



REDEMPTION

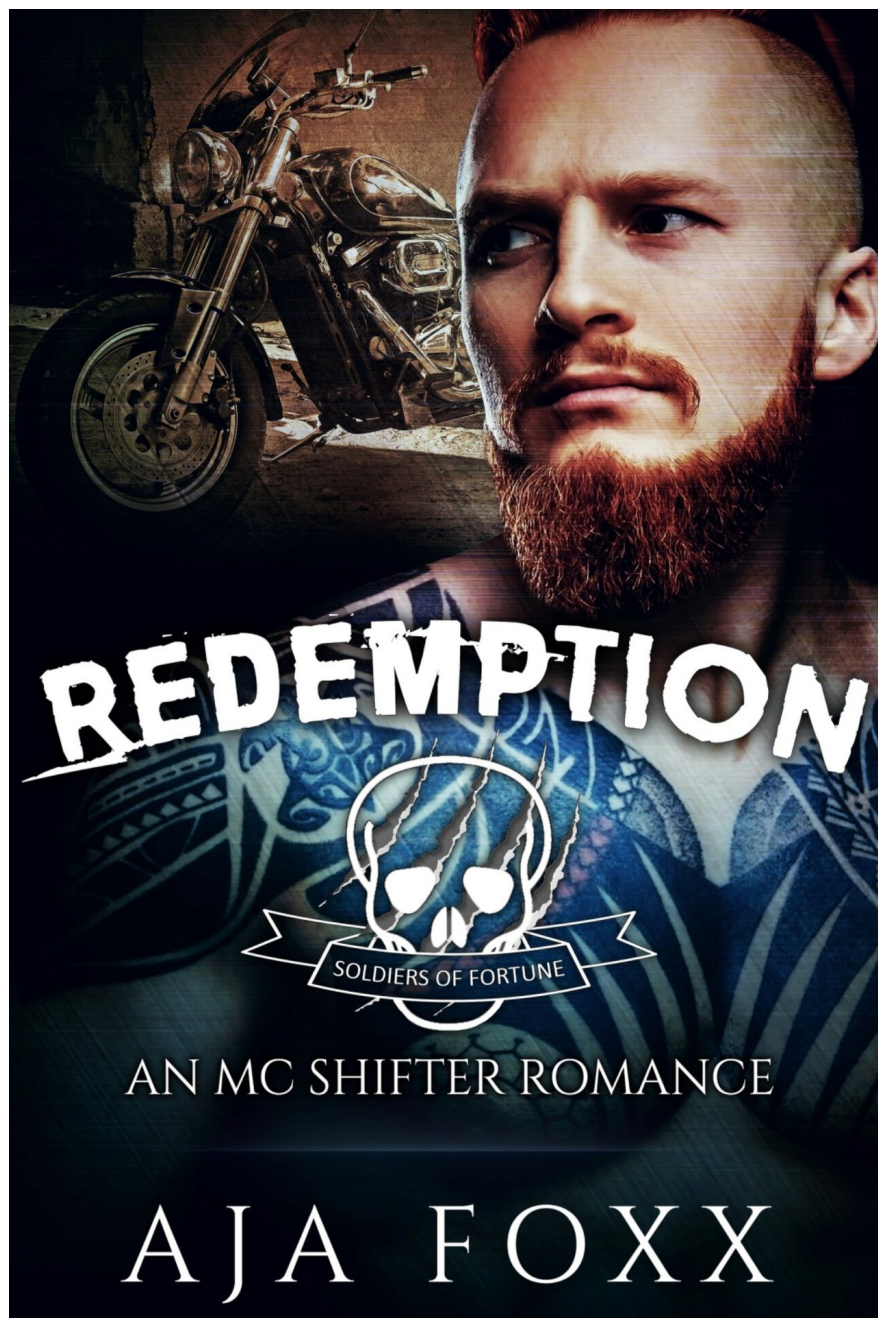


AN MC SHIFTER ROMANCE

AJA FOXX



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Redemption

Soldiers of Fortune 5

An MC Shifter Romance

~ *Rooster* ~

For months, I had been leaving food for a homeless kid, watching over him from afar. When I finally got close, I caught a glimpse of his striking golden eyes and was instantly captivated by the mysterious young man. When Liam revealed his shifter abilities, I quickly realize that he was my destined mate. Now, I just needed to keep him safe long enough to claim him as my own.

~ *Liam* ~

I had lived on the streets since my parents kicked me out years ago for being different. My unique ability to communicate with plants and trees had kept me alive all this time, their whispers guiding and protecting me. When the Soldiers of Fortune faced threats from outside forces, I knew I could use my ability to help them. I just hope they didn't see me as a freak like everyone else did, especially since I found the red-headed cook so intriguing.

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**Warning:** *Gay erotic romance. The material in this book contains explicit sexual content that is intended for mature audiences only. All characters involved are adults capable of consent, are over the age of eighteen, and are willing participants.*

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# Redemption

## *Soldiers of Fortune 5*

AJA FOXX

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### Chapter One

~ Rooster ~

I set the last container of fried chicken on the picnic table and stepped back to survey my offering. The food had become a daily ritual—my silent communication with the homeless kid who'd been lurking around our property for months.

Montana winters could be brutal, and this one was already making its intentions known with a bitter chill that seeped through my leather jacket. The kid would need the calories, especially if they were planning to stick around.

Three water bottles joined the spread, along with the plastic fork that I knew would be ignored. I'd tried different utensils—spoons, even chopsticks once as an experiment—but the kid always ate with their hands. Like an animal. Like my nickname for them: feral kitten.

"Dinner's ready," I said to the empty yard, my breath forming small clouds in the cold air. "Extra fried chicken tonight. Recipe's new. Let me know if you like it."

I snorted at myself. As if the kid would ever leave feedback. In the two months since I'd first noticed signs of someone scavenging from our dumpsters, we'd never exchanged a single word. Just food left on the table and empty containers stacked neatly afterward.

A strange dance between strangers.

The back door of the clubhouse creaked as I pulled it open and stepped inside, the warmth of the kitchen enveloping me immediately. My domain. Where I ruled with a wooden spoon and a bad attitude, as Butch liked to

say. The guys gave me shit about being the club cook, but they shut their mouths quick enough when their plates were empty.

I moved to the window, positioning myself where I could see the table without being obvious. The waiting was always the hardest part. Sometimes the kid wouldn't appear until well after dark, when they thought everyone was asleep or occupied elsewhere. Other times, like today, desperation or hunger drove them to take risks.

A shadow detached itself from the side of Gearhead's workshop. My feral kitten, right on schedule. The kid moved like water—fluid, silent, always alert. They approached the table in a half-crouch, golden eyes scanning for threats before small hands darted out to grab the container of chicken.

I watched as they devoured the food, tearing into the meat with desperate efficiency. No fork, as expected. Just fingers and teeth and hunger.

The kid couldn't be more than twenty, though it was hard to tell with the layers of clothing and constant hood shadowing their face. Small-framed, definitely undernourished. And something else that had been bothering me lately—no scent.

Every shifter had a distinctive scent, unique as a fingerprint. Even humans had their smells, though less pronounced to our enhanced senses. But this kid? Nothing. Like trying to smell a ghost.

I'd begun to wonder if they might be an omega shifter. Rare as hen's teeth, but it would explain the lack of scent. Omegas were treasured in shifter society for their unique abilities, though they couldn't shift themselves.

If my feral kitten was an omega, that raised more questions than answers. What were they doing alone? Where was their pack? And why were they hiding?

The temperature had dropped another five degrees since I'd stepped outside, the wind picking up strength as it moaned around the corners of the clubhouse. Winter in Montana didn't mess around. My mind flashed forward to snow piling in drifts, temperatures plummeting below zero, the kind of cold that could kill a homeless kid overnight.

Decision made, I turned to the pantry and started filling a paper bag. More chicken. Protein bars. Apples. A loaf of bread. Peanut butter. Foods

that would keep and didn't need preparation. On impulse, I added a small jar of honey—everyone needed something sweet now and then.

I hesitated, then grabbed one of my own hoodies from the hook by the back door. It would be big on the kid, but that was the point. Extra layers meant extra warmth.

The bag was heavier than I'd intended, but I didn't remove anything. With a deep breath, I pushed the door open again, trying to move slowly, telegraphing my movements.

Too late. The kid froze at the sound, a piece of chicken halfway to their mouth. For a heartbeat, neither of us moved.

I got my first real look at those eyes. Golden. Not brown or hazel, but actually golden, with an almost luminous quality that reflected the security light overhead. Lynx eyes. I'd bet my Harley on it.

The hood of their dark blue sweatshirt framed a thin face smudged with dirt. Young. Male, I was pretty sure, though it was hard to tell under all those layers. His entire body had gone rigid, poised between fight and flight, calculating odds and exits.

I held up the paper bag like a peace offering, then slowly—very slowly—set it down on the edge of the porch.

"Take this with you," I said, keeping my voice low and even. "If you run out, come back for more."

I stepped back into the kitchen, closing the door behind me but immediately moving to the window. I half-expected the kid to be gone, spooked by the encounter, but he remained frozen for several seconds longer. Then, like a switch had been flipped, he sprang into action, shoving the remaining chicken into his mouth and gathering the containers.

To my surprise, he stacked them neatly on the table—his usual cleanup routine despite the interruption—before approaching the porch with the same liquid caution. He snatched the bag, clutching it to his chest like precious cargo, and then he was gone, melting into the shadows between buildings so quickly I almost doubted he'd been there at all.

Only the empty space where the bag had been and the neatly stacked containers proved I hadn't imagined the whole thing.

I sighed, my breath fogging the window glass. "You're welcome, kid," I muttered, though there was no one to hear.

Tomorrow I'd make extra stew. Something hot that would stick to his ribs. And maybe next time, he wouldn't run.

I wiped down the counter with smooth, practiced motions, my mind still on the golden-eyed kid who'd vanished into the shadows. The kitchen gleamed around me—stainless steel surfaces reflecting the overhead lights, everything in its place.

I'd learned early in my cooking career that a clean kitchen was non-negotiable, especially when feeding a bunch of rowdy bikers who'd eat just about anything. The guys joked that you could perform surgery in my kitchen.

They weren't wrong.

With the lunch hour approaching, I pulled out ingredients for the club's favorite sandwiches. Thick-cut bread, three types of meat, cheese that didn't come pre-sliced in plastic. The Soldiers of Fortune MC might be rough around the edges, but they ate well. I made sure of that.

The kitchen was my zone, the one place in the clubhouse where I felt completely at home. Well, that and astride my Harley on the open road, wind whipping past, nothing ahead but possibilities. But that was different—a freedom that existed in motion. The kitchen was my anchor, my territory.

I moved with practiced efficiency, muscle memory taking over as I sliced meats and cheeses, toasted bread, and prepared condiments. My hands knew what to do without conscious direction, leaving my mind free to wander.

Today, it kept circling back to that kid, those strange golden eyes. A lynx shifter, I was almost certain, though I'd never encountered one personally. They were uncommon in these parts.

My tablet chimed with a reminder about inventory. If I was going to shop tomorrow, I needed to know what we were low on. The pantry was a walk-in affair at the back of the kitchen, meticulously organized with shelves of ingredients and supplies. I grabbed my tablet and headed in, ready to count cans and measure flour levels.

"Mr. Rooster? You here?"

Bug's voice pulled me back to the present. Only he could get away with calling me that. Anyone else would get a wooden spoon to the back of the head or worse.

I stepped out of the pantry to find him standing in the doorway, his head tilted at that adorable angle that made him look like a curious puppy. Not that I'd ever admit noticing such a thing.

"What's up, kid?" I asked, setting my tablet on the counter.

Bug had been with us for nearly a year now, ever since Bear had found him—or rather, Bug had found Bear wounded and helped him. The kid was still skittish sometimes, his brain damaged from the bullet that had nearly killed him years ago. His speech came out fragmented, but there was nothing wrong with his intelligence.

He shuffled from foot to foot, a sure sign he wanted something but wasn't sure how to ask. His oversized sweater hung off his thin frame, sleeves rolled up several times to free his hands. Despite regular meals, he still looked underfed.

"You make cupcakes?" he finally blurted, eyes darting around the kitchen before landing back on me. "Bear say... say you make good ones. With frosting?"

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. For all his street toughness and survival skills, Bug sometimes wanted the simplest things—things any kid should have had growing up.

"I could," I replied, leaning against the counter. "Any particular kind you're hoping for?"

Bug's eyes widened slightly, as if he hadn't expected to get this far. "Chocolate? With... with the swirly stuff?" He made a gesture with his hand for frosting.

"Buttercream frosting," I supplied. "Sure, I can do that. Tell you what—I'm making a grocery run tomorrow. Help me shop and I'll pick up what we need for cupcakes. That work for you?"

The transformation on Bug's face was immediate—pure joy breaking through his usual wariness. It was moments like these that reminded us all that despite everything he'd been through, there was still a young man underneath who just wanted normal things.

"Yes! I help good. Carry bags. Remember lists." His excitement made his speech pattern even more choppy than usual, words tumbling out in his eagerness.

I nodded, already mentally adding cocoa powder and confectioners' sugar to my shopping list. "Be ready after breakfast. We'll take the truck."

Bug bounced slightly on his toes—actually bounced—and turned to go. I called after him, "Hey, make sure you tell Bear where you'll be tomorrow. He worries."

Bug paused, turning back. "I tell. Bear growly when worried."

"That he is," I agreed, thinking of the massive Sergeant-at-Arms who'd become fiercely protective of Bug since claiming him as his mate.

"Growly" was putting it mildly.

With a quick nod, Bug disappeared from the doorway, his footsteps fading down the hall. I returned to my inventory, but my mind wandered again.

Bug had found his place here, against all odds. The damaged street kid and the club enforcer—nobody would have put those two together, but their bond was unquestionable. The claiming bite on Bug's neck had healed into a silvery scar that he displayed proudly, never covering it with his collars.

A small pang hit me somewhere in the vicinity of my chest. I was happy for them—for all the mated pairs in our club. Butch and Treat, Gunner and Henry, Gearhead and Percy. Each finding their other half, that connection that went beyond the physical.

At forty-two, I'd begun to wonder if my mate was out there at all. The club accepted without question that I was gay—females simply did not attract me, never had—but finding another gay shifter who was also my destined mate? Those odds seemed increasingly slim.

I shook off the melancholy. Self-pity wasn't my style. If a mate was in my future, they'd show up when the time was right. If not, I had my kitchen, my Harley, and a family of sorts in the club.

For now, that had to be enough.

I returned to counting cans of tomatoes, mentally adding cupcake ingredients to tomorrow's list. At least I could give Bug his chocolate cupcakes with the "swirly stuff" on top. Making others happy through food—that was something I could do, mate or no mate.

I finished noting the last items on my inventory list and closed the tablet app with a satisfied tap. The pantry was well-stocked for most things, but the shopping list for tomorrow had grown to a decent size.

Before finalizing it, I needed to check with Butch about any special requests for Doby. The toddler bear cub was the newest addition to our unconventional family, and his needs changed almost weekly as he grew.

Butch and Treat were still figuring out parenthood, and I was determined to make at least the feeding part easier for them.

I headed toward Butch's office, tablet tucked under my arm. The clubhouse was relatively quiet this morning—most of the guys were either out on runs or working at Gunner's garage. The silence made my footsteps

echo slightly down the hallway lined with framed photos of motorcycles and club members past and present.

Butch's office door stood open, but I knocked on the frame anyway. You didn't just walk in on the MC president without announcing yourself, open door or not.

Hierarchy mattered, even among friends.

He looked up from a stack of papers, reading glasses perched on his nose in a way that would have looked scholarly if not for the massive beard and tattoos covering his forearms.

Butch was a mountain of a man, intimidating to most, but I'd known him long enough to see past the gruff exterior to the deeply loyal heart beneath.

"Need something, Rooster?" he asked, removing his glasses and setting them aside.

"Shopping run tomorrow," I said, stepping inside. "Anything special Doby needs this week?"

Butch's expression immediately softened at the mention of his adopted son. The change never failed to amaze me—how the fearsome biker transformed when it came to the cub and his mate.

"Apple juice," he replied without hesitation. "The organic kind in the glass bottles. We're down to the last one, and you know how he gets if we run out."

I nodded, adding it to my list. Doby's tantrums were legendary when his favorite things weren't available. The kid had Butch wrapped around his little finger, and everyone knew it.

"Got it. Anything else?" I asked.

"Maybe those animal crackers he likes? The ones in the blue box."

I nodded again, making another note. "Bug's coming with me shopping tomorrow. Kid wants chocolate cupcakes, so we're making a deal—he helps carry bags, I get baking supplies."

Butch's mouth twitched in what might have been a smile. "Good. Kid needs normal shit like that."

"If you see Bear before I do, let him know Bug's coming with me? Don't want him thinking Bug wandered off again."

"Will do." Butch leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing slightly as he studied me. "Speaking of wandering, Gearhead mentioned picking up an

unfamiliar scent around the back of the property. You seen anyone creeping around the backyard?"

I hesitated, weighing my words. I hadn't exactly been keeping the homeless kid a secret, but I hadn't exactly announced it either. Something protective stirred in me, but lying to Butch wasn't an option.

"Yeah, there's a homeless kid I've been feeding. Just for a couple of months," I admitted. "Skinny thing, probably early twenties at most. Leaves the containers stacked nice and neat. Never caused any trouble."

Butch's eyebrows drew together. "You've been feeding some stranger hanging around our property for months and didn't think to mention it?"

Put that way, it did sound bad.

"He's harmless, Butch. Just hungry."

"Harmless isn't for you to decide without information," he said, his voice taking on the edge of authority that reminded everyone exactly why he was president. "What do we know about this kid? Could be a scout for the Dough Boys. They've been causing trouble lately."

I shook my head. "He's not with the Dough Boys or anyone else. I think he might be a lynx shifter, actually. Scared, undernourished. Got these golden eyes I spotted today. Been leaving food out for him, and tonight I gave him a bag of supplies since winter's coming."

"You approached him?" Butch's frown deepened.

"Briefly. Just to give him the food bag. He took off right after."

Butch pinched the bridge of his nose—a gesture I recognized as his attempt to remain patient. "Next time he shows up, you tell me immediately. We need to know who's hanging around, especially with everything that's happened lately."

Something deep within my soul balked at the idea. The feral kitten had just started trusting me enough to not bolt at the first sign of my presence. Bringing Butch into it—as well-intentioned as he might be—would likely send the kid running for good.

But I nodded anyway. "Sure, Butch."

"I mean it, Rooster. This isn't just about you being a bleeding heart. It's about keeping everyone safe. We've got Doby here now. Bug, Treat, Percy—people who've been through enough trauma. We can't have unknown elements wandering around."

He had a point, damn it. I hadn't considered how a stranger near the property might affect our more vulnerable members.

"Understood," I said, more sincerely this time. "If I see him again, I'll let you know."

"Good." Butch's expression softened slightly. "I'm not saying we can't help the kid if he needs it. Just that we need to be smart about it. Do things the right way."

"The right way" was code for "the club way"—with proper protocols, information gathering, and collective decision-making. It was what kept us all alive and functioning as a unit.

"Got it," I said, accepting the mild reprimand for what it was—concern, not anger.

"Anything else?" Butch asked, already reaching for his glasses to return to his paperwork.

"That's it. I'll let you know when we get back from shopping tomorrow."

He nodded, dismissing me, and I turned to head back to the kitchen. Lunch wouldn't make itself, and I still had prep work to finish before the guys started wandering in hungry and impatient.

As I walked away, I contemplated the conflict brewing inside me. I understood Butch's concerns—they were valid, especially given our history with enemies. But something about that kid pulled at me, made me want to protect him from everything, including my own club's scrutiny.

I sighed as I pushed through the kitchen doors. Despite occasionally butting heads with Butch over things like this, I wouldn't give up this job for anything. This kitchen, these people—they were my home, my family. And maybe, just maybe, there was room for one more stray in our strange collection of misfits.

The sandwiches wouldn't make themselves. I rolled up my sleeves and got back to work.

## Chapter Two

~ Liam ~

The ivy tendrils curled around my fingers in silent greeting as I settled deeper into my hiding spot at the edge of the clubhouse property. I'd formed an understanding with these bushes over the past couple of months—they kept me concealed while I watched, and I made sure no one trampled their carefully extending roots. We were both survivors in a world that preferred neat, contained things.

*“Be still,”* the plants whispered through their leaves. *“Men with metal beasts gather.”*

I nodded, knowing better than to ignore their warnings.

The motorcycle club members were preparing to leave, their engines growling with impatience in the yard. I counted seven of them today, all in matching leather vests with patches I couldn't read from this distance. My eyes found him immediately—the red-haired man who left food for me.

The cook.

He stood taller than most of the others, his flaming beard like a beacon in the afternoon sun. Unlike the rest, he didn't immediately mount his bike. Instead, he glanced toward the back of the property where the picnic table sat empty, where I usually appeared after dark.

Was he looking for me? The thought sent a shiver down my spine—half fear, half something else I couldn't name.

The plants trembled slightly, sensing my discomfort. They'd been my only consistent companions since I was seven, when my parents had caught me conversing with the garden instead of playing with the neighborhood children. I still remembered my father's face contorting in disgust.

“Freak,” he'd called me. “No son of mine talks to weeds.”

That night, I'd been left at a bus station with twenty dollars and a backpack containing a change of clothes. The memory still burned, but I'd learned since then.

The plants had saved me countless times, warning me of approaching danger, guiding me to safe sleeping spots, even showing me which wild berries wouldn't poison me.

And three months ago, they'd led me here, to this motorcycle club with its fearsome members and one red-haired cook who left containers of food on a picnic table.

The leader—a mountain of a man with a thick beard—called out something, and the group began rolling their bikes toward the gate. The cook finally mounted his own motorcycle, a gleaming machine with dark green accents that reminded me of pine needles.

As he passed through the gate, he looked back one more time. I pressed myself further into the greenery, though I knew he couldn't see me. No one ever did when I didn't want them to.

*"He leaves good things,"* the ivy noted, picking up on my thoughts. Plants didn't think in words, exactly, but in impressions and sensations that my mind translated. *"Warm feelings. Not like the others."*

"I know," I whispered back, barely audible even to myself. The cook—I'd heard others call him Rooster—left better food than I'd found anywhere else. Real meals, not just scraps or expired convenience store castoffs. Sometimes there were even desserts. Last night, he'd given me that bag of supplies that now rested in my hidden camp half a mile away.

The gate swung closed behind the last motorcycle, and silence settled over the property. I remained perfectly still, a skill I'd mastered years ago. Stillness meant survival. Movement caught attention, and attention usually meant trouble.

I'd wait here another hour at least. The clubhouse wasn't empty—I'd spotted movement in the windows upstairs, probably other members who weren't joining the ride. But fewer people meant less risk of being seen if I decided to approach the picnic table early tonight.

The plants rustled, sending a new warning. *"Stranger. Not pack-metal-beast man. Different."*

I tensed, following their direction toward the eastern corner of the property. A figure in dark clothing moved along the fence line, keeping to the shadows. Male, average height, wearing a black hoodie and gloves despite the afternoon warmth. His movements were furtive, stopping frequently to check his surroundings.

This wasn't someone who belonged here. I recognized the behavior—I'd used it myself when scoping out potential shelters or food sources. But there was something predatory in the way he moved, something that made the hair on my arms stand up.

He reached the back door of the clubhouse and pulled something from his pocket. A thin metal tool glinted in the sunlight as he worked at the lock. I'd seen enough break-ins on the street to know what he was doing.

“*Danger-to-nest*,” the blackberry bush beside me hummed anxiously. Plants understood territory and violation on a primal level.

The door swung open, and the man slipped inside.

I bit my lip, conflict churning in my gut. This wasn't my problem. I wasn't part of this club. I was just a homeless nobody who occasionally took their leftover food. The smart move—the survival move—would be to disappear now, find another feeding spot until things settled.

But the image of the red-haired cook flashed in my mind. His careful placement of the plastic fork that I never used. The extra containers when the weather turned cold. The hoodie he'd included in last night's bag—too large for me, but warmer than anything I owned.

Small kindnesses that had kept me alive.

The plants sensed my indecision. “*Your choice*,” they seemed to say. “*Always yours*.”

That was the thing about plants—unlike humans, they never judged my decisions. They simply witnessed.

I weighed my options. The intruder was bigger than me, probably stronger. I was fast but malnourished, and while my lynx strength gave me advantages, it had limits. If he had a weapon...

But I knew the building's layout from weeks of careful observation. I knew where the shadows were deepest, which floorboards creaked from watching club members through windows. And the intruder didn't know I was here.

Surprise was sometimes better than strength.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I slipped from my hiding spot, moving in a low crouch toward the back door. The plants whispered encouragement as I passed, their leaves brushing against my clothes like tiny hands pushing me forward.

I paused at the threshold, taking one deep breath. This was stupid. This was dangerous. This was possibly the worst decision I'd made in years of making mostly good ones that had kept me alive.

But it felt right.

I stepped inside, into the warm kitchen that smelled of the red-haired man and fresh bread and safety. Then I closed the door silently behind me and followed the sound of unfamiliar footsteps deeper into the building.

I moved through the clubhouse like a shadow, each step placed with deliberate care. The hardwood floors that would have creaked under anyone

else's weight remained silent beneath mine—a skill learned through years of needing to be invisible.

The intruder wasn't nearly as careful, his footsteps echoing softly down the hallway ahead. Amateur. If you were going to rob someone, at least have the decency to be good at it.

My lynx senses tracked him easily. His scent—cheap cologne and cigarettes. His breathing—slightly elevated. The faint rustle of synthetic fabric as he moved. He paused at each door, looking inside before moving on. Searching for something specific.

I kept to the shadows, my body close to the wall. Years on the streets had left me skinnier than I should be, but it made me quieter, more agile. I could slip through spaces others couldn't see.

The man stopped outside a door near the end of the hall, checked both directions, and then slipped inside. I counted to ten before approaching, my bare feet making no sound on the wooden floor. The door had been left slightly ajar—another amateur move.

I peered through the crack. An office. Desk, computer, filing cabinets. Photos and motorcycle memorabilia on the walls. The largest chair behind the desk marked this as an important room—probably belonging to the bearded leader I'd observed so many times from my hiding spot.

The intruder was already seated at the computer, fingers moving rapidly across the keyboard. A small device protruded from one of the USB ports, blinking with a red light.

Whatever he was doing, it wasn't good.

I assessed my options. I could run—the smart choice. I could find somewhere to hide until the motorcycle club returned—the safe choice. Or I could stop him—the stupid choice.

I went with stupid.

Drawing a deep breath, I gathered my strength. I might be small and underfed, but I was still a lynx shifter. We might not have the raw power of bears or wolves, but we had speed and precision that most other shifters lacked.

I pushed the door open silently and slipped into the room. Three steps brought me behind the intruder, who remained focused on the screen, muttering something about "encrypted files." One more step and I was coiled, ready.

I launched myself across the desk, a hiss escaping my throat that was more lynx than human.

The man's head jerked up, eyes widening in shock as I collided with his chest. My momentum knocked his chair backward, sending us both crashing to the floor. I landed on top, immediately slashing with my hands—not quite claws in human form, but my nails were sharp enough to draw blood across his cheek.

"What the fu—" He swung at me, but I was already moving, ducking under his arm and sinking my teeth into his wrist.

He howled, trying to shake me off. I bit harder, tasting blood. Living rough meant fighting dirty—no rules, no mercy.

He managed to grab a fistful of my hair with his free hand, yanking hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. I released his wrist and twisted, clawing at his face again before kicking hard at his groin. His grip loosened as he doubled over, cursing.

I scrambled away, putting the desk between us. He was bigger, stronger, but I was faster and had nothing to lose. As he started to rise, I grabbed the nearest heavy object—a silver motorcycle statue from the desk—and vaulted back over.

The statue connected with his temple with a sickening crack. His eyes rolled back, and he crumpled to the floor. I landed beside him, breathing hard, adrenaline still surging through my system. One of the wheels had broken off the motorcycle statue, skittering across the floor.

I winced.

I hadn't meant to break it.

I poked the man cautiously. Out cold, but breathing. Blood trickled from the gash on his temple where the statue had connected.

Now what?

I couldn't leave him here. What if he woke up before the bikers returned? I couldn't let him escape after what he'd tried to do. Not after I'd committed to this spectacularly bad decision.

I looked at the computer. The device was still plugged in, still blinking. I yanked it out and shoved it in my pocket.

Evidence.

The next problem was moving him. He had to weigh at least twice what I did. But I'd moved heavier things when necessary.

I grabbed him under the arms and began the laborious process of dragging him from the office. Each pull sent pain shooting through my undernourished muscles. Down the hallway, through the kitchen and out the back door to the yard.

Sweat soaked through my hoodie by the time I reached the picnic table—the same one where the red-haired cook left food for me.

Fitting, somehow.

I needed something to secure him. Rope, tape, anything. I remembered seeing a garage or workshop attached to the main building. I might find something useful there.

I left the man sprawled in the dirt and slipped into the workshop through a side door. The space smelled of oil and metal and rubber. Tools hung in neat rows on pegboards. Parts of motorcycles in various stages of repair filled workbenches. A coil of sturdy rope hung on a hook near the door.

Perfect.

By the time I returned, the man had started to groan, shifting slightly. I worked quickly, binding his wrists behind him, and then securing him to one of the heavy picnic table legs. I used more rope than necessary, wrapping it multiple times in complex knots I'd learned from a sailor who'd once shared a homeless camp with me.

"No getting out of that," I muttered as I finished the last knot.

The man's eyes fluttered. I stepped back, statue still clutched in my hand in case he tried anything.

He blinked, confusion giving way to anger as he realized his situation. He tested the bonds, then glared at me. "You little shit," he snarled. "Do you have any idea who I'm working for? You're dead."

I'd heard better threats from hungrier men. "Shut up," I said, my voice rusty from disuse.

"Untie me now and maybe I'll just break your arms instead of your neck."

I almost laughed. Thieves were all the same—threats and bluster when caught. I'd seen plenty in my years on the street. Always taking what wasn't theirs, leaving misery in their wake. If they put half the effort into honest work that they did into stealing, they'd be rich.

"No," I said simply.

"Listen, kid, you don't want to get involved in this. This is between me and the Soldiers of Fortune. Let me go, walk away, and you'll never see me

again."

I picked up the broken wheel from the statue that I'd carefully retrieved from the office. "You broke their statue," I said, holding it up. "And tried to steal from their computer."

"That's not—" He cut himself off, clearly realizing explaining his actual crime wouldn't help his case.

I stepped closer, making sure he could see my eyes. Most humans found something unsettling about them—too golden, too reflective, too unlike their own. "I don't like thieves."

He swallowed hard, looking away. "What are you going to do with me?"

I glanced toward the gate. "Nothing. They will."

Fear flashed across his face. "You can't leave me for them. You don't understand what they'll do."

I shrugged. "Should've thought of that before you broke in."

I checked the ropes one last time, making sure they were secure. The man continued to threaten and plead alternately, but I tuned him out. The distant rumble of motorcycle engines told me the club members would be returning soon.

My work here was done. I moved back toward the bushes, the broken motorcycle statue still clutched in my hand. I'd place it on the picnic table later as an offering—payment for breaking it. Maybe they'd forgive the damage when they saw what I'd caught for them.

I huddled back in my hiding spot, heart hammering against my ribs as the sound of approaching motorcycles grew louder. The engines' roar hit me like a physical blow—loud noises had always been my enemy, overloading my sensitive hearing and setting my nerves on edge.

I pressed my hands against my ears, trying to block out the worst of it as the bikers rolled through the gate and into the yard. They hadn't noticed the gift I'd left them yet. The thief remained tied to the picnic table, now gagged with a strip of his own shirt to silence his constant threats.

I'd added that touch just before retreating to the bushes.

The red-haired cook—Rooster—was among the last to park his bike. He removed his helmet, running a hand through his flaming hair before glancing toward my usual spot. Looking for me again. Something warm and uncomfortable stirred in my chest.

Then the shouting started.

"What the hell?"

"Butch! We've got a situation!"

"Someone get over here!"

The yard erupted into chaos as they discovered the bound man. Seven large, leather-clad bikers converged on the picnic table, voices overlapping in a painful assault on my ears. I cringed deeper into the foliage, fighting the urge to run.

I needed to see this through.

The bearded leader—Butch, they'd called him—barked orders I couldn't quite make out over the commotion. Two men hauled the thief to his feet while still attached to the table leg. Another removed the gag.

The thief started talking immediately, words tumbling out in a desperate stream. I couldn't hear everything, but caught snippets: "...just following orders..." and "...didn't get anything..." and "...wasn't my idea..."

Rooster stood slightly apart from the others, his head tilted as if sensing something. He turned slowly, scanning the edge of the yard, his gaze eventually settling near—but not directly on—my hiding spot.

I had a choice to make. I could stay hidden, let them deal with the thief however they wanted, and return to my regular pattern of accepting food left at night. Safe. Anonymous. Or I could make myself known, explain what had happened, maybe earn something more than scraps.

Dangerous. Exposed. But possibly worth it.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I moved just enough to make the bushes rustle deliberately. Rooster's eyes snapped to the movement, narrowing slightly. I raised one hand just high enough to be visible above the greenery, then beckoned him closer before withdrawing it again.

His eyebrows shot up. He glanced back at the others, still focused on the thief, then walked casually toward my hiding spot as if just checking the perimeter.

When he was close enough, I whispered, "Computer."

He startled, clearly not expecting me to speak. "What?"

"He was at the computer." I pointed toward the clubhouse.

Rooster looked from me to the building, then back again. "You saw what he was doing?"

I nodded.

"Can you show me?"

I weighed my options. Going inside meant being trapped, cornered. But staying outside meant others might notice our conversation. I pointed to the

side door—not the main entrance where everyone was gathered.

"Okay," he said, seeming to understand my caution. "I'll meet you there."

I circled wide around the yard, keeping to the shadows while Rooster approached the others. He spoke briefly to Butch, who nodded, before heading toward the side door.

I reached it first, slipping inside and immediately locating all possible exits in the room. Always know your escape routes—first rule of survival.

Rooster entered a moment later, moving slowly as if trying not to startle a wild animal. Smart man. "I'm Rooster," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle for such a large person.

I nodded. I knew.

"You've been the one taking the food I leave out."

Another nod.

"And you stopped that guy from... what? Stealing data?"

I pulled the small USB device from my pocket and held it out. Rooster took it, examining the blinking light with a frown.

"Can you show me where he was?"

I gestured for him to follow but maintained distance between us as I led him through the clubhouse to the office. Every few steps, I glanced back, making sure he wasn't too close and that no one else had joined us. The whole time, I kept track of windows, doorways, alternate paths—anything that could become an escape route if needed.

In the office, I pointed to the computer, then mimed typing. I pointed to the USB port, then to the device in his hand.

"He was downloading files?" Rooster asked.

I shrugged. Maybe. I hadn't exactly understood what the man was doing, just that it involved the computer and that suspicious device.

I set the silver motorcycle statue on the desk and pointed to the broken wheel.

"You broke it?" His tone wasn't accusatory, just curious.

I nodded, then mimed hitting the thief with it.

His eyes widened slightly. "You knocked him out with this? Then tied him up outside?"

I nodded again, then reached into my pocket. I pulled out my meager treasures—three quarters, two dimes, a nickel, and a half-eaten cherry

lollipop I'd been saving for a special occasion. I arranged them carefully beside the broken statue.

"What's this?" Rooster asked.

I pointed to the broken wheel, then to my small pile of possessions. Payment for damages.

Understanding dawned on his face, followed by something that looked strangely like sadness. "Kid, you don't need to pay for anything. You did us a favor."

I frowned, not quite believing him. Nothing was ever free. There was always a cost.

"What's your name?" he asked.

I hesitated, then spotted a notepad on the desk. I picked up a pen and carefully wrote "Liam" in crude, blocky letters. My education had been limited to what I could teach myself from discarded books and occasional visits to public libraries when I could slip past security.

"Liam," he read. "I'm Daniel, but everyone calls me Rooster."

The door opened behind us, and the bearded leader stepped in. I immediately shifted position, putting the desk between us and moving closer to the window.

"This him?" the man asked Rooster.

Rooster nodded. "Butch, this is Liam. Liam, this is our club president, Butch."

I gave a slight nod, but remained poised for quick movement.

Butch studied me with piercing eyes that seemed to see more than I wanted to show. "Thank you for catching our intruder. We've been trying to figure out who's been accessing our systems."

I shrugged. Wasn't my business. I just didn't like thieves.

"You've been taking the food Rooster leaves out," Butch continued.

"How long have you been watching our place?"

I held up three fingers.

"Months?" When I nodded, he exchanged a look with Rooster that I couldn't interpret. "Where are you staying?"

I didn't answer. Some information was too dangerous to share.

"We can help you," Butch said. "If you need a place—"

The door opened again, and a massive man filled the doorway—the largest of the bikers by far. His presence seemed to suck all the oxygen from the room.

My body went into automatic assessment: too big to fight, too strong to resist, blocking the main exit. Window behind me. Two large men between me and the door. Odds of escaping unharmed if they decided to keep me here: minimal.

I edged toward the wall, eyes darting between all three men.

"This the kid?" the new arrival rumbled.

That was enough. I'd pushed my luck too far already.

In one fluid motion, I vaulted onto the desk, leaped to the floor on the opposite side, and darted past Rooster. He reached for me, but I was already gone, slipping through the gap between him and the doorframe.

I sprinted down the hallway, ignoring the shouts behind me. Through the kitchen, out the back door, across the yard in a blur of movement. I heard heavy footsteps in pursuit, but no one could match my speed, not even on their best day.

I disappeared into the gathering darkness at the edge of the property, the plants parting to make a path only I could see, then closing behind me to cover my tracks.

They'd been kind. They might even have meant their offer of help. But kindness could be revoked, help could become a trap, and I'd survived this long by trusting no one completely.

Still, as I melted into the shadows, I found myself wondering what might have happened if I'd stayed.

## Chapter Three

~ Rooster ~

I stared at the empty doorway where Liam had disappeared, his escape so quick it was almost supernatural. The kid moved like water—there one moment, gone the next. I hadn't even had time to process what was happening before he'd slipped past me with the agility of the lynx I suspected he might be.

"That went well," I muttered, turning back to face Butch and Bear.

Butch ran a hand through his beard, his expression caught between irritation and admiration. "Fast little shit, isn't he?"

"Told you he was skittish," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "That was definitely the kid I've been feeding. Been leaving food out for him for weeks now."

"And you didn't think to mention that we had a stray shifter camping on our property?" Butch's tone wasn't accusatory so much as tired. We'd been through this conversation before.

I shrugged. "Didn't seem worth bothering you about. Kid was just hungry."

Bear, still filling the doorway like a human mountain, grunted. "Not just hungry. Smart enough to catch that asshole trying to hack our system. Brave enough to take him down, too."

I nodded toward the window. "Speaking of which, what are we doing with our gift-wrapped thief?"

Butch's expression hardened. "Bear, take him to the basement. Get what information you can. I want to know who sent him and what exactly he was after."

Bear's smile wasn't pleasant. "With pleasure, boss." He turned and lumbered back down the hall, his heavy footsteps fading as he descended the stairs.

The basement wasn't a place anyone wanted to visit uninvited. We weren't monsters, but we weren't saints either. The club had enemies, and sometimes gathering intelligence required methods that wouldn't win us any humanitarian awards.

Butch walked around his desk and picked up the broken motorcycle statue that Liam had left there. It was a custom piece that Gearhead had

made for him last Christmas—a silver replica of his first bike. The front wheel now lay detached beside it.

"Kid tried to pay for breaking it," I said, pointing to the sad little pile of coins and the half-eaten lollipop still sitting on the desk. "That's everything he had."

Butch's face softened slightly. "Jesus." He set the statue down carefully. "You thinking what I'm thinking about this timing?"

"You mean how someone tries to hack our system right when we're all supposed to be out on a run?" I asked. "Yeah, seems a bit convenient."

"Too convenient." Butch reached for the USB device I'd placed on his desk—the one Liam had taken from the intruder. "Someone's watching us. Knew our schedule. If it weren't for your stray lynx, they might have gotten whatever they were after."

I hadn't considered that angle. "You think someone's targeting us specifically?"

"Feels like it. First the issue Fang and his bastard kid, then that thing with Percy and that fox skulk, then the trouble with the Dough Boys last month, now this." He sighed heavily, the weight of leadership evident in the new lines around his eyes. "I want security doubled. No one goes anywhere alone for the next few days, not even to take a piss."

"You got it," I agreed. The club came first—always had, always would. We were family, and family protected each other.

Butch picked up the lollipop, turning it thoughtfully between his fingers. "This Liam kid. You said he's been around for months?"

"Since summer, I think. Started noticing food missing from the dumpster, then figured it was easier to just leave stuff out for him. Less mess that way." I didn't mention how watching the skinny kid devour the food I left had become something of a private ritual for me—how I'd started noticing his preferences, leaving more of what disappeared completely and less of what he seemed to avoid.

"And he just happened to be in the right place at the right time to stop our break-in?"

I considered this. "He seems to watch the place. Probably has for a while."

"Think he's connected to whoever sent our friend outside?"

That hadn't occurred to me. "Doesn't seem likely. Why catch the guy if they're working together?"

Butch nodded, seemingly satisfied with that logic. "See if you can learn more about him. If he's in a situation like Bug's, I'd like to help him."

The mention of Bug reminded me of how far the former street kid had come since Bear had found him. From living in alleys and abandoned buildings to being the Sergeant-at-Arms's mate and a valued member of our strange family.

Maybe Liam could find something similar here.

"Might be tough," I admitted. "Kid doesn't talk much. Wrote his name down, but that's about it. Seems almost mute."

"But he understands everything," Butch noted. "I saw his eyes. Nothing wrong with his intelligence."

"No," I agreed. "Nothing wrong there at all. Just scared, I think. And used to being alone."

Butch returned to his chair, the leather creaking under his weight. "Well, whatever his story, he did us a solid today. Make sure he gets whatever he wants if he comes back around."

"Already planned on it."

"And Rooster?" Butch fixed me with his penetrating stare. "Keep me in the loop this time."

I nodded, properly chastised. "Will do, boss."

I turned to leave, my mind already shifting to dinner preparations. The guys would be hungry after all the excitement, and cooking always helped me think.

"Oh, almost forgot," I said, pausing at the doorway. "Sammy and Joey are coming back tomorrow. Percy wants to make them a welcome cake." The young fox shifters had been staying with a neighboring friendly MC while we dealt with some club business, but they were finally returning home.

"Good." Butch's expression lightened slightly. "Those boys have been through enough. A cake sounds perfect."

I nodded and headed toward my kitchen, the one place in this chaotic world where everything made perfect sense to me. As I walked, I wondered if Liam would return tonight for food, or if our encounter had scared him off for good.

Something deep inside me hoped it was the former. The kid intrigued me in a way I couldn't quite explain—and wasn't ready to examine too closely.

I moved around my kitchen with practiced efficiency, slicing tomatoes, lettuce, and onions for the sandwich platter. After the excitement with the intruder, I'd opted for something simple—cold cuts, fresh bread, and a batch of my potato salad that the guys always demolished within minutes. Nothing fancy, just filling comfort food that would satisfy hungry bikers and hopefully coax a skittish lynx shifter back to our doorstep.

The last few hours had been a whirlwind of activity. Bear had taken our uninvited guest to the basement for questioning. Butch was holed up in his office making calls about enhanced security. The rest of the guys were either on patrol around the property or checking our surveillance systems for weaknesses.

Nobody would have time for a complicated meal tonight.

I arranged thick slices of roast beef, ham, and turkey on a platter, surrounded by Swiss, cheddar, and provolone cheese. Next came the condiments—mayo, mustard, horseradish spread that Bear loved despite the way it made his eyes water. A basket of freshly baked bread completed the spread.

The potato salad was my mother's recipe—red potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, celery, onions, and a dressing made with mayo, mustard, and a secret blend of spices I'd never share with anyone. Not even under torture.

As I set everything up on the serving table, I prepared two separate plates. One for myself—a massive sandwich with all the fixings and a generous portion of potato salad. The second plate was smaller, with just half a sandwich and a side of potato salad. For Liam, if he showed up.

I had a feeling he would. The kid had been scared off earlier, but hunger was a powerful motivator. I'd learned that watching him these past few months. He never missed more than one meal before his hunger drove him back to our picnic table.

I rang the dinner bell—an actual brass bell hanging by the kitchen door that I'd insisted on installing after getting tired of shouting for the guys. Within minutes, they started filtering in, grabbing plates and building sandwiches with the focused intensity of men who'd had a long day.

Gunner nodded his thanks as he piled roast beef high on rye bread. "Appreciate it, Rooster. Simple's good tonight."

"Everything quiet outside?" I asked, picking up my two prepared plates.

"So far," he replied, his eyes shifting to the second plate in my hands.

"That for our little vigilante?"

"If he decides to come back," I said with a shrug that probably didn't fool anyone. I wasn't sure why I cared so much whether the kid returned, but I did.

I slipped out the back door while the others were still serving themselves. The evening air had cooled considerably since afternoon, carrying the crisp scent of approaching autumn. Soon Montana's brutal winter would arrive, and I couldn't imagine how a skinny kid like Liam would survive without proper shelter.

I set both plates on the picnic table and took a seat at one end, making sure to leave plenty of space. Then I waited, pretending to be entirely focused on my food.

Five minutes passed. Ten. I ate slowly, occasionally glancing toward the bushes near Gearhead's workshop where I'd first spotted Liam earlier today. The area remained still, but I had the distinct feeling I was being watched.

I was nearly finished with my sandwich when the bushes rustled slightly—too deliberately to be wind. Slowly, cautiously, a hooded figure emerged, golden eyes reflecting the security lights as they assessed the situation.

I kept eating, not looking directly at him. Like approaching a stray cat—let them come to you.

After a long moment of hesitation, Liam crept forward, stopping several times to check for threats before finally reaching the table. He remained standing, poised for flight, as he reached for his plate.

"You can sit," I said quietly, still not looking directly at him. "No one's going to bother us. They're all inside eating."

He eased onto the bench at the opposite end of the table, putting maximum distance between us. Smart kid. Always keeping his escape routes clear.

I watched from the corner of my eye as he picked up half of the turkey sandwich and took a small, careful bite. Once he determined it was safe, he devoured the rest in three huge bites, hunger overcoming caution.

When he finished the sandwich, he moved on to the potato salad, scooping it up with his fingers. The sight triggered something protective in me—this kid clearly hadn't had anyone to teach him basic things like using utensils.

"Here," I said, keeping my voice casual as I held up my fork. "Makes it easier."

Liam froze, eyes locked on the fork with suspicion.

I demonstrated, spearing a chunk of potato and bringing it to my mouth. "See? Less messy."

After a moment's deliberation, Liam cautiously picked up the fork beside his plate, holding it awkwardly like he'd never handled one before. He tried to copy my motion, but ended up dropping a glob of potato salad onto the table.

His cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but I pretended not to notice.

"Takes practice," I said, demonstrating again. "Try holding it like this."

He adjusted his grip, determination etched across his face as he concentrated on the task. His next attempt was more successful, though he still managed to get potato salad on his chin.

Without thinking, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a clean napkin, offering it to him. "For your face."

Liam stared at the napkin for a long moment before taking it with hesitant fingers. He swiped at his chin, missing most of the potato salad.

"Little higher," I said, pointing to my own chin.

He tried again, this time cleaning himself properly.

Despite the mess, I was impressed by how quickly he adapted. This wasn't a kid with limited intelligence—this was someone who'd simply never been taught. The thought made my chest ache. What circumstances had led to him being alone, without even these basic skills?

"Drink?" I asked, standing slowly to avoid startling him.

Liam tensed, but gave a small nod.

I returned to the kitchen, grabbing a beer for myself and, after a moment's consideration, a bottle of apple juice for him. Bug had mentioned once that many shifters preferred sweet drinks, their enhanced taste buds making bitter flavors like beer less appealing.

When I returned, I was pleased to see Liam still sitting there, working on his potato salad with determined concentration. His fork handling had improved considerably in just those few minutes.

I set the juice down at his end of the table, then retreated back to my seat before opening my beer. Always giving him space, always making sure he had an escape route. The kid was like a wild animal—one wrong move and he'd bolt.

"It's apple juice," I said when he eyed the bottle suspiciously. "Sweet. Try it."

He picked up the bottle and sniffed it cautiously before taking a small sip. His eyes widened slightly—apparently he approved. The bottle was half empty within seconds.

Progress. Small steps, but progress all the same.

I watched as Liam finished the last of his potato salad, his fork handling improving with each bite. The kid was a quick study, I'd give him that. There was intelligence behind those golden eyes—a sharp mind that had clearly helped him survive God knows what kind of life.

As he set down his fork with a satisfied expression, I figured it was time to see if I could get some information out of him without sending him running for the hills again.

"So," I began casually, keeping my tone light, "you've been watching our place for a while, huh?"

Liam's posture immediately stiffened, wariness returning to his eyes.

I raised my hands in a placating gesture. "Not accusing you of anything. Just curious how much you've seen."

He studied me for a long moment, then gave a small nod.

"Have you noticed other people hanging around who shouldn't be? Besides today's computer guy, I mean."

Liam's eyes flicked toward the clubhouse, then back to me. He held up two fingers.

"Two other times?" I asked, surprised. "Recently?"

He shook his head, then gestured with his hands to indicate something that had happened further in the past.

"When?" I pressed gently.

He seemed to consider how to answer, then pointed to Percy's window on the second floor of the clubhouse.

The realization hit me. "You mean when Biggins tried to take Percy?"

Liam nodded emphatically.

Christ. That had been over a month ago—a nasty situation when Alpha Biggins had tried to forcibly reclaim Percy as part of his fox skulk. If this kid had been watching us even back then...

"Did you see what happened?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Liam made a series of quick gestures—pointing to his eyes, then to various positions around the yard, pantomiming someone sneaking around, then being confronted. The kid had a talent for silent communication.

"You saw it all," I said, and it wasn't a question. "From hiding."

He nodded, a flicker of something like pride crossing his features.

"Listen," I said, leaning forward slightly but careful not to crowd him, "I want you to know something. You're welcome here. The food I leave out? That's for you. On purpose." I tapped the table. "This is your table as much as anyone's."

Liam's brow furrowed slightly, obviously skeptical.

"I mean it. But I'd appreciate it if you'd let us know when you see people who shouldn't be here. Like you did today." I gestured toward the clubhouse. "We've got people inside who've been hurt before. People who need protecting."

Something in his expression shifted—a flash of understanding, maybe even empathy.

"Deal?" I asked.

After a moment's hesitation, he gave a single nod.

"Good." I drained the last of my beer, feeling strangely satisfied with our silent conversation.

I couldn't quite figure out why this particular homeless kid had caught my interest so thoroughly. I'd helped plenty of people over the years—the MC had a soft spot for strays and outcasts—but something about Liam pulled at me differently.

Maybe it was those golden lynx eyes, or the careful way he ate what I provided, or how he'd risked his own safety to protect our club from an intruder.

Over the months, I'd noticed his preferences in the food I left out. He devoured anything with protein—chicken, beef, eggs—and had a surprising fondness for sweet things. Fruit disappeared quickly, especially berries. Vegetables were hit or miss; he liked potatoes and carrots but left broccoli untouched. I'd started adjusting my offerings accordingly, making sure to include the things he seemed to enjoy most.

It was strange, this one-sided relationship we'd developed. I knew his eating habits better than those of some club members I'd known for years, yet I'd barely heard him speak a word.

"Winter's coming," I said, nodding toward the darkening sky.

"Temperatures drop fast up here. You got somewhere warm to stay?"

Liam shrugged, his expression carefully blank.

Not a good sign.

"The clubhouse has extra rooms," I offered, trying to sound casual. "You helped us out today. Least we could do is give you a warm place to sleep when the snow hits."

He looked away, clearly uncomfortable with the suggestion.

"Just think about it," I said. "No pressure. But Montana winters are brutal, especially if you're sleeping rough."

I was about to continue when Liam's head suddenly snapped up, his body going rigid with attention. His eyes, reflecting the security lights, narrowed as he scanned the yard with an intensity that reminded me of a predator sensing danger.

"What is it?" I whispered, immediately on alert.

Liam pressed a finger to his lips in the universal sign for silence, then pointed toward the tree line at the edge of the property. I squinted into the darkness, but saw nothing.

Before I could question him further, his hand shot out and wrapped around my wrist. His grip was surprisingly strong for someone so thin. With a quick jerk of his head toward Gearhead's workshop, he pulled me to my feet.

I followed his lead, letting him guide me into the shadows beside the building. He moved with absolute silence, feet barely seeming to touch the ground as he found a position behind a stack of old tires that gave us a clear view of the yard while keeping us hidden.

Once we were concealed, he released my wrist and pointed again.

This time, I saw them—two shadowy figures detaching themselves from the darkness at the property line. They moved with purposeful stealth, staying low and using the sparse vegetation for cover as they approached the back door of the clubhouse.

Unlike the amateur we'd caught earlier, these guys knew what they were doing. They wore dark clothing that blended into the night, and they moved with the disciplined patience of professionals.

I pulled out my phone, careful to keep the screen angled away from the yard as I typed a quick text to Butch: *Two intruders approaching back door. Armed. Professional. Watching from Gearhead's shop with Liam.*

The message sent with a soft whoosh that sounded deafening in the silent yard. Liam shot me a warning look, finger still pressed to his lips.

The intruders had stopped about twenty yards from the door, crouching behind Bug's meager herb garden. One of them pulled something from a

bag—binoculars or maybe night vision goggles—and began scanning the building methodically.

My phone vibrated silently in my hand. Butch's reply: *Stay put. Bear and Gunner moving into position. Do NOT engage.*

I showed the message to Liam, who nodded his understanding. His body remained coiled with tension, ready to move at a moment's notice.

The figures conferred briefly in hushed tones too quiet for me to make out. The larger one pointed toward the side of the building where Henry's makeshift medical room was located, while the smaller one shook his head and gestured toward the back door.

They seemed to be disagreeing about their entry point.

I felt Liam shift beside me, his attention razor-sharp as he tracked every movement. His ability to remain completely still while maintaining such intense focus was unnerving. In that moment, he seemed more lynx than human.

My phone vibrated again: *30 seconds. Be ready to duck.*

I nudged Liam and showed him the message. His eyes widened slightly, but he nodded again, pressing himself lower behind the tires.

The seconds ticked by with excruciating slowness as we watched the intruders finally come to an agreement. They began moving toward the back door again, one reaching into his jacket—presumably for a lockpicking tool or weapon.

Suddenly, the yard lit up like daylight as Gunner flipped on the powerful emergency floodlights we'd installed after the incident with Biggins. The intruders froze, momentarily blinded, as Bear and three other club members emerged from different points around the building, guns drawn and aimed.

"Down on the ground!" Bear's voice boomed across the yard. "Now!"

I watched as the careful planning of our would-be intruders fell apart in seconds. This wasn't their first day—they immediately assessed their options, realized they were outgunned, and dropped to their knees with hands raised.

Liam let out a breath beside me, his shoulders relaxing slightly as the immediate threat passed. But there was something in his eyes as he watched the scene unfold—not relief, but grim recognition.

He knew something about these men. And whatever it was, it scared him.

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## Chapter Four

~ Liam ~

I stayed perfectly still behind those tires, my fingers still wrapped around Rooster's thick wrist. The contact should have sent warning signals firing through every nerve in my body—touch meant danger, meant vulnerability—but instead, something inside me quieted.

My inner lynx, usually so alert and ready to flee, purred with contentment. The sensation was so foreign I almost pulled away from pure shock.

Rooster didn't try to break free of my grip. He stayed crouched beside me, his breathing steady despite the tension radiating from his massive frame. I could feel his pulse beneath my fingertips—strong and surprisingly calm considering the armed men in our yard.

Bear's voice boomed across the open space again. "I said on the ground! Face down, hands behind your heads!"

The intruders complied with practiced movements, too smooth to be their first time surrendering. Their composure unsettled me. These weren't desperate thieves or random troublemakers. They were professionals—the kind who only surrendered when it served their purpose.

I'd seen men like this before, back when I was younger and less careful about my hiding places. Men who worked for organizations that hunted shifters for sport or profit. Men who knew how to wait for the perfect moment to strike.

My suspicion was confirmed when the taller intruder's eyes flicked toward the gate. A signal.

"More coming," I whispered, the words scraping my throat from disuse.

Rooster's head snapped toward me, surprised by my voice, but he didn't question me. Instead, he immediately typed another message on his phone, trusting my warning without hesitation.

The back door of the clubhouse slammed open as three more MC members rushed out to help Bear and the others. The yard was now filled with leather-clad bikers pointing guns at the kneeling intruders.

No one noticed the gate slowly swinging open.

Four men slipped through, weapons already drawn. Unlike the first two, they didn't bother with stealth—they charged forward with the confidence of those who knew they had the advantage of surprise.

"Behind you!" Rooster bellowed, already rising to his feet.

The yard erupted into chaos. The kneeling intruders sprang up, tackling the nearest bikers. Gunshots cracked through the night air, bullets splintering wood and shattering the clubhouse windows. The new attackers spread out, moving with coordinated precision that spoke of military training.

I tugged desperately at Rooster's wrist, trying to pull him deeper into the shadows. We needed to run, to hide, to get as far from this firefight as possible. Every survival instinct I'd developed over years on the streets screamed at me to flee.

But Rooster wasn't moving. His eyes were locked on his brothers fighting for their lives. "I have to help them," he said, voice tight with urgency.

I shook my head violently, pulling harder on his arm. The safety I'd felt moments ago evaporated, replaced by cold dread. I couldn't let him go out there, couldn't watch him get hurt or worse.

The realization hit me like a physical blow—I cared what happened to this man. This stranger who'd fed me for months without asking anything in return. This cook with flaming red hair who'd taught me how to use a fork with endless patience.

Rooster looked down at me, his expression softening despite the battle raging yards away. He gently extracted his wrist from my grip and, to my shock, cupped my face with his massive hand.

"I have to help my brothers, baby boy. I'll be careful. I promise."

His thumb brushed across my cheekbone, the gesture so tender it left me frozen in place. No one had touched me with such gentleness in more years than I could remember.

Before I could react, he was gone, charging into the fray with a roar that sounded more bear than human. My chest tightened as I watched him barrel into one of the attackers, sending the man sprawling.

I should run. This wasn't my fight. These weren't my people.

But my eyes wouldn't leave Rooster.

He moved with surprising grace for his size, landing a solid punch on one attacker before spinning to help a club brother struggling with another. The MC members were outnumbered but fighting fiercely, their brotherhood evident in the way they covered each other, moved as a unit.

Then I saw him—a man circling around the edge of the fight, baseball bat raised, eyes fixed on Rooster's back.

My warning died in my throat as the bat connected with a sickening crack against Rooster's skull. He stumbled, disoriented, before crumpling to the ground like a marionette with cut strings.

Something snapped inside me.

The world narrowed to a single point: the man standing over Rooster with the bat raised for another strike.

I didn't decide to move—I was simply in motion, a blur of rage and protective fury. I hit the attacker with the full weight of my body, my momentum carrying us both to the ground.

My claws extended and found purchase in around his throat—not killing, not yet, but making it clear I could. He screamed, the bat falling from his hands as he tried desperately to dislodge me.

I ripped into him, my rational mind submerged beneath waves of primal rage. My claws tore through his jacket, drawing blood in long, ragged lines. He bucked beneath me, howling in pain and terror. The scent of his fear only fueled my attack.

Only when he stopped fighting—when he lay whimpering and bleeding on the ground—did I release him. I backed away, a warning growl rumbling through my chest, daring him to move again.

He didn't.

Turning, I padded quickly to where Rooster lay motionless on the ground. My heart hammered painfully against my ribs as I nudged his face with the back of my hand.

Relief flooded me when he groaned, eyes fluttering.

Without conscious thought, I positioned myself over his body, straddling his massive form with my considerably smaller one. I bristled with anger as I surveyed the chaos around us. The fight was winding down, the attackers either subdued or fleeing, but I didn't care.

Let anyone—friend or enemy—try to approach Rooster now. I would protect him with every ounce of strength I possessed.

The realization should have terrified me—I'd never felt this kind of attachment to anyone. Never risked myself for another person. Never chosen to stay when I could have run.

But as I stood guard over the red-haired cook who had shown me nothing but kindness, I felt something I hadn't experienced in years.

I felt like I'd found something worth fighting for.

The fight died down around us, but I remained crouched over Rooster's body, my body throbbing with adrenaline and my heart still racing with the lingering ferocity.

Blood—not mine—had dried under my fingernails, and the taste of that man's fear lingered in my mouth.

Rooster groaned beneath me, his eyes fluttering open then squeezing shut against the pain. A dark bruise was already forming where the bat had connected with his temple, the skin split and bleeding sluggishly.

"Kid?" he mumbled, trying to focus on my face. "You okay?"

Typical. He was the one bleeding from a head wound, and he was asking if I was alright.

I nodded quickly, my eyes never leaving his face. The yard around us was a battleground of groaning bodies and cursing bikers. Several of the attackers lay motionless on the ground while others were being zip-tied by club members. The scent of blood, gunpowder, and adrenaline hung heavy in the air.

The clubhouse door swung open, and a lean man with short brown hair stepped out, carrying what looked like a medical bag. Unlike the others, he wore no leather vest, just a rumpled button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Doctor. The word popped into my head immediately.

"I need to check injuries!" he called out, his voice crisp with authority. "Priority to anyone bleeding or unconscious!"

His eyes swept the yard, assessing the situation with clinical detachment. Several bikers pointed toward us. The doctor started in our direction, and I felt my muscles tense, ready to defend Rooster if necessary.

"It's okay," Rooster whispered, reading my posture. "That's Henry. He's Gunner's mate. Doc's good people."

I wasn't convinced. Everyone was dangerous until proven otherwise. That's how I'd survived this long.

But Rooster needed help. The blood from his head wound was soaking into his beard, staining the red hair an even darker crimson. My protective instincts warred with my ingrained distrust of strangers.

Rooster's need won.

I rose to my feet in one fluid motion and approached the doctor, who stopped short, eyeing me warily. Smart man. I probably looked feral, wild-

eyed and blood-spattered. Without speaking, I grabbed his sleeve and tugged him toward Rooster, my intention clear.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming," he said, allowing himself to be led. "Is that Rooster down? How bad is it?"

I didn't answer, just pulled him faster.

When we reached Rooster, the doctor—Henry—immediately knelt beside him, setting down his bag and pulling out a penlight. I hovered nearby, muscles tense, ready to intervene if he caused Rooster any pain.

"Pupils equal and reactive," Henry muttered, shining the light into Rooster's eyes. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Three," Rooster answered, trying to sit up. "I'm fine, Doc. Just a love tap."

"You're not fine," Henry countered, pushing him gently back down. "That's a nasty concussion at minimum. You need a CT scan to rule out a skull fracture or intracranial bleeding."

Rooster waved him off. "No hospitals. You know the drill."

"At least let me clean and stitch that cut," Henry insisted, already pulling supplies from his bag. "And you're staying under observation tonight. No arguments."

I watched the exchange with growing frustration. Rooster clearly needed more help than he was willing to accept. Stubborn man. I found myself wondering if all bear shifters were this hardheaded or if it was just him.

My attention snapped to movement behind us—the bearded leader, Butch, was approaching, his massive form silhouetted against the security lights. Instinctively, I shifted position, moving behind Rooster where I felt marginally safer.

"Report," Butch said, his voice gruff as he surveyed the damage to his club member.

Henry answered without looking up from his work cleaning Rooster's wound. "Concussion. Laceration. Hardheaded idiot refusing proper medical care. The usual."

Butch grunted, then turned his attention to me. I tensed under his scrutiny, feeling exposed despite Rooster's presence between us.

"You're the one who tore into that guy with the bat?" he asked, nodding toward the man I'd attacked. The attacker was now conscious, but moaning

in pain as someone zip-tied his hands. His jacket was in shreds, blood seeping through multiple deep scratches across his torso.

I looked away, not confirming or denying anything.

"Saved my ass," Rooster said, wincing as Henry began stitching his wound. "Liam spotted them first, tried to keep me out of the fight, then went full protective mode when I got hit."

Butch studied me with newfound interest. I didn't like it. Being noticed was dangerous. Being considered valuable was even worse—it meant people wanted something from you.

"What exactly happened?" Butch asked Rooster. "Before the fight."

I was grateful when Rooster took over the explanation. My throat felt raw from the few words I'd spoken earlier, and explaining anything fully would have been beyond me.

"Liam and I were at the picnic table when he spotted two men sneaking into the yard," Rooster said, remaining impressively still as Henry worked on his wound. "We were able to hide before they spotted us. That's when I texted you. Liam noticed the second group coming through the gate before anyone else did."

"Good eyes," Butch commented, glancing at me again.

I ducked my head, avoiding his gaze.

"Better than good," Rooster said. "Kid's got instincts. Knew something was wrong before I did."

I shifted uncomfortably under the praise. Years of living in shadows had taught me to recognize danger, that's all. There was nothing special about wanting to stay alive.

Butch nodded thoughtfully, then turned to two of his men—the massive one called Bear and another with long dark hair pulled into a ponytail.

"Bear, Gunner, take our new friends to the basement. I want to know who sent them and why."

The men nodded, already moving to collect the captive intruders. I didn't envy those men what was coming. The basement clearly wasn't a place for friendly conversations.

Butch turned back to us. "You should stay inside tonight," he said, addressing me directly. "Whoever sent these men might send more. You're safer with us."

My heart rate spiked at the suggestion. Indoors meant trapped. Indoors meant surrounded by people I didn't know or trust. Indoors meant no easy

escape routes when things inevitably went wrong.

But then Rooster tried to stand and immediately swayed, his face paling beneath his beard. Henry steadied him with a muttered curse about stubborn patients. The sight of Rooster's vulnerability made something twist painfully in my chest.

He needed help. He needed looking after.

Before I could second-guess myself, I grabbed Rooster's hand and tugged him gently toward the clubhouse. If he was staying inside, then I would too—at least until I was sure he would be okay.

"I think that's a yes," Rooster said to Butch, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth despite the pain evident in his eyes.

I led him toward the kitchen door, the one place in the clubhouse that felt remotely safe to me. My heart hammered against my ribs as we approached the building, every instinct screaming that I was making a mistake.

But when Rooster squeezed my hand gently, something quieted inside me. Just for tonight, I told myself. Just until his head was better. I had a debt to repay, after all. Food for protection—it seemed like a fair exchange.

That's what I told myself, anyway, as I stepped willingly into the building I'd spent months circling from a safe distance.

I pushed Rooster into the nearest chair the moment we entered the kitchen, my movements quick and decisive. This space, at least, felt vaguely familiar from watching through windows—the gleaming countertops, the industrial-sized stove where he'd prepared the food that had kept me alive these past months.

I knew this room, even if I'd never been inside it, and that small comfort steeled my nerves as I turned to examine Rooster's injury in the bright overhead light.

The gash looked worse under the fluorescents—an angry red line disappearing into his hairline, already swelling into an impressive lump. Blood had dried in his beard, turning the vibrant red a rusty brown.

Despite the doctor's neat stitches, the area around the wound was already darkening into what would become a spectacular bruise.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Rooster said, trying to sound reassuring.

I shot him a disbelieving look and turned to search the cabinets. I needed ice for the swelling. A bag to put it in. A towel to wrap around it. Simple first aid knowledge I'd picked up from necessity over the years.

The kitchen was immaculately organized, each cabinet containing exactly what its label promised. Plates. Glasses. Mixing bowls. Baking supplies. I found a stack of clean dish towels in a drawer beside the sink and grabbed one, then located plastic bags in another drawer.

Now for ice.

I moved to the large stainless steel refrigerator, pulling it open with determination. The inside was packed with food—containers labeled in neat handwriting, fresh vegetables, gallons of milk, cartons of eggs. My stomach growled reflexively at the sight of so much food in one place, but I pushed the feeling aside.

Focus. Ice.

I frowned, searching the freezer compartment before realizing there wasn't one. Just this massive refrigerator with no freezer section.

"The freezer's in the pantry," Rooster said, watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read. "Big chest freezer at the back."

I nodded and headed for the door he pointed to, pulling it open to reveal a walk-in pantry larger than any room I'd slept in for years. Shelves lined the walls, stocked with canned goods, dry pasta, rice, beans, flour, sugar—enough food to feed an army. Or survive an apocalypse.

My eyes widened as I took in the sheer abundance. I couldn't help cataloguing it all, the survival part of my brain automatically calculating how long such supplies could last.

At the back, just as Rooster had said, stood an enormous chest freezer. I lifted the lid to find it packed with frozen meats, vegetables, and containers of prepared meals. And ice. Plenty of ice.

I filled a plastic bag with ice cubes, wrapped it in the dish towel, and returned to Rooster. He hadn't moved from his chair, his eyes slightly unfocused in a way that worried me. Concussions were serious. I'd seen people die from head injuries that didn't look much worse than his.

Carefully, I placed the makeshift ice pack against the side of his head, positioning it to cover the worst of the swelling without pressing on the stitches.

"Thanks, kid," he murmured, reaching up to hold the ice pack in place.

I stepped back, observing him critically. The ice would help with the swelling, but it wouldn't fix the concussion. There was a faster way to heal, and we both knew it.

Why wasn't he shifting?

All shifters knew that transforming accelerated healing. Injuries that might take weeks to heal in human form could mend in days or even hours after a shift. The more time spent in animal form, the faster the healing.

I frowned, trying to figure out how to communicate this without speaking. Words were hard for me on the best days, and today had been far from the best.

I pointed at him, then made a transforming gesture with my hands.

Rooster's brow furrowed in confusion. "What is it, Liam? You need something else?"

I growled in frustration, an animal sound that slipped out before I could stop it. I tried again, pantomiming shifting, but he just looked more confused.

"I don't understand what you're trying to tell me," he said gently.

I looked around and spotted a notepad and pen on the counter. Grabbing them, I quickly sketched a stick figure, then an arrow, then a rough bear. I held it up, pointing insistently.

Rooster squinted at my drawing. "You... want to see a bear?"

I shook my head, adding another arrow from the bear back to the human, then circling the whole sequence.

"A transformation? You know about shifters?" His eyes widened slightly. "Have you seen one of us shift before?"

I wanted to scream. He wasn't getting it. I jabbed my finger at him, then at the drawing, then at his injury.

"You think I should shift?" he asked finally, understanding dawning. "To heal faster?"

I nodded emphatically, relief washing through me.

"I can't, kid. Not with you here. We don't—" he hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "We don't reveal ourselves to humans. It's our most important rule."

So that was it. He thought I was human. He was protecting his secret, not realizing I already knew because I shared it.

I stared at him for a long moment, weighing my options. Revealing myself was a risk—the biggest I'd taken in years. But watching him suffer needlessly from an injury he'd received while protecting his family... it bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

Decision made, I stepped back from him, creating space between us and the kitchen table.

"Liam? What are you—"

I cut him off with a raised hand. Then, holding his gaze, I grabbed my pad of paper and wrote down what I wanted him to know, something I hadn't shared with anyone. Ever.

Rooster's mouth dropped open when I turned the page toward him, the ice pack forgotten in his hand. "You're a shifter," he whispered, eyes wide with astonishment.

I blinked slowly in confirmation, my golden eyes holding his gaze.

"A lynx," he continued, wonder replacing shock. "I thought you might be, with those eyes, but I wasn't sure." Rooster's expression changed from shock to something more complex—curiosity mixed with a gentle understanding that made my chest feel strange. "I'll bet you're a beautiful lynx."

I wouldn't know. I quickly wrote on my pad again, before turning it toward Rooster. "*Never shifted.*"

"You've never shifted?"

I shook my head.

"Then..." Rooster frowned. "If you've never shifted, how do you know you're a shifter?"

I huffed before writing on my pad again. When I turned it toward Rooster, his eyebrows hit his hairline.

"Someone told you?"

I nodded again. I couldn't exactly tell him that plants had told me I was a lynx shifter. He'd think I was nuts.

"Your parents?"

This time I shook my head. "*No parents.*"

"No parents? How long have you been on your own?"

I held up all ten fingers, then five more. Fifteen years.

"Since you were what? Seven? Eight?"

I nodded. Seven.

"Jesus," he muttered. "And you've been alone all that time? With no one to guide you?"

I shrugged. I'd figured it out on my own. Plants had helped—they always recognized what I was, even when I was in human form.

I pointed again at the drawing, then at him, raising my eyebrows in question.

"You're right," he admitted. "Shifting would help me heal faster. But I didn't want to scare you off." A small, rueful smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "Guess I was worried over nothing."

I nodded, gesturing impatiently for him to get on with it. The stubborn man had a head injury that needed healing.

"Not here," he said, rising carefully from his chair. "Too exposed. We have a shifting room down the hall for emergencies. Will you come with me?"

The question hung in the air between us—an invitation, not a command. He was giving me a choice, acknowledging my freedom to refuse.

I hesitated, then nodded. I'd already revealed my biggest secret to this man. Following him down a hallway seemed like a small risk in comparison.

As I walked beside him, supporting his larger frame when he swayed slightly, I realized something had fundamentally changed between us. We were no longer just the provider and the stray, the cook and the homeless kid.

We were two shifters who had recognized something in each other—something that felt oddly like belonging.

The thought should have terrified me. Instead, as we moved deeper into the clubhouse, I felt the unfamiliar sensation of my defenses lowering, just a fraction.

Maybe, just maybe, I could trust this red-haired cook with the kind eyes and gentle hands. For tonight, at least, I'd stay. Tomorrow's problems could wait until morning.

# Chapter Five

~ Rooster ~

My head throbbed where that bastard had hit me with the bat, the pain pulsing in time with my heartbeat. Even with the ice pack, it felt like someone was driving a nail through my skull with each beat.

But the pain hardly registered compared to what I'd just witnessed—Liam shifting into a lynx right in front of me, then slipping away to change back into human form in private.

My mind was still processing the implications. The kid had been a shifter all along. A lynx shifter surviving on his own since he was seven years old. The thought made my chest ache almost as much as my head. No wonder he'd been so wary, so careful about keeping his distance. He'd been hiding more than just his homelessness.

Liam moved with that fluid grace I'd noticed before—the grace of a predator in human form. His golden eyes met mine briefly before darting away, his body language screaming uncertainty.

That's when it hit me.

The scent washed over me like a tsunami, my bear roaring to attention within me so suddenly I nearly lost my breath. How had I missed it before? But of course—he'd never been close enough, and he'd masked his shifter scent somehow.

Now, having shifted, his true scent filled the kitchen—earth and pine and something uniquely him, something that called to my very soul.

Mate.

My mate.

The one I'd given up hope of ever finding.

"You're my mate," I blurted out, the words tumbling from my mouth before my brain could filter them.

Liam froze, his entire body going statue-still in that way only cats can achieve. His golden eyes widened, pupils expanding into black pools of confusion and alarm. He took a half-step backward, his gaze darting toward the nearest exit.

"I can smell it on you," I explained, trying to keep my voice gentle despite the bear inside me that wanted to roar with triumph. "It's... it's a shifter thing. The scent. When someone is your destined mate, you can smell it."

Liam frowned, then lifted his arm to his nose and sniffed it, his face scrunching up like he'd encountered something unpleasant. I almost laughed at his expression—somewhere between bewilderment and offense.

"No, not like that," I said. "It's not a bad smell. It's... perfect. To me, at least. It's how our kind finds our mates."

He still looked utterly lost, and I realized with a pang that he probably had no idea what I was talking about. If he'd been on his own since childhood, who would have taught him about mates? About anything related to shifter culture?

Before I could explain further, the back door swung open, and voices filled the hallway—Butch and several others returning from securing the captives. Liam moved with lightning speed, darting behind me like I was a human shield. His thin fingers clutched the back of my shirt, his body pressed against my spine.

The protective instinct that surged through me was unlike anything I'd ever felt. I rose to my full height, ignoring the wave of dizziness from my head injury, and positioned myself as a barrier between the doorway and my newly discovered mate.

Bear, Gunner, and Henry appeared in the doorway first, mid-conversation about the captives. They fell silent when they saw me standing there like a bouncer at an exclusive club.

"Everything okay?" Gunner asked, his eyes flicking from my defensive stance to the glimpse of Liam behind me.

"Fine," I said, my voice gruffer than I intended. "Just need a minute."

Henry frowned, his doctor-brain probably noticing how I was swaying slightly. "You should be sitting down with that head injury. I told you—"

"I'm fine," I repeated, more firmly this time. My bear was too close to the surface, too protective of the frightened lynx using me as cover. "We just need a moment."

They exchanged glances but moved past us toward the common room, giving us a wide berth. Henry muttered something about "stubborn patients" as he passed.

Butch was the last to enter, his expression shifting from weariness to sharp interest as he took in the scene. "Rooster? What's going on?"

I took a deep breath, reaching behind me to gently touch Liam's hand where it clutched my shirt. A silent reassurance.

"Butch, can I have a word? Just you?"

He nodded, then waited as the others disappeared down the hallway. When we were alone, I felt Liam relax slightly, though he still remained safely behind me.

"Come on out, Liam," I said softly. "It's just Butch. He's our president. Our alpha. He's not going to hurt you."

Slowly, reluctantly, Liam shifted to stand beside me rather than behind me. His body remained tense, poised to run at the first sign of danger. I resisted the urge to put my arm around him, sensing he wasn't ready for that level of contact.

"Butch," I said, my voice steadier than I felt, "Liam is a shifter. A lynx. And... he's my mate."

I'd been waiting my entire life to say those words.

Butch's eyebrows shot up, but he controlled his reaction quickly. "I see." His gaze shifted to Liam, assessing but not unkind. "Welcome to the club, then."

Liam didn't respond, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"There's more," I continued. "He doesn't know anything about being a shifter, about mates, about any of it." I felt a growl building in my chest as I thought about the implications. "He was abandoned when he was seven years old. Been on his own ever since."

Butch's expression darkened. We'd seen enough cases like Bug and the fox brothers to know what happened to young shifters without protection.

It rarely ended well.

"I see," he repeated, his voice gentler this time. "That explains a few things."

He looked at Liam again, then back to me. "Take him to your room. Get him cleaned up. Fed. We can sort out the rest tomorrow."

I nodded, gratitude washing through me.

"And Rooster?" Butch added, his tone dropping to ensure Liam couldn't hear. "Make sure you explain everything before you even think about claiming him. Kid's been through enough without being blindsided by a mating bite."

"I know," I assured him. The thought of rushing Liam into anything made my stomach turn. He'd had enough choices taken away from him already.

"Good," Butch said. "I'm going to check on Treat and Doby. Someone should be tucking that cub in right about now."

As he walked away, I turned to look at Liam, who was watching me with wary confusion. Those golden eyes seemed to see right through me, questioning everything I'd just said.

My mate. The thought still felt surreal, like I might wake up and find this had all been some concussion-induced hallucination. But the scent of him was unmistakable, and my bear knew with absolute certainty that we had finally found what we'd been searching for all these years.

Now I just had to explain what that meant to someone who'd been alone far too long. Luckily, I knew just the place to do it.

"Come with me," I said as I tugged him down the hallway. My private room was nothing fancy—just a space off the kitchen where I could crash between cooking shifts without having to trek upstairs.

A double bed took up most of the room, with a small dresser and chair by the window making up the rest of the furniture. But it was clean, it was private, and most importantly, it had a door that locked from the inside. I figured Liam would appreciate that last feature the most.

"This is my space," I explained as I flicked on the light. "Nobody comes in here without my permission."

I deliberately moved to sit in the chair by the window, positioning myself as far from the door as possible. The message was clear: I wasn't blocking his escape route if he needed to bolt. My head still throbbed like a son of a bitch, but I ignored it.

Some things were more important than pain.

Liam hovered in the doorway, golden eyes taking in every detail of the room. I recognized the calculation in that gaze—he was mapping exits, assessing threats, planning escape routes. I'd seen the same look in Bug's eyes when he first arrived.

After a long moment, he stepped inside and perched on the very corner of the bed nearest the door. His posture remained tense, ready to spring up at the first sign of danger. The kid had clearly spent years perfecting the art of quick getaways.

"So," I began, keeping my voice gentle, "I'm guessing no one ever explained to you what being a shifter means."

Liam shook his head, a quick, sharp movement.

"Have you ever lived with other shifters? A lynx clan maybe?"

Another head shake.

"How long have you known you could shift?"

He frowned, then held up his hands with all ten fingers spread, then added two more fingers.

"Since you were twelve?" I clarified.

He nodded.

"And your parents... were they shifters too?"

The question seemed to confuse him. After a moment, he shook his head.

"They were human?" I pressed. "Did they know what you were?"

His face darkened, and he nodded once. Then he made a gesture like he was pushing something away.

"They kicked you out when they found out," I guessed, my voice hardening despite my efforts to keep it neutral.

Liam nodded, his eyes dropping to the floor.

"And that's when you were seven?" I asked, piecing together his earlier gestures.

Another nod.

The rage that bubbled up inside me was so fierce I had to close my eyes for a moment to contain it. Seven years old. A fucking child, tossed out like garbage because he was different.

Were his parents even his biological parents? Or had they adopted him, only to discard him when they discovered what he really was?

"Were you adopted?" I asked, opening my eyes again.

Liam shrugged, then nodded hesitantly. Not certain, then, but he suspected as much.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the bear that wanted to hunt down these people and make them pay for what they'd done. The reasonable part of me knew that Liam's parents had likely been frightened humans encountering something they couldn't understand.

But the protective part of me—the part now fiercely attuned to this skinny kid with the haunted eyes—wanted blood.

"Okay," I said, focusing on the immediate need. "I'm going to explain some basics about shifters. Stop me if anything doesn't make sense."

He nodded, his attention fully on me now.

"First rule of shifter society: we keep ourselves secret from humans. There are exceptions—like Henry, who's mated to Gunner—but in general, humans don't know we exist, and we like to keep it that way."

I watched his face for signs of confusion, but he seemed to understand this principle well enough. After fifteen years of hiding, he'd clearly figured that part out on his own.

"Most shifters live in groups with others of their kind," I continued. "Bear shifters like me live in clans or dens. Lynx shifters like you would typically have their own communities, though they tend to be smaller and more spread out."

Liam tilted his head, listening intently.

"Each group has its own territory, its own rules. Some are very traditional—strict hierarchies, rigid customs. Others, like our MC, are more modern. We accept different types of shifters, focus more on chosen family than bloodlines."

I paused, taking another deep breath before continuing to the more complicated parts.

"Shifters who live outside established groups are called rogues. Some choose that path, preferring solitude. Others are forced into it through circumstances." Like being abandoned as a child, I didn't add. "Rogues aren't necessarily bad, but they can be dangerous if they're unstable. If they expose our secret or hurt others."

Liam's eyes narrowed slightly, his body tensing again.

"When rogues become a threat to the wider shifter community, they sometimes have to be... eliminated." I winced internally at the clinical term, but there was no gentle way to describe what happened to dangerous rogues.

The effect was immediate. All color drained from Liam's face, and he shifted his weight, preparing to flee. I realized with a sickening jolt what he must be thinking—that he was a rogue, that we might consider him a threat.

"No, no," I hurried to clarify, raising my hands in a placating gesture. "Not you. You've done nothing wrong, Liam. You've survived. That's all. You're not dangerous—you're just a kid who had to figure things out on your own."

He didn't look convinced, his eyes darting between me and the door.

"Listen to me," I said, keeping my voice steady. "Not all rogues are dangerous. Most are just people trying to live their lives outside the traditional structures. The only ones who get in trouble are those who deliberately hurt others or risk exposing all of us."

Liam's breathing slowed slightly, but he remained poised for flight.

"You don't have to worry about any of that," I assured him. "You're not a rogue anymore anyway. You're my mate. That makes you part of our club, under our protection."

That seemed to confuse him again, his brow furrowing as he processed my words.

"Do you understand what a mate is?" I asked gently.

After a moment's consideration, he shook his head.

Of course he didn't. Who would have taught him? The realization made my chest ache all over again. This kid had been navigating the world without any of the knowledge most shifter children received from birth. No wonder he'd been so wary, so silent, so careful to remain hidden.

"It's a lot to explain," I admitted. "But we have time. There's no rush."

Liam seemed to relax marginally at that, though his position on the edge of the bed remained ready for a quick departure.

I rubbed my temples, trying to ease the throbbing that had intensified during our conversation. The adrenaline from the attack was wearing off, leaving me feeling the full effects of the concussion.

"Let me tell you about our club," I said, deciding to start with something more concrete. "About the people here. Then you'll understand better where you fit in."

Liam nodded again, his golden eyes fixed on me with an intensity that suggested he was memorizing every word. For all his silence, there was nothing slow about this kid. He was taking everything in, processing, analyzing.

I just hoped I could earn enough of his trust to convince him to stay.

"The Soldiers of Fortune MC has a structure, like most shifter groups," I explained, settling back in my chair. The movement made my head throb, but I ignored it. This was too important. "We're not as rigid as traditional bear clans, but we still have a hierarchy that keeps things running smoothly. Butch is our president—our alpha, in shifter terms. He makes the final decisions, keeps us all in line."

Liam nodded, his golden eyes tracking my every movement. He reminded me of a wild animal being offered food—interested but still wary of getting too close.

"Gunner is our VP—what shifters would call a beta. He's Butch's right hand, takes over when Butch isn't around. Strong as hell, loyal to the bone."

I smiled slightly. "Has a temper, though. You'll want to steer clear when he's in a mood."

I shifted in my chair, trying to find a position that didn't make my head feel like it was about to split open.

"Bear is our sergeant-at-arms—the enforcer. He handles security, deals with threats, makes sure everyone follows club rules. Big guy, looks scary as shit, but he's got a good heart. Especially since he found Bug." I paused, watching Liam's face. "You'll probably meet everyone tomorrow, so don't worry about keeping all this straight."

Liam made a small gesture with his hand, as if to say, 'keep going.' Kid was hungry for information. Probably the first time anyone had bothered to explain anything to him in years.

"Me, I'm the cook. Might not sound important compared to the others, but food is how we take care of our own. In bear culture especially, providing food is about more than just filling bellies. It's about family, about belonging." I gestured toward the kitchen beyond the door. "That's my domain. Nobody messes with my kitchen or my recipes."

A ghost of a smile flickered across Liam's face.

Progress.

"We've got other key members too. Ryder's our road captain—plans routes, keeps us safe when we're traveling. Razor handles the money, keeps the books. Smart as they come, that one. Gearhead's our mechanic—anything with an engine, he can fix it. And Ink runs the bar and does tattoo work. Multi-talented bastard."

I took a sip from the water glass on my nightstand, my throat dry from talking more than I usually did in a day.

"There are newer members too. Tex was a prospect until recently, but now he's a full member. Bit of an attitude on that one. And Peanut—he's been assigned as Bug's protector when Bear's busy with club business."

Liam frowned at the mention of Bug again, his head tilting in question.

"Bug's... complicated," I said carefully. "He and some of the others have special situations. But that's their story to tell, not mine. Just know that we take care of our own here. No matter what baggage they bring with them."

Liam seemed to consider this, then nodded slowly.

"We've also got two fox shifter prospects—Sammy and Joey. Brothers who escaped a bad situation. They're coming back tomorrow after staying with a friendly MC for a while. Good kids, bit skittish like you."

I paused, gathering my thoughts before moving on to the more personal aspects of club dynamics.

"Most important thing you need to understand about our club is that we've got several mated pairs." I watched his face carefully as I continued. "That's rare in some shifter communities, but we've been lucky. Bug is mated to Bear—found each other about a year ago. Bug was living on the streets before that, had a rough past. Bear's protective as hell of him now."

Liam's eyes widened slightly, perhaps recognizing similarities between Bug's story and his own.

"Then there's Doc—Henry, the guy who stitched me up tonight. He's mated to Gunner. Interesting pair, those two. Henry was a regular human doctor until he discovered his twin brother was actually a shifter, and so was he. Long story." I waved my hand dismissively. "They're solid together, though. Balance each other out."

I shifted again, trying to ease the ache in my temples before continuing.

"Butch is mated to Treat, and they've got Doby—little bear cub, just a toddler. Sweet kid, though he can throw one hell of a tantrum when he doesn't get his juice." I smiled at the thought. "Treat was in a bad way when Butch found him. He'd been running for a long time, protecting Doby. Now they're family."

Liam was watching me intently, absorbing every word. There was something almost hungry in his expression—not for food, but for understanding. For connection, maybe, though he might not recognize that himself yet.

"And then there's Gearhead and Percy. Another rescue situation. Percy's a fox shifter. He was hiding from his old skulk—fox clan—when Gearhead found him. Or more accurately, stalked him for months before making contact." I chuckled. "Not the approach I'd recommend, but it worked out for them."

I leaned forward, ignoring the way it made my vision swim slightly. "That just leaves you," I said softly. "And you're mine."

The words hung in the air between us, heavy with meaning that Liam couldn't possibly understand yet.

"I've waited a long time to find my mate," I continued, my voice rougher than I intended. "Most shifters pair up in their twenties or thirties. I'm forty-two. Started to think maybe there wasn't someone out there for me."

Liam's expression was unreadable, but he hadn't bolted yet. I took that as a good sign.

"And then you show up, this skinny kid stealing food from our dumpster. Turns out you've been right under my nose for months." I shook my head in wonder. "The universe has a sense of humor, I'll give it that."

Liam shifted on the bed, pulling his knees up to his chest in a defensive posture. Protective of himself. Unsure.

"I know this is a lot," I acknowledged. "And I know you don't understand what being mates means yet. That's okay. We've got time. I'm not going to rush you or force anything."

His shoulders relaxed marginally at that.

"For tonight, all you need to know is that you're safe here. No one in this club will hurt you. You can stay in this room—I'll take one upstairs. The door locks from the inside." I pointed to the heavy deadbolt. "Food's in the kitchen whenever you want it. Bathroom's through there." I gestured to the small en suite. "Has a shower. Probably feel good to get cleaned up."

Liam glanced toward the bathroom door with poorly concealed longing. I wondered how long it had been since he'd had a proper shower with hot water.

"There's clean clothes in the dresser," I added. "They'll be too big, but they're better than what you've got now. We can get you your own stuff tomorrow."

I stood up slowly, careful not to make any sudden movements that might startle him. My head protested the change in position, but I managed to stay steady.

"I'll leave you to get settled," I said, moving toward the door. "If you need anything during the night, I'll be upstairs, third door on the left. Or you can just bang on the ceiling—I'll hear you."

I paused at the doorway, looking back at him. He seemed so small sitting there on the edge of my bed, his golden eyes watching me with a mixture of wariness and something else—hope, maybe. Or at least curiosity.

"We're going to figure this out, Liam," I promised softly. "You're not alone anymore. Whether you decide to stay as my mate or just as a member of this club, you've got family now. And we take care of our own."

As I closed the door behind me, I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face despite the pain in my head. My mate. After all these years of watching the others find their perfect matches, I'd finally found mine.

Now I just had to hope he'd decide to stay.

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## Chapter Six

~ Rooster ~

I closed the door behind me and leaned against the wall, my head throbbing with each beat of my heart. Finding my mate after all these years should have been the happiest moment of my life, but instead, I felt like I was walking on eggshells.

The kid was skittish as a wild hare, traumatized by years of surviving alone. I needed to be patient, to move slowly, to give him time. But a selfish part of me wanted to claim him now, to make sure he couldn't disappear from my life as suddenly as he'd appeared in it.

I pushed away from the wall and made my way to the kitchen. Henry had left painkillers with strict instructions to take them every four hours. My bear growled at the idea of medication, but the persistent hammering in my skull convinced me to be sensible.

I swallowed the pills with a glass of water, then filled another glass for Liam. The kid had to be thirsty.

After giving myself a few minutes to collect my thoughts, I returned to my room, knocking softly before opening the door.

Liam hadn't moved from his perch on the edge of the bed, though his eyes had been darting around the room, taking inventory of everything. Those golden eyes snapped to me as I entered, alert and wary as ever.

"Brought you some water," I said, setting the glass on the nightstand within his reach but not crowding him. "Figured you might be thirsty."

He nodded once but didn't reach for the glass while I was watching. I settled back into my chair by the window, wincing as my head protested the movement.

"I should probably explain more about what being mates means," I said, keeping my voice gentle. "I know I threw that at you pretty suddenly."

Liam's posture remained tense, but his eyes held that hungry curiosity I'd noticed before. The kid had spent fifteen years with no one to answer his questions about what he was, why he could transform, what it all meant. If nothing else, I could give him that—information, understanding.

"Shifters have a... connection to fate, I guess you could say," I began. "Most of us believe that somewhere in the world, there's one perfect match for us. One person who complements us completely. Like puzzle pieces designed to fit together."

I watched his face for signs of comprehension or confusion, but his expression remained carefully blank.

"When we meet that person, our bodies recognize them before our minds do," I continued. "It's in their scent—something that calls to us on an instinctual level. That's what happened when you shifted back there in the kitchen. Your scent changed, and my bear recognized you immediately."

Liam tilted his head slightly, brow furrowed.

"Finding your mate is just the beginning, though," I said. "Fate might bring us together, but we still have to do the work of building a relationship. Getting to know each other. Building trust." I smiled slightly. "Some might say that's the hard part."

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "Not everyone finds their mate. Some shifters go their whole lives without that connection. Others find their mates but something keeps them apart—distance, circumstance, death." I shook my head. "I'd started to think I might be one of the unlucky ones."

Liam pointed at himself, the question clear in his eyes.

"Yes," I confirmed softly. "You're my mate, Liam. And I'm yours."

He blinked rapidly, processing this information. His fingers twisted in the hem of his ragged shirt, a nervous gesture that made my heart ache. How long had it been since anyone had claimed him as their own in any way? Since he'd belonged somewhere, to someone?

"Being mates is... well, it's permanent," I explained. "Once the bond is formed, it can't be broken. That's why it's such a serious thing in shifter society. It's a lifetime commitment."

Liam's eyes widened slightly.

"But the bond isn't complete yet," I hurried to clarify. "Just finding each other is only the first step. The full bond forms when we... claim each other."

His brow furrowed again, confusion evident.

I took a deep breath. This was the delicate part. "Liam, do you understand what sex is? Intimacy between partners?"

To my relief, he nodded. At least I wouldn't have to fumble through that explanation.

"Good. Well, claiming happens during intimacy. It's a bite," I touched my shoulder where neck meets shoulder, "right here. When both mates bite each other during... during sex, it forms an unbreakable bond. We become

connected on a level that's hard to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it."

The change was immediate and dramatic. Liam's entire body went rigid, his eyes widening in unmistakable terror. Before I could say another word, he was off the bed in a blur of motion, darting past me toward the door.

"Liam, wait—" I called, but he was already gone, the door swinging wildly in his wake. I cursed and lunged to my feet, ignoring the explosion of pain in my skull. "Liam!"

I followed him through the kitchen, knocking over a chair in my haste. The back door slammed as I reached it, yanking it open in time to see his shadowy figure racing across the yard. My heart pounded painfully as I gave chase, my longer legs eating up the distance between us.

But Liam moved like water, fluid and fast. By the time I reached Gearhead's garage, he'd vanished around the corner. I rounded it at full speed only to find... nothing.

Empty space where Liam should have been.

"Liam!" I called, scanning the darkness. How had he disappeared so quickly? "Please come back!"

I moved toward the bushes where I'd first spotted him months ago, where he'd hidden so often while watching our compound. Dropping to my hands and knees, I peered into the foliage, breathing deeply to catch his scent.

There was a trace of him—earth and pine and that unique something that had called to my bear—but it was fading already. He'd passed through, but he hadn't stopped.

"Liam, please," I called, desperation creeping into my voice. "I don't know what I said that scared you, but we can talk. I swear I won't do anything without your permission."

Silence answered me, broken only by the distant rumble of a motorcycle on the main road.

I rose to my feet, turning in a slow circle as I searched the darkness. "You don't have to hide from me, baby boy," I called, using the endearment that had slipped out earlier. "I would never hurt you."

But I had hurt him, somehow. Something I'd said had triggered a fear so profound he'd bolted like a startled deer.

The bite. It had to be. The moment I'd mentioned biting him during intimacy, he'd panicked. Given his life on the streets, God only knew what

horrors he might have experienced or witnessed. What associations that word—bite—might have for him.

"I'm such an idiot," I muttered, rubbing my hand over my face.

I continued calling for him, moving from one hiding spot to another around the compound. Each empty space felt like a knife twisting in my gut. I'd found my mate after decades of waiting, only to lose him in minutes because of my clumsy explanation.

"Liam!" I shouted into the darkness, no longer caring who heard the desperation in my voice. "Please come back. We don't have to talk about claiming or biting or any of it. Just please come back."

But as the minutes stretched into an hour, then two, the terrible truth settled over me like a shroud.

He was gone.

I searched until my voice grew hoarse and my legs threatened to buckle beneath me. Every bush, every tree, every shadow on the compound got a thorough inspection.

By three in the morning, I'd covered every inch of our property twice, calling Liam's name until the other club members started poking their heads out of windows with concerned expressions. I waved them off. This was my mess to fix, my mate to find.

Butch had offered to organize a search party, but I'd declined. A group of leather-clad bikers crashing through the woods would only drive Liam deeper into hiding.

"Come on, kid," I muttered, shining my flashlight into yet another cluster of bushes. "Where are you?"

The beam of light revealed nothing but empty space where Liam should have been. The forest beyond our property line loomed dark and imposing, a thousand perfect hiding spots for a lynx shifter who didn't want to be found.

My head pounded relentlessly, the concussion making itself known with every beat of my heart. The painkillers had worn off hours ago, but I couldn't bring myself to go back inside for more. What if Liam returned while I was gone? What if I missed him?

"I'm sorry," I called into the darkness, my voice cracking. "Whatever scared you, we can work through it. Just come back."

Only the wind answered, rustling through the trees with cold indifference.

By the time the eastern sky began to lighten with the first hint of dawn, my desperation had curdled into something darker. Self-loathing settled in my gut like a bad batch of dough—heavy and sour.

I'd had one chance with my mate and I'd blown it with my clumsy words. Fifteen years alone had taught Liam to run from danger, and somehow, I'd made myself the danger.

I leaned against a tree, closing my eyes briefly as fatigue washed over me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept. Before the attack on the clubhouse, surely. Twenty-four hours ago? More?

"Just a little longer," I promised myself, pushing away from the tree. "He can't have gone far."

But he could have. Lynx shifters were built for speed and stealth. Liam could be counties away by now if he'd shifted and run through the night.

My search pattern widened, taking me beyond our property and into the surrounding woods. I followed game trails and old logging roads, calling Liam's name until my throat felt raw. The morning mist curled around my ankles as I stumbled through the underbrush, my movements growing clumsier with each passing hour.

I emerged from the trees onto the edge of town, the quiet streets just beginning to stir with early morning activity. A newspaper delivery van rumbled past, and somewhere a dog barked at the disturbance. I checked my phone—5:47 AM.

I'd been searching all night.

Without conscious direction, my feet carried me through the waking town. Each alley got a cursory glance, each dumpster a moment's consideration. Where would a frightened, homeless shifter hide in an unfamiliar town?

I was so focused on my search that I didn't notice the subtle changes in my surroundings—the increased graffiti on the walls, the broken bottles littering the gutters, the lingering scent of marijuana and cheap beer. It wasn't until I spotted a tag spray-painted across a boarded-up storefront—a stylized "DB" surrounded by dollar signs—that reality came crashing down.

Dough Boys territory.

I'd wandered straight into rival gang turf without even realizing it. My exhausted brain finally registered the danger, adrenaline cutting through the fog of fatigue. I was alone, injured, and deep in hostile territory.

If any Dough Boys spotted me here—a Soldiers of Fortune member without backup—I'd be lucky to escape with just another concussion.

I turned to retrace my steps, my senses suddenly hyper-alert. That's when I heard it—footsteps behind me, trying to match my pace. Someone was following me, attempting to stay just out of sight.

My heart rate kicked up another notch. I quickened my pace, scanning the street ahead for escape routes. The wharf was visible at the end of the block—warehouses and shipping containers that could provide cover, but also dead ends and perfect ambush spots.

The footsteps behind me sped up too.

At the next alley, I ducked in without hesitation, pressing myself against the brick wall just inside the entrance. My breath came in shallow pants as I prepared to ambush whoever was tracking me. I might be exhausted and injured, but I was still a bear shifter—dangerous even at my worst.

The footsteps approached the alley mouth. I tensed, timing my move. As a figure passed the entrance, I lunged, grabbing a handful of fabric and yanking hard. The person yelped as I spun them around and slammed them against the wall, my forearm pressed against their throat.

"Bug?" I gasped, immediately releasing him when I recognized the wide, startled eyes staring back at me.

Bug coughed, rubbing at his throat where my arm had pressed. "You... you fast for big man," he wheezed.

"Jesus Christ," I hissed, glancing frantically toward the street to see if anyone had noticed. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Bug tilted his head in that bird-like way of his, as if the answer should be obvious. "You leave, I follow."

The simple logic of his statement left me momentarily speechless. I grabbed his shoulders, lowering my voice to an urgent whisper. "Do you have any idea where we are right now? This is Dough Boys territory! Do you know what they'd do if they caught you here?"

Bug nodded calmly. "Bad things. Cut open. Take pieces."

His blunt assessment made my stomach turn. "Exactly. So we need to go. Now." I tugged at his arm, already planning the quickest route back to our territory. "Does Bear know?" I asked suddenly, freezing mid-step.

"Does Bear know you followed me?"

The thought of Bear's reaction if he discovered his mate had disappeared sent a fresh wave of panic through me. The sergeant-at-arms

was protective on a good day. If he thought Bug was missing, he'd tear the town apart looking for him—starting with anyone he considered a threat.

Bug shrugged. "Left note. Said 'help Rooster find kitten.'"

I closed my eyes briefly, trying to contain my rising anxiety. "A note. You left a note and then followed me into rival gang territory in the middle of the night."

"Yes." Bug nodded, apparently pleased I understood.

"Bear is going to kill me," I muttered. "If the Dough Boys don't do it first." I tugged on Bug's arm again, more insistently this time. "Come on. We need to get out of here before—"

Bug planted his feet, refusing to budge. His hand went to his stomach, pressing against it in the way I'd seen before when his instincts were warning him of danger. His eyes widened slightly, focusing on something beyond me.

"We no go," he whispered urgently. "We hide."

I didn't hesitate. When Bug's instincts kicked in, you didn't question them—you just moved. I'd seen the kid's gut feelings save lives before.

In one fluid motion, I scooped Bug up and over my shoulder, ignoring the sharp pain that lanced through my skull at the sudden movement. Three quick strides brought us behind a large metal dumpster tucked against the back wall of the alley.

The container reeked of rotting fish and diesel fuel—pungent enough to mask our scents from anyone who might be hunting us.

I deposited Bug in the narrow space between the dumpster and wall, then positioned myself in front of him, creating a human shield with my larger body.

"Stay behind me," I whispered, my voice barely audible even to my own ears. "No matter what happens, don't make a sound."

Bug nodded, his eyes wide, but focused. Unlike most people in dangerous situations, Bug never panicked—a strange calm would settle over him, as if he'd switched to some other mode of existence. Right now, he was completely still, barely seeming to breathe.

I peered around the edge of the dumpster, careful to keep most of my body hidden. The mouth of the alley remained empty for a long moment, the early morning light casting long shadows across the cracked pavement. Then came the sound of approaching footsteps—multiple sets, some steady and measured, others stumbling and erratic.

A well-dressed man entered the alley first. Even in the dim light, I could make out the quality of his dark suit and the gleam of an expensive watch at his wrist.

He moved with the confident stride of someone used to being obeyed, stopping about fifteen feet from our hiding place to light a cigarette. The flame from his gold lighter briefly illuminated sharp features and cold eyes.

Behind him came two burly men in leather jackets, dragging a third man between them. The third man's face was a mess of blood and bruises, his legs barely supporting his weight as they hauled him forward.

"Here's good," the suited man said, his voice carrying clearly in the quiet morning air. He took a long drag from his cigarette, studying the beaten man with clinical detachment. "Drop him."

The thugs released their grip, and the man collapsed to the pavement with a pained groan. I felt Bug tense behind me, his fingers digging into my back.

The suited man crouched down and grabbed a fistful of the beaten man's hair, yanking his head up to force eye contact. "Tommy, Tommy, Tommy," he said, his tone conversational, almost friendly. "I thought we had an understanding. You deliver packages, you get paid, nobody gets hurt. Simple arrangement."

"I did," the man—Tommy—gasped, blood bubbling from his split lip. "I swear I did. Just like always."

"Yet here we are," the suited man continued, still in that eerily pleasant tone. "With you lying to my face."

"I'm not lying!" Tommy's voice cracked with desperation. "I delivered everything to the drop point, just like you said. Same as always. I didn't take anything!"

The suited man sighed dramatically, releasing Tommy's hair and standing up. He brushed imaginary dust from his knees before taking another drag of his cigarette.

"Then explain to me, Tommy, why my buyer received only half the product they paid for." He flicked ash onto Tommy's trembling form. "Because someone took my drugs. And if it wasn't you, then who was it?"

I felt my jaw clench as the pieces clicked together. The Dough Boys had been pushing harder into our territory lately, trying to establish drug routes through Fortune. This must be their supplier—the man pulling the strings behind their recent aggression.

"I don't know!" Tommy sobbed. "I swear, man. I just did the delivery like always. Maybe—maybe someone intercepted after I left? Or before I picked up? I don't know!"

The suited man circled Tommy slowly, like a predator toying with wounded prey. "Here's the problem with your theory, Tommy. My own men wouldn't dare cross me. They know what happens to thieves in my organization." He gestured vaguely to the thugs standing nearby. "So that leaves you, the only outsider with access to the product."

I recognized him now. Victor Kaine. I'd heard his name mentioned in club meetings—a new player trying to establish himself in Montana's drug trade. Rumor had it he was ruthlessly efficient and completely without mercy. Some even whispered he had connections to government agencies that gave him protection from local law enforcement.

More concerning were the rumors that he'd somehow learned about shifters and was particularly interested in territories controlled by shifter gangs. Whether he knew what we were or just thought we were ordinary MCs with unusual strength wasn't clear.

"Please," Tommy begged, "I didn't take anything. I wouldn't steal from you. I'm not stupid!"

"No," Kaine agreed, "you're not stupid. Which makes me think you've found yourself a powerful new friend. Someone who made you promises of protection." His voice hardened. "Someone who doesn't understand the consequences of stealing from me."

Bug shifted behind me, his breath warm against my ear as he whispered, "He looking for our club. Thinks we took drugs."

My blood ran cold. If Kaine believed the Soldiers of Fortune had stolen his product, he'd come after us next. With Liam missing and half our members still recovering from yesterday's attack, we weren't in the best position for another confrontation.

"Check his phone," Kaine ordered one of his men. "I want to see every call, every text, every contact."

The thug pulled a smartphone from Tommy's pocket and handed it to Kaine, who scrolled through it with deliberate slowness.

"Interesting," he murmured. "You've been in the area around the Soldiers of Fortune clubhouse quite frequently this past week." He showed the screen to Tommy. "Location data doesn't lie."

"That's—that's just because I live near there!" Tommy protested. "I'm not involved with them, I swear!"

I felt Bug stiffen behind me again. His hand pressed against his stomach, his warning system clearly in overdrive.

"Bad man," Bug whispered. "Knows about us. Hunting."

I nodded slightly to show I'd heard. We needed to get back to the clubhouse as soon as possible. Butch needed to know about this—about Kaine's suspicions and the missing drugs. If someone was setting us up to take the fall for a theft, we needed to find out who and why.

Kaine handed the phone back to his thug and reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a small switchblade. The blade snapped open with a click that echoed in the quiet alley.

"I want my drugs, Tommy," he said, yanking Tommy's head back by his hair and bringing the blade close to his throat. "Where are they?"

I pressed Bug further back into our hiding place, my mind racing. We couldn't help Tommy without revealing ourselves, and getting caught by Kaine would only make things worse. We needed to stay hidden, to survive long enough to warn the club.

As the sun climbed higher over the wharf, I found myself caught between a man I couldn't save and a mate I couldn't find, with only Bug's steady presence behind me keeping me anchored to reality.

## Chapter Seven

~ Liam ~

I ran until my lungs burned, until my legs threatened to collapse beneath me, until the night air tore at my throat with each desperate gasp. I couldn't stop, couldn't slow down, and couldn't risk being caught.

The word "bite" echoed in my head like a death sentence, drowning out everything else Rooster had said about mates and bonds and belonging. All I knew was that I had to get away, had to put as much distance between myself and that word as possible.

Branches whipped at my face as I crashed through the underbrush. The forest was a blur of shadows and moonlight, trees looming like sentinels in my peripheral vision. I didn't care about stealth now. Didn't care about being silent or unseen. The careful habits of fifteen years abandoned in my blind panic to escape.

Rooster's words played on repeat in my head, his gentle voice describing something that felt like violence to me. *"Claiming happens during intimacy. It's a bite, right here."* The memory of his fingers touching that spot where neck meets shoulder sent another surge of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I stumbled over an exposed root, my ankle twisting painfully as I caught myself against a tree trunk. The rough bark scraped my palms, but I pushed off immediately, ignoring the sting. Pain didn't matter. Nothing mattered except distance. Space. Safety.

Every breath tore at my chest, each footfall sending jarring impacts up my spine. How long had I been running? Minutes? Hours? The forest seemed endless, trees and undergrowth melting together in the darkness. My vision blurred, tears or sweat or both stinging my eyes.

I'd been stupid to think I could trust him. Stupid to believe that someone would offer food, shelter, kindness without wanting something in return. And what he wanted was to bite me. To claim me. To own me.

My foot caught on another root and this time I went down hard, sprawling across the forest floor. Dead leaves and pine needles cushioned my fall, but the impact still knocked the wind from my lungs. I lay there gasping, my body finally refusing to continue its mindless flight.

A sob escaped me, the sound strange and unfamiliar to my own ears. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried. Tears were weakness. Weakness

got you noticed. Noticed got you hurt.

I dragged myself to the base of a massive pine tree, its trunk wider than I could wrap my arms around. My back pressed against the rough bark as I pulled my knees to my chest, making myself as small as possible. The position was familiar—the same way I'd huddled for warmth and protection on countless nights alone.

Gradually, as my breathing slowed, I became aware of other sensations. The gentle pressure of pine needles beneath me. The cool, resinous scent of the tree at my back. The soft rustling of branches overhead despite the still night air.

I pressed my trembling hands against the tree's bark, feeling the subtle vibrations beneath my fingertips. Not audible sound, but something deeper. A language without words that I'd understood since childhood.

*Safe here. Safe with us.*

The tree's message wasn't in English or any human tongue. It was a feeling, an impression that formed in my mind as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud. I closed my eyes, letting my awareness sink into the connection.

*Afraid-one. Heart-racing. Be still.*

Around me, other trees joined the silent conversation, their needles shifting with deliberate movements. I felt the forest awakening to my presence, recognizing me as they always had. Plants didn't judge. Didn't demand. Didn't bite.

*Known-to-us. Protected.*

My golden eyes blinked open, scanning the darkened forest. My body remained tense, ready to bolt at the first sign of pursuit, but the trees were forming a different message now. They bent slightly inward, their branches creating a canopy above me, a living shelter against the night.

The pine I leaned against seemed to shift, its bark softening imperceptibly where it touched my back. Not physically changing, but somehow accommodating my presence, welcoming me into its space.

*Long-alone. Not-alone now.*

I shook my head, rejecting the tree's assessment. I was alone. Had been since I was seven years old. The brief connection with Rooster had been an illusion, a momentary weakness on my part. Humans—even shifter humans—couldn't be trusted.

But even as I thought this, images of Rooster flashed through my mind. His patient teaching as I learned to use a fork. The careful way he'd always given me space, never crowding me. The food he'd left without demands or expectations.

And that moment in the yard during the attack—his gentle touch on my face, the unexpected tenderness in his voice as he'd called me "baby boy." No one had ever touched me like that. Like I was something precious rather than something to use or discard.

*Red-fur-man searches. Calls your name.*

I tensed again, my hands pressing harder against the pine's bark. Could Rooster have followed me? Tracked me into the forest? The thought sent my heart racing once more, but the trees immediately responded, their energy shifting to soothe my panic.

*Far away. Not here. Safe now.*

The branches above me rustled more insistently, drawing my attention upward. Through gaps in the needles, I could see stars scattered across the night sky. They seemed impossibly distant and cold, reminding me of how small I was in this vast world. How insignificant.

Yet the trees remembered me. Recognized me. Even after months or years of absence, they always knew me when I returned to the forests. Their roots spread for miles beneath the soil, connecting in ways humans couldn't understand. They were the closest thing to family I'd ever known.

*Rest now. Watch over you.*

I felt the subtle movement of roots beneath me, shifting through soil to create a nest of sorts around where I sat. Not restraining me—never that—but forming a protective circle, a boundary between me and potential threats.

I exhaled slowly, some of the tension finally easing from my muscles. My hand moved to my shoulder, touching the spot where Rooster had indicated the bite would go. The spot that had triggered my panic and flight.

What was happening to me? In fifteen years of solitary survival, I'd never let anyone get close enough to matter. Yet somehow, in just one night, the red-haired cook with gentle hands had slipped past my defenses. Had made me care enough to fight for him when he was attacked.

Had made me feel something I couldn't even name.

I leaned my head back against the pine trunk, too exhausted to sort through these unfamiliar emotions. The trees continued their silent

communion, branches swaying in rhythmic patterns above me. Their presence was the one constant in my chaotic life—the one thing I could always count on when humans failed me.

As my eyelids grew heavy, I wondered if I would ever find my way back to the clubhouse. Back to Rooster. Or if I would simply disappear into the forest as I'd done so many times before, becoming just another shadow among the trees.

I don't remember falling asleep against the pine tree, but the nightmares found me anyway. They always did when I let my guard down. I curled tighter into myself, arms wrapped around my knees as if I could physically hold the memories at bay.

But they came anyway, washing over me in waves of remembered terror. Not dreams, not imagination—my actual past, preserved with the cruel clarity of a child's memory.

I was six, maybe almost seven, sitting cross-legged in our small backyard garden. My father had planted tomatoes that year, and I'd been fascinated watching them grow from tiny seedlings to sprawling vines heavy with fruit. That day, I was talking to them—not the childish babbling of make-believe, but actually conversing with the gentle vibrations I could feel coming from the plants.

"Your leaves are getting yellow here," I'd said, touching a spotted tomato leaf. "Too much water makes you sick."

I remember the exact moment my father found me—the sudden shadow falling across the garden, his sharp intake of breath.

"What are you doing?" he'd asked, his voice tight with something I couldn't identify then but now recognize as fear.

"Talking to the tomatoes," I'd answered honestly. "They said they're getting too much water and—"

His hand had clamped around my upper arm, yanking me to my feet with bruising force. "Plants don't talk. What's wrong with you?"

That night, I'd heard my parents arguing behind their bedroom door. My mother's voice high and frightened: "It's not normal, Paul. First the thing with his eyes changing color, now this? What if he's... not right?"

My father's voice, disgusted: "No son of mine talks to weeds."

I pressed my cheek against the moss-covered tree trunk, the memory so vivid I could feel the phantom grip of my father's fingers on my arm. The

forest floor beneath me shifted slightly, roots moving in response to my distress, forming a more secure cradle around my huddled form.

Three nights after the garden incident, I'd been woken from sleep, told to dress quickly and pack a small backpack. "We're going on a trip," my mother had said, not meeting my eyes. Her hands trembled as she helped me put on my jacket, though the night was warm.

The bus station had been nearly empty that late. My father had bought a ticket—not for all of us, just one. He'd pressed twenty dollars into my hand and told me to wait for the bus.

"Where am I going?" I'd asked, confused and frightened.

"Away," he'd answered simply. Then they'd walked out, leaving me alone on a hard plastic chair in a dingy station at midnight.

The bus never came—at least, not before I'd panicked and fled the station, running blindly into the unfamiliar city streets, the twenty dollars clutched in my small fist.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the memory, but that only made the images sharper. The trees sensed my increasing distress, their branches bending lower as if trying to embrace me. I focused on their presence, trying to anchor myself in the now, but the past wouldn't release its grip.

Those first few weeks alone had been a blur of hunger and fear. I'd slept in parks, behind dumpsters, anywhere I could make myself small and invisible. I'd learned quickly how to scavenge food, how to avoid adults who might send me to foster care or worse. But I hadn't yet learned to avoid other street kids—especially the older ones.

They'd found me huddled in a makeshift cardboard shelter during a rainstorm. Three boys, probably no older than fourteen but seeming like giants to my seven-year-old self. They'd seemed friendly at first, offering to show me a better place to sleep, somewhere dry. Desperate and naive, I'd followed them.

Their "better place" had been an abandoned building where a group of homeless teens had established a territory of sorts. I still remember the smell—mildew and unwashed bodies and the sickly-sweet odor of cheap wine. They'd given me food, the first hot meal I'd had since being abandoned.

Then they'd explained the price.

"Everyone who stays with us goes through initiation," the oldest boy had said, his smile revealing teeth stained brown from cigarettes. "Gotta

prove you're tough enough to be one of us."

Before I could run, two of them had grabbed my arms, pinning me to the filthy mattress that served as communal seating. The leader had leaned over me, his breath hot on my face.

"Don't struggle. It'll hurt more if you fight."

I'd fought anyway, twisting and kicking as panic overtook me. That had only made them laugh.

"Hold him tighter," the leader had ordered. "Little feral cat needs to learn his place."

The pain had come suddenly—teeth sinking into my shoulder, biting down hard enough to break skin. I'd screamed, the sound echoing off concrete walls as blood welled from the wound. Through my tears, I'd seen the leader wipe my blood from his mouth, grinning.

"Now you're marked. You belong to us now."

I jerked back to the present with a gasp, my hand flying to my shoulder where phantom pain flared. Sweat soaked my shirt despite the cool night air. I felt nausea rising in my throat, the remembered terror so vivid I could taste the metallic tang of blood in my mouth.

The trees responded immediately to my distress, their energy pulsing through the ground beneath me, up through the roots and into the trunk I leaned against.

*Safe-now. Long-past. Not-here.*

I focused on their vibrations, letting them ground me in the present. Those boys were years and hundreds of miles away. They couldn't hurt me anymore. No one could hurt me unless I let them close enough.

I hadn't let anyone that close again—until Rooster. The thought of his gentle hands, his patient teaching, made my chest ache with conflicting emotions. When he'd spoken of biting, of claiming, all I could remember was being held down, teeth breaking my skin, the feeling of being owned.

But Rooster wasn't like those boys. He'd given without taking, protected without demanding. The memory of his fingers lightly brushing my face felt nothing like the violent hands that had pinned me down all those years ago.

I exhaled shakily, loosening my death grip on my knees. The forest around me had become my first real sanctuary after that night with the street gang. I'd escaped their "initiation" when they'd all passed out from whatever they'd been drinking and smoking. Terrified and bleeding, I'd fled to the nearest park, hiding among the bushes.

That was the first time I'd truly understood what the plants were trying to tell me. *Under-here. Hide-well. They-pass-by.*

I'd crawled beneath a dense rhododendron, pressing myself into the dirt as my pursuers searched the park the next morning. The bush had seemed to thicken around me, its leaves creating a perfect screen that hid me from view. The boys had walked within feet of my hiding place, but hadn't spotted me.

After that, I'd learned to listen more carefully to the whispers of the green world. Plants had guided me to safe sleeping spots beneath dense undergrowth where humans rarely ventured. They'd indicated which wild berries were safe to eat and which would make me sick. They'd warned me of approaching dangers—stray dogs, aggressive homeless men, police officers who might send me into the system.

As the years passed, my connection to plants had deepened.

In cities, I'd found unexpected allies in the weeds pushing through sidewalk cracks, the ivy climbing abandoned buildings, the neglected trees in forgotten lots.

In forests like this one, the network was vaster, stronger—thousands of plants communicating through underground mycelia, forming a web of awareness that extended for miles.

The plants never demanded anything in return for their help. They never tried to own me or mark me. They simply recognized something in me that was kindred—a fellow outsider, surviving against the odds.

I ran my fingers over the moss growing on the tree trunk beside me, feeling the subtle vibration of acknowledgment. Around me, the forest floor continued its gentle movement, roots shifting beneath the soil to create a living nest cradling my body. The canopy above had grown denser, branches interlacing to form a protective dome.

Within this cocoon of nature's making, I felt my breathing steady, my heartbeat slow. The panic that had driven me from Rooster's side began to ebb, replaced by exhaustion and the beginnings of clarity.

Maybe Rooster's "bite" wasn't meant as the violation I'd experienced. Maybe there was something about this "claiming" I didn't understand. Maybe...

I leaned my head back against the tree, too drained to complete the thought. The forest held me in its silent embrace as my eyes drifted shut,

this time falling into a deeper, dreamless sleep protected by the only family I'd known for fifteen long years.

I woke with a jolt, my body tense before my eyes even opened. Something was wrong. The protective cocoon of roots and branches around me trembled with urgency, the vibrations different from the soothing rhythm that had lulled me to sleep.

This wasn't comfort—this was warning. I sat up, blinking as pre-dawn light filtered through the canopy above, casting everything in a gray-blue glow. The forest was trying to tell me something important.

The pine tree at my back pulsed with energy, its needles rustling despite the still morning air. I pressed my palm against its trunk, focusing on the sensations flowing through my fingertips.

*Danger-coming. Metal-beasts. Bad-men.*

The message was fragmented, urgent. I frowned, trying to interpret the impressions flooding my mind. Plants didn't think in human concepts like "motorcycle gang" or "enemies," but in patterns of energy and intent. Whatever they sensed carried malevolence, threat.

I placed my other hand flat against the ground, closing my eyes to better concentrate on the vibrations running through the soil. The forest floor was alive with movement—not physical shifting like during the night, but a current of information passing from root to root, tree to tree, carrying news from miles away.

*Red-fur-place. Attack-coming. Blood-intent.*

My eyes snapped open as the meaning crystallized. The Soldiers of Fortune clubhouse—Rooster's home—was in danger. Someone was planning to attack them, someone the plants recognized as violent, threatening.

I remembered the intruders from the previous night, how they'd moved with such purpose, how they'd nearly overwhelmed the club members. Could this be another assault? Something worse?

The image of Rooster collapsed on the ground, blood streaming from the gash on his head, flashed vividly in my mind. He'd been vulnerable then, injured. If another attack came while he was still recovering...

I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them as I had so many times before when I needed to think. The logical choice was clear: stay away. The club's problems weren't mine. I'd survived this long by

avoiding other people's conflicts, by slipping away at the first sign of trouble.

Fifteen years of hard-won survival instincts screamed at me to retreat deeper into the forest, to find another territory, another feeding ground. The Soldiers of Fortune had enemies—powerful ones, apparently. Getting involved would only put me in the crosshairs.

But even as I tried to convince myself to leave, another voice whispered in my mind. Not the plants this time, but my own thoughts, surprising in their clarity and insistence.

Rooster had fed me for months without asking anything in return. He'd been patient when teaching me to use a fork, gentle when explaining shifter society. He'd given me space, respected my boundaries, offered shelter without demands.

And when those men had attacked the clubhouse, I'd chosen to fight for him. Not because I had to, but because something inside me couldn't bear to see him hurt.

I pressed my fingers against my temples, trying to sort through the unfamiliar emotions warring within me. Fear of the claiming bite still churned in my stomach when I remembered Rooster's explanation. But was I afraid of the bite itself, or what it represented?

Those boys years ago had used their teeth to mark me as property, to take away my choice, my freedom. But everything about Rooster suggested he valued those very things—choice, freedom, dignity. He'd even said he wouldn't rush me, wouldn't force anything.

"I've waited a long time to find my mate," he'd said, his voice rough with emotion. "Most shifters pair up in their twenties or thirties. I'm forty-two. Started to think maybe there wasn't someone out there for me."

The memory of those words sent an unexpected warmth through my chest. He'd waited decades for a mate—for me, specifically. Not just any stray he could control or own, but the one person who fit him somehow.

The trees around me shifted, their energy changing from urgent warning to something like curiosity. They sensed my internal conflict, my indecision.

*Choose-path. Stay-or-go.*

I breathed deeply, centering myself as I considered my options. If I returned to warn Rooster about the danger, I didn't have to stay afterward. I

didn't have to accept the mate bond, the claiming bite, any of it. I could deliver my warning and disappear again—choice still mine, freedom intact.

But a deeper truth was emerging as I sat there in the growing light: I didn't want to disappear again. Not completely. Something about Rooster, about the way he'd looked at me with such wonder and care, had awakened a longing I'd buried years ago—a desire for connection that went beyond the silent communion I shared with plants.

Maybe there was a middle path. Maybe I could accept some kind of relationship with Rooster—and the club—without surrendering the independence that had kept me alive all these years. Maybe "mate" didn't have to mean what those street boys had tried to make it mean.

I could set boundaries. Could make it clear that while I might stay, I needed space, freedom, respect. No claiming bite—not until I was ready, if ever. No ownership, no possession.

The pine tree at my back seemed to respond to my shifting thoughts, its energy warming slightly against my spine.

*Brave-one. Choose-strength.*

I smiled faintly at the tree's encouragement. Plants didn't think in terms of emotions like humans did, but they recognized patterns of energy. They'd felt my fear give way to resolve, my indecision crystallize into purpose.

I rose to my feet, brushing pine needles and dirt from my clothes. My muscles ached from running and sleeping on the forest floor, but the pain felt distant, unimportant compared to the clarity of my decision.

Pressing my palm against the pine trunk one last time, I sent a silent thank you to the forest that had sheltered me. The branches above rustled in acknowledgment, needles shifting to release their resinous scent—a forest blessing.

*Return-path clear. Follow-light.*

I nodded, understanding. The plants would guide me back to the clubhouse by the most direct route. They'd help me avoid any dangers along the way, as they had so many times before.

I turned my face toward the direction they indicated, where thin streams of golden light were beginning to pierce the canopy. Dawn was breaking, painting the forest in shades of amber and rose. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the cool morning air, and began to walk.

With each step, my resolve strengthened. I would return to the clubhouse. I would warn Rooster and the others about the danger the plants

had sensed. I would face my fear of the claiming bite, not by submitting to it, but by making it clear that my cooperation had conditions. My body was my own. My choices were my own.

If Rooster truly saw me as his mate—not property, but partner—he would understand that. He would respect it. And maybe, in time, I could learn to trust him enough to consider more.

As I walked, the rising sun broke fully above the horizon, its rays finding paths through the trees to illuminate my face. For perhaps the first time in fifteen years, I moved toward human connection instead of away from it. Not out of desperation or necessity, but by choice.

The plants whispered their approval in rustling leaves and swaying branches. Ahead lay uncertainty, danger, the complicated tangle of human relationships I'd avoided for so long. But also, possibly, something I'd never allowed myself to imagine:

A home. A family. Belonging on my own terms.

I quickened my pace, golden eyes fixed on the path ahead, determined to reach Rooster before whatever threat the forest had warned me about could find him first. I would protect what was mine—not because fate had declared it so, but because I had chosen it for myself.

# Chapter Eight

~ Rooster ~

I dragged myself through the compound gates as the first fingers of dawn stretched across the sky. My head throbbed with each heartbeat, the baseball bat injury a constant reminder of last night's fight.

Even worse was the hollow ache in my chest—I'd spent the entire night searching for Liam, and I had nothing to show for it. My mate was still out there somewhere, alone and afraid, running from words I wished I could take back.

My boots scraped against the gravel as I stumbled across the yard, exhaustion weighing on me like a physical burden. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept. Was it before the attack on the clubhouse? That seemed like a lifetime ago now.

The compound was beginning to stir. Lights had clicked on in the clubhouse windows, silhouettes moving behind the curtains. Someone—probably Ink—had already started the coffee maker.

On any other day, the familiar morning rhythms would have comforted me. Today, they just emphasized what was missing, of who was missing.

The back door swung open, and Butch stepped onto the porch, his expression darkening when he spotted me. He opened his mouth as if to call out, but then his eyes shifted to something over my shoulder, and his face hardened into something more concerning.

I turned just in time to see Bear storming across the yard toward me. His massive frame moved with the focused intensity of an approaching storm, each step deliberately placed, fists clenched at his sides.

Behind him trailed Bug, his thin form almost comically small next to his mate. Bug's face showed none of Bear's anger—just a quiet concern as his eyes met mine.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Bear growled, closing the distance between us. "Do you have any idea what you put us through? What you put Bug through?"

I winced, not from his words but from the truth behind them. In my desperate search for Liam, I hadn't considered the consequences of Bug following me—what might have happened if Kaine's men had spotted him, what Bear must have felt when he realized his mate was missing.

"I'm sorry," I said, the words feeling inadequate even as they left my mouth. "I didn't know Bug was following me."

"That's not good enough." Bear stepped closer, his face inches from mine. "You went into Dough Boys territory alone, concussed, in the middle of the fucking night. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't," I admitted. "I was just looking for Liam."

"Your stray?" Bear's voice dripped with frustration. "The one who ran off? You risked everything—risked Bug—for someone who chose to leave?"

The words stung like salt in an open wound. I felt my bear rising within me, bristling at the dismissal of my mate, but I was too exhausted to summon proper anger. Instead, I just sagged, my shoulders dropping as the fight drained out of me.

"He's my mate, Bear," I said quietly. "He didn't know what that meant. I explained it badly, scared him off. What would you do if Bug ran?"

The question hit its mark. Bear's expression shifted, the fury giving way to something more complex. He took a step back, running a hand over his short-cropped hair.

"Fuck," he muttered, then glanced back at Bug, who hovered a few paces behind. Something passed between them—one of those silent communications that mated pairs developed.

Bug nodded slightly, and Bear turned back to me with a sigh.

"You look like shit," he said, his voice gruff but the edge gone from it. "When's the last time you slept?"

I shook my head, unable to remember. "Doesn't matter. I need to keep looking."

"What you need is rest," Bear countered. "You're dead on your feet. And that head injury isn't getting any better with you running around all night."

As if on cue, a fresh wave of pain throbbed through my temple. I winced, swaying slightly.

Bear's large hand shot out, steadying me with a grip on my shoulder. The anger in his eyes had transformed completely into concern. "Listen to me. I'll help you search for him. We'll all help. But you need to clean up, eat something, maybe get a few hours of sleep first."

Bug stepped forward, tugging at Bear's leather vest. "See bad man," he said urgently. "In alley. Knife man."

Bear's expression sharpened. "What's he talking about?"

I exhaled slowly. "I ran into Victor Kaine in Dough Boys territory. He was... interrogating someone. Thought the guy had stolen his drugs, was convinced our club was involved somehow."

"Shit." Bear's hand tightened on my shoulder. "Butch needs to hear about this. Last thing we need is a drug war on top of everything else."

I nodded, then glanced down at Bug. "How did you know to follow me? About Liam, I mean?"

Bug touched his stomach, a gesture I'd come to recognize as his reference to his uncanny intuition. "Mr. Rooster sad. Kitten scared. Both need help."

Despite everything, I felt a small smile tug at my lips. Bug's simple wisdom often cut straight to the heart of things. "Thanks for trying to help, Bug. But Bear's right—it was dangerous."

Bug nodded solemnly. "Know danger. Choose anyway."

The simple declaration hit me hard. Bug understood the risks, but had followed me anyway, driven by loyalty and concern. The realization made me feel even worse about inadvertently putting him in danger.

Bear seemed about to say something else when the sound of tires on gravel drew our attention to the main gate. A sleek black sedan with tinted windows rolled into the compound, moving with deliberate slowness, like a shark circling potential prey.

The three of us tensed, instinctively moving closer together. Bear pushed Bug slightly behind him, a protective gesture that was second nature to him now. From the corner of my eye, I saw Butch straighten on the porch, his hand moving subtly toward the small of his back where I knew he kept a pistol.

The sedan stopped in the center of the yard. For a moment, nothing happened—just the soft ticking of the cooling engine breaking the morning silence. Then the driver's door opened, and a man stepped out with casual confidence.

He was tall and lean, dressed in an expensive tailored suit that looked wildly out of place in our dusty compound. His dark hair was perfectly styled, his clean-shaven face handsome in a cold, calculated way. As he turned to survey the compound, sunglasses hiding his eyes, recognition slammed into me like a physical blow.

Victor Kaine.

The same man I'd watched torture Tommy in that alley just hours ago. The same man who suspected our club of stealing his drugs. Here, at our compound, striding toward our clubhouse like he owned the place.

My fists clenched at my sides as my bear roared within me, clawing at my insides with rage. Every instinct screamed to attack, to eliminate the threat before it could harm my family. Only Bear's steadying presence beside me kept me in check.

"I'm here to speak with Butch Cassidy," the man called out, his voice pleasant and professional, as if he were arriving for a business meeting rather than walking into the heart of rival territory. "About some mutual interests."

My throat tightened as I watched him approach Butch and got a closer look at the man. This wasn't Victor Kaine. The features were similar, but this man was younger, with subtle differences in his bone structure and bearing.

"Victor Markus," Bear whispered beside me. "Preston Markus's nephew."

The revelation sent a chill down my spine. Preston Markus—the man who had experimented on Treat, who had hunted omega shifters, who had nearly destroyed our club. And now his nephew was standing in our compound, smiling that same cold smile I'd seen in the alley.

Something told me the timing wasn't coincidental. Victor Kaine in the Dough Boys territory at dawn, and now Victor Markus cousin at our doorstep hours later?

My bear growled a warning, sensing danger coiling around us like an invisible snake. Whatever was happening, I had a sickening feeling that Liam had run from one threat straight into something far worse.

I couldn't sit still while Victor Markus smooth-talked his way through a meeting with our leadership. Every cell in my body screamed for action—to keep searching for Liam, to confront the Markus kid about his connection to the attack on our compound, to do something besides wait helplessly while threats circled us like vultures.

So I paced. Back and forth along the perimeter fence, my boots kicking up little clouds of dust with each turn, my eyes constantly scanning the tree line as if Liam might materialize if I just looked hard enough.

Bear had ordered me to get some rest, but sleep felt impossible with my mate missing and a Markus in our clubhouse. The concussion still throbbed

behind my eyes, vision blurring occasionally when I turned too quickly, but the pain was almost welcome—a distraction from the hollow ache in my chest.

Where was Liam right now? Huddled in some makeshift shelter? Hungry? Hurt? The questions tortured me with each step. I'd seen how he lived—scavenging, hiding, always on alert. But something about knowing he was my mate made it unbearable to think of him out there alone now, especially after I'd been the one to frighten him away.

"I should have been more careful," I muttered to myself, scrubbing a hand over my beard. "Should have explained better."

My fifteenth circuit of the perimeter brought me to the northeastern corner of our property, where the fence line met the beginning of the dense forest. I paused, leaning against a fence post to catch my breath.

The woods beyond our compound had always seemed almost sentient to me—watching, waiting, harboring secrets in its shadows. Liam had disappeared into those trees last night, vanishing like a ghost.

Something moved.

I froze, every sense suddenly alert. There—a subtle shifting among the lower branches of a pine near the fence line. Not the natural sway of wind through needles, but a deliberate movement. A flash of fabric—faded blue—there and gone so quickly I might have imagined it.

My heart hammered against my ribs. I'd spent enough time observing Liam from a distance to recognize his patterns. He'd always been cautious, watching us from hiding spots just like this one, waiting and assessing before approaching the food I left.

I wanted to rush forward, to call his name, but instinct told me that would send him running again. Instead, I backed away slowly, moving at an angle that would take me around in a wide circle. If it was Liam, I needed to approach from a direction he wasn't watching, get close enough to speak without giving him time to flee.

The graveled yard gave way to softer dirt as I slipped through a gap in our outer security fence—a spot I knew the cameras didn't quite cover. I moved as quietly as my size allowed, grateful for the skills I'd developed hunting in my bear form. Each step was carefully placed, my breathing controlled despite the excitement coursing through me.

I circled wide through the underbrush, approaching the pine tree from behind. As I drew closer, I caught a scent on the breeze that made my bear

rumble with recognition—earth and pine and something uniquely Liam.

My mate was here.

I eased around the trunk, and there he was—crouched on a low branch, balanced with feline grace, his golden eyes fixed intently on the clubhouse. He hadn't noticed me yet, too focused on watching Victor's sedan parked in our yard.

For a moment, I just stared, drinking in the sight of him. Relief flooded me so intensely my knees nearly buckled. He looked unharmed, though leaves and dirt clung to his ragged clothes, suggesting he'd spent the night in the forest. His hair was more disheveled than usual, falling across his forehead and partially obscuring those remarkable eyes.

"Liam," I whispered, unable to hold back any longer.

He startled violently, nearly falling from his perch. Those golden eyes whipped toward me, wide with alarm. In an instant, he was moving, scrambling higher into the branches with the fluid agility of his lynx nature.

"Wait!" I held up my hands, showing my empty palms. "Please, don't run. It's just me."

Liam froze mid-climb, his back pressed against the trunk, fingers gripping the bark so tightly his knuckles were white. His chest rose and fell rapidly, eyes darting between me and the open forest beyond, calculating escape routes.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," I said softly, taking a small step closer. "All night. I was so worried."

He remained frozen, watching my approach with the wary focus of a wild animal evaluating a potential threat. When I reached toward him instinctively, he flinched back, pressing himself harder against the tree trunk.

The rejection stung, but I understood it. I had triggered something terrible last night with my talk of claiming bites. Whatever Liam's past held, it had left deep scars—ones I couldn't see, but needed to respect.

I dropped to my knees in the dirt, making myself smaller, less threatening. With deliberate movements, I opened my hands and placed them on my thighs, palms up.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice rough with emotion. "For whatever I said that scared you. I never meant to frighten you away. I've been searching all night, everywhere I could think of. I was terrified something had happened to you."

Something shifted in Liam's expression—a subtle softening around his eyes. He studied me for a long moment, head tilted slightly as if assessing my sincerity.

Then, slowly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, dog-eared notepad. The same one he'd used to write his name for me that first time in the office.

That seemed like a lifetime ago now.

He climbed down to a lower branch with cautious movements, still keeping a safe distance between us. Perching there, he began to write frantically, the pencil stub in his hand flying across the page.

When he finished, he hesitated, then tore out the page and dropped it. The paper fluttered to the ground between us.

I picked it up carefully, my heart clenching as I read the simple question: *"Did you mean it about not rushing?"*

"Yes," I said immediately, looking up at him. "Absolutely. Every word. We go at your pace, Liam. I swear it."

He nodded once, then returned to his notepad. This time when he dropped the page, I saw it wasn't words but a drawing. With trembling hands, he'd sketched two figures—one larger, one smaller. The larger figure's mouth was at the smaller one's shoulder, clearly depicting a biting motion.

Then, with harsh, jagged strokes, he'd crossed the entire image out, the pencil pressing so hard it had torn the paper in places.

The meaning was clear—this was what had frightened him, what had sent him running into the night. The claiming bite that should have been sacred had been twisted into something terrifying for him.

"Liam," I said softly, my throat tight with emotion. "Whatever happened to you, whatever that meant to you in the past—that's not what being mates is about. Not for me. Not for us."

He watched me intently, his golden eyes searching my face for any sign of deception.

"I would never hurt you like that," I continued, pouring every ounce of sincerity I possessed into the words. "Never force you. Being mates is about protection, about caring. About finding someone who matters more than yourself."

His hands moved to his shoulder, touching the spot where a claiming bite would go. His expression was haunted, distant, as if revisiting a painful

memory.

When he looked back to me, something had changed in his eyes—a question forming, a cautious hope emerging from beneath layers of fear.

"I would never hurt you, baby boy," I whispered, the endearment slipping out again. "We go as slow as you need. Months. Years. Forever, if that's what it takes." I meant every word. Finding my mate after decades of waiting only to lose him over a misunderstanding would break something in me I wasn't sure could be repaired. "The claiming bite—it should be something beautiful, something both people want. Not something feared."

Liam's golden eyes studied my face, searching for deception. I held his gaze steadily, letting him see the sincerity behind my words. I had nothing to hide from him—not my longing, not my relief at finding him, not my willingness to wait however long it took to earn his trust.

"Some shifters never exchange claiming bites," I continued softly. "It doesn't make them any less mated. It doesn't change what they mean to each other."

Something shifted in his expression—not quite trust, but maybe the beginning of it. His shoulders lowered slightly from their defensive hunch, and he settled more comfortably on his branch. Though he still maintained the distance between us, the air of immediate flight had dissipated.

He flipped to a new page in his notepad and began to draw again. This time his strokes were more deliberate, more focused. I watched in fascination as a face emerged on the paper—Victor Markus, rendered with surprising accuracy. Liam tore out the page and dropped it to me.

I caught it, frowning at the image. "Yes, that's Victor Markus. He's inside talking to Butch right now."

Liam nodded, already working on another drawing. This one showed the clubhouse with stick figures at various points around it. Small devices were sketched near each figure, with arrows connecting them to what appeared to be a central location off the compound.

When he dropped this page to me, I immediately understood what he was trying to communicate.

"The break-ins," I said, looking up at him sharply. "You think Victor is connected to them?"

He nodded emphatically, then created another sketch—this one showing a small rectangular device with what looked like a tiny antenna. He pointed

at the drawing, then at his ear, then made a circular motion around our compound.

"Listening devices?" I guessed. "You think they've been planting bugs around our property?"

Another vigorous nod, followed by more drawing. This time he sketched what was unmistakably a shifter mid-transformation, with crude symbols around it that I recognized from some of Henry's research materials about Preston Markus's experiments.

The implications sent a chill down my spine. "They're targeting us specifically as shifters. Not just as a rival gang." I looked up at him, pieces clicking together. "You've been watching. You saw them."

Liam tapped his own chest, then pointed to the tree, then made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the entire perimeter of our property. He'd been monitoring the compound from various vantage points, had witnessed the intruders we'd caught—and possibly others we hadn't.

"That's why you came back," I said as understanding dawned. "Not just because of..." I gestured between us, indicating our complicated mate situation. "But to warn us."

He nodded, his expression grave as he sketched one more image—a calendar with days marked off, leading to today's date, which he circled repeatedly with heavy strokes of his pencil.

"Something's happening today? That's why Victor is here?"

Liam confirmed with another nod, then pointed urgently toward the clubhouse. The message was clear—we needed to warn the others immediately.

I started to rise from my kneeling position, preparing to head back to the compound, when Liam's hand shot out in a stopping gesture. His entire body had gone rigid, head tilted slightly as if listening to something I couldn't hear. His eyes were fixed on a point beyond me, near the fence line.

Following his gaze, I saw the clubhouse door open as Victor Markus stepped outside, flanked by Butch and Gunner. Even from this distance, the tension in their body language was obvious. They spoke for a few minutes before Victor started for his car, Butch and Bear going back inside. I knew they'd be watching from the window until Victor left the property.

Liam's attention had shifted fully to Victor now, a new wariness entering his posture. Whatever he wanted to communicate would have to wait. Someone was in our territory who shouldn't be, and both of us knew it.

Victor Markus was strolling casually along the perimeter fence, about fifty yards from where we were hidden. His posture was relaxed, hands in his pockets, as if he were just stretching his legs after being cooped up inside.

Liam slipped down from his branch with silent grace, crouching beside me behind the thick trunk of the pine. His proximity surprised me—this was the closest he'd willingly come to me since I'd found him. His shoulder nearly brushed mine as we both peered around the tree, watching Victor's movements.

The Markus heir paused near a section of fence partially obscured by overgrown bushes. He glanced back toward the clubhouse—making sure no one was watching—then knelt down as if tying his shoe. His hand moved to the base of the fence post, pressing something into the soft earth there.

I narrowed my eyes, straining to see what he was planting. A small metallic object caught the morning sunlight, a tiny red light blinking once before Victor covered it with dirt and leaves.

"Tracker," I whispered. "Or a bug."

Liam nodded, his breath warm against my shoulder as he leaned slightly closer to see. I could feel the tension radiating from his slender frame—not fear of me now, but shared concern about what we were witnessing.

Victor stood, brushed the dirt from his expensive trousers, and continued his casual stroll along the fence line, moving away from us. His act might have fooled anyone else, but Liam and I had seen the truth—he was securing our perimeter with surveillance devices, preparing for something.

I turned to look at Liam, finding his face inches from mine. Our eyes locked—his golden gaze meeting my brown one—and something passed between us. A shared understanding. A silent agreement. Whatever was happening, whatever Victor Markus was planning, we would face it together.

Without words, we both knew what needed to be done. The club had to be warned. The devices had to be found and neutralized. And Victor Markus needed to be exposed for whatever game he was playing.

I shifted my weight, preparing to move back toward the compound once Victor was out of sight, and my hand brushed accidentally against Liam's. He tensed, but didn't pull away immediately.

Progress, small but significant.

"We'll protect them," I whispered. "Together?"

Liam hesitated, then gave a single, decisive nod. He still didn't trust me fully—might not for a long time—but he trusted me enough for this. Enough to stand with me against a common enemy.

We remained crouched side by side beneath the pine tree, my large hand hovering protectively near his smaller one without touching, both watching Victor with narrowed eyes.

The morning sun filtered through the branches above us, casting dappled light across Liam's face and illuminating the fierce determination in those remarkable golden eyes.

In that moment, I didn't need a claiming bite to know that this wild, cautious lynx shifter was meant to be mine. And as we prepared to defend our club together—his chosen territory as much as mine now—I dared to hope that someday, he might come to see me as his, too.

But for now, this was enough—this fragile trust, this common purpose, this moment of standing together against a threat. The rest would come in time. However much time Liam needed.

# Chapter Nine

~ Liam ~

I waited until Victor's sleek black car disappeared through the main gate before I settled onto the ground, cross-legged, my notepad balanced carefully on my knee.

My fingers trembled slightly as I began to sketch, not from fear but from the urgent messages pulsing through the soil beneath me.

The dandelions pushing through cracks in the pavement, the stubborn clover clinging to life at the fence line, the ancient oak near the garage—they all whispered to me through subtle shifts in their energy, painting a picture of danger that only I could see.

Rooster crouched beside me, his massive frame casting a shadow over my notepad. He remained silent, watching as my pencil flew across the paper. I appreciated that he didn't rush me, didn't demand immediate explanations. He simply waited, a steady presence at my side.

The plants were agitated, their usual gentle hum escalated to something more frantic. I placed my palm flat against the ground, closing my eyes briefly as I sorted through the jumble of impressions flooding my consciousness.

*Metal-death. Signal-danger. Watching-eyes.*

I opened my eyes and began sketching the compound's layout with quick, precise strokes. The clubhouse in the center, the garage to the left, the picnic table where Rooster had first left food for me—each detail rendered with the accuracy of someone who had spent months observing from the shadows. Then I marked Xs where the plants had sensed the buried devices, my pencil pressing harder against the paper with each mark.

Seven. Nine. Twelve.

Twelve devices forming a perfect perimeter around the Soldiers of Fortune compound. Victor had only planted one during our observation, which meant the others had been installed earlier, during previous "visits" or break-in attempts.

The realization made my stomach twist with anxiety.

"Kid, this is..." Rooster's voice trailed off as he studied my drawing. His finger traced the pattern of Xs, connecting them into a complete surveillance circle. "You're saying all these spots have devices like the one we saw him plant?"

I nodded, then flipped to a fresh page. This time I sketched Victor's silhouette near the fence line, then drew connecting lines to other figures wearing similar suits. Three men in total, with nearly identical postures—confident, entitled, dangerous.

I'd seen them before, though never all together. They took turns circling the compound, each visiting a different section of the fence to maintain their network of spying tools.

Rooster's brow furrowed as he studied the new drawing. "These other two—you've seen them here too? Recently?"

I held up two fingers, then pointed to the waxing moon overhead before making a circular motion. Two cycles. Two months. I'd been watching them watching the MC for that long.

The weeds beneath my legs shifted, their tiny roots squirming with agitation as they transmitted a fresh warning. I quickly sketched a close-up of one of the devices—a small metal disc with a blinking light, an antenna barely thicker than a human hair, and something else... something that had made the plants recoil when Victor buried it.

*Poison-metal. Death-to-green.*

I couldn't explain that part to Rooster. How could I make him understand that the devices weren't just listening or tracking—they were hurting the plants somehow, causing a slow decay in the soil around them?

Instead, I drew a crude shifter mid-transformation beside one of the devices, with jagged lines connecting them. Then I sketched a small cage around the shifter figure.

"These track shifters specifically?" Rooster asked, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Not just surveillance but targeting us?"

I nodded emphatically, relieved he understood. I flipped to yet another page and drew what I'd seen three cities ago—men in similar suits setting up identical devices around a small park where I'd discovered a coyote shifter living. Three days later, the coyote had been gone, and the suited men had returned to collect their equipment, satisfied smirks on their faces.

My hand moved faster now, sketching a map of the country with X marks in various cities—places I'd passed through, places where I'd seen these men and their technology, places where shifters had disappeared.

I'd never stayed long enough to witness the actual captures. Survival had taught me to run at the first sign of hunters. But I'd seen enough to recognize the pattern.

Rooster's breathing changed as he studied my drawings, becoming deeper, more controlled—the breathing of someone working to contain rage. "You've seen this before. Multiple times. That's why you came back. Not just because of... us."

I glanced up at him, momentarily surprised by the "us" in his statement, before nodding slowly. It wasn't just about warning Rooster, though that had been a significant part of my decision.

It was about all of them—this strange, cobbled-together family of shifters who had claimed this territory as their own. Who had unknowingly sheltered me with their presence, creating a buffer zone between me and the world's dangers.

The MC hadn't been merely my feeding ground these past months—it had been my shield, my unwitting protectors. And now they were targets because of what they were.

I turned to a fresh page and drew the clubhouse again, this time with small waves emanating from each buried device, converging on a point outside the compound. Then I added a simple arrow pointing to tomorrow's date on a calendar. The meaning was clear: whatever Victor and his companions were planning, it was happening soon. Very soon.

"They're triangulating," Rooster muttered, the color draining from his face. "Using these devices to pinpoint exactly where each shifter is inside our territory. Planning an ambush, maybe."

I nodded grimly, adding a final sketch—small arrows pointing inward from all directions toward the compound center. Classic hunting pattern. Surround, then close in for the kill.

Rooster's hand moved toward mine before stopping just short of contact, respecting the boundaries I'd established. "We need to show this to Butch. Immediately."

I hesitated, my instincts screaming at me to run, to disappear back into the forest where I'd survived for fifteen years. Getting involved meant becoming visible, traceable. It meant putting myself directly in the hunters' path.

But as I looked at my drawings—at the careful documentation of a threat I'd been tracking across multiple states without fully understanding—I realized I was already involved. Had been since the first time I'd sensed those devices buried near the fence line and chosen to stay rather than flee.

The clover near my knee trembled, its leaves turning subtly toward me in silent encouragement.

*Not-alone now. Choose-strength.*

I took a deep breath and nodded to Rooster, gathering my notepad and pencil as I rose to my feet. For the first time in fifteen years, I was choosing to step toward danger rather than away from it.

For the first time, I had something—someone—worth the risk.

My shoulders hunched as we stepped away from the sheltering pine tree into the exposed yard. Every step across the open compound felt like an invitation for watching eyes, for the click of a camera shutter or the red dot of a laser sight between my shoulder blades.

I'd spent fifteen years avoiding precisely this—being visible, trackable, an easy target in an open space.

Rooster must have sensed my discomfort because he positioned his large body between me and the fence line where Victor had planted the device, creating a living shield against whatever invisible eyes might be watching us.

"Just stay close to me," he murmured, his voice barely audible above the sound of gravel crunching beneath our feet. "If those devices are transmitting our position, they already know I'm out here. But they might not have spotted you yet."

I nodded, pressing myself closer to his broad back as we moved. My notepad was clutched tightly against my chest, the pages containing information that could save these people—these shifters who didn't realize they were being hunted. The knowledge felt heavy in my hands, a responsibility I hadn't asked for but couldn't ignore.

The clubhouse loomed ahead of us, its weathered exterior more imposing up close than it had appeared from my usual hiding spots. Except for my one quick trip to Butch's office, I'd never been inside beyond the kitchen and Rooster's room.

The thought of venturing deeper into the building made my pulse quicken, but I forced myself to keep moving forward. The stakes were too high for me to retreat into the comfort of shadows now.

As we approached the back door, it swung open to reveal the bearded man—Butch, their president—his expression grim as he ushered us quickly inside. "Was wondering where you two disappeared to," he said, his eyes scanning the yard behind us before closing and locking the door.

The interior of the clubhouse assaulted my senses immediately—the mingled scents of leather, motor oil, cigarette smoke, and beer creating a potent cocktail that made my nose twitch. Voices echoed from somewhere deeper inside the building, male voices raised in animated discussion.

My steps faltered as we moved past the kitchen into unfamiliar territory, but Rooster's steady presence kept me from bolting.

"This way," he said, guiding me down a short hallway to a door at the end. "Butch's office. It's secure."

I wasn't sure what "secure" meant in this context, but I followed anyway, my fingers tightening around my notepad. The office was smaller than I'd remembered—a cluttered space dominated by a large wooden desk covered with papers, motorcycle parts, and what appeared to be building plans. The walls were lined with filing cabinets and shelves holding various trophies, photos, and MC memorabilia.

Butch closed the door behind us, then moved around to sit behind his desk. His movements were deliberate, controlled—the movements of an alpha predator accustomed to command.

Every instinct I had screamed to keep my distance from such a dominant presence, yet I forced myself to approach the desk when Rooster nodded encouragingly.

"Rooster says you've got something important to show me," Butch said, his eyes fixed on me with an intensity that made me want to disappear into the floor.

I glanced at Rooster, who gave me a small nod. "Go ahead, kid. Show him what you showed me."

With trembling hands, I placed my notepad on the desk and opened it to the first drawing—the compound layout with the marked positions of Victor's devices.

I spread out several pages, arranging them in a sequence that told the story I couldn't voice aloud: the tracking network, the suited men, the pattern of surveillance, the specific targeting of shifters.

Butch leaned forward, his brow furrowing as he studied each drawing in turn. His fingers traced the X marks on the compound sketch, much as Rooster's had done earlier.

"These are all places where tracking devices are buried?" he asked, looking up at me.

I nodded, then flipped to the drawing showing the device's internal components—the antenna, the blinking light, the power source.

"And you're certain these are designed to track shifters specifically? Not just standard surveillance?"

I hesitated, then reached for my pencil. On a fresh sheet, I drew a simplified version of what I'd seen in a city three years ago—a device similar to Victor's being tested in a park. I sketched a human walking past it—the device remaining inactive—followed by a shifter approaching—the device lighting up with activity. Then I added the suited men arriving minutes later, converging on the shifter's location.

Butch's eyes widened slightly as he understood. "They can differentiate between humans and shifters? How the hell is that possible?"

I shrugged, unable to explain the science behind it. All I knew was what I'd observed—that these devices responded differently to shifters than to ordinary humans. I sketched another quick drawing—a simplified molecular structure with question marks around it.

"Something in our biology," Rooster guessed, watching over my shoulder. "Something these devices can detect."

I nodded, relieved he understood. Then I flipped to another page and drew a small calendar, marking off days leading to tomorrow with a large X circled repeatedly.

"Tomorrow," Butch said flatly. "Whatever they're planning happens tomorrow."

I confirmed with another nod, then drew a final image—the most difficult to convey. A small lynx hiding in bushes, watching as men in suits installed equipment around various territories. I added small details to each location—a wolf paw print beside one, bear claw marks on a tree near another, fox tracks by a third. Then I drew empty cages where those markers had been, with the suited men loading them into vans.

"How long have you been tracking these people?" Butch asked, his voice quieter now, serious.

I held up five fingers.

"Five years?" he guessed.

I shook my head.

"Five... months?" Rooster suggested.

Another head shake. I drew a quick map of the United States with five cities circled.

"Five different locations," Butch realized. "You've seen this happen in five different places."

I nodded, then pointed to myself and mimed walking from one circle to another on the map.

"You've been moving around, staying ahead of them," Rooster said softly. "That's why you never stay in one place too long."

The accuracy of his assessment surprised me. I'd never told anyone about my constant relocations, my careful patterns of movement designed to avoid detection. Yet he'd understood immediately—this giant of a man with the gentle eyes and endless patience had seen right through my defenses to the survival strategy beneath.

"And now they're here," Butch said grimly. "After us."

I picked up my pencil again and added one more detail to my drawing—a small lynx near the Soldiers of Fortune compound, watching, noting, warning. Me.

Butch studied the image for a long moment, then looked up at me with new understanding in his eyes. "You could have just disappeared when you realized what was happening. Most people would have. Most people who've survived what you have definitely would have." He leaned back in his chair, regarding me with what seemed like respect. "But you came back to warn us instead."

I shrugged, uncomfortable with his assessment. It hadn't felt like bravery when I'd made the decision—just necessity. These people, this club—they'd unwittingly created a space where I could exist on the periphery, taking what I needed without being hunted or harmed. Rooster had fed me without demands. The least I could do was return the favor with information that might save them.

"Thank you," Butch said simply. "Not many would take that risk for strangers."

I glanced at Rooster, whose eyes were fixed on me with an expression that made my chest feel strangely tight. "Not strangers," he corrected quietly. "Family."

The word hung in the air between us, loaded with meaning I wasn't ready to examine. I looked down at my drawings instead, focusing on the concrete threat rather than the complex emotions Rooster's statement had stirred.

Butch's expression had shifted from contemplative to determined. "We need to find these devices. Now. And then we need to prepare for whatever's coming tomorrow."

I nodded, already planning how to locate each buried tracker with the plants' help. It was time to show them exactly what I could do—and hope it would be enough to keep us all alive.

Outside, I pulled Rooster toward the fence line where Victor had planted the newest device, my fingers wrapped around the cuff of his leather jacket rather than touching his skin.

My steps were purposeful despite the anxiety churning in my stomach. I hadn't revealed this ability to anyone before—this strange connection to plants that had kept me alive when all else failed.

Even as a child, before I'd been abandoned, I'd learned to hide how leaves seemed to whisper to me, how roots reached toward my fingers when I sat in gardens. My parents had called it unnatural, freakish. But now, this "freakish" ability might be the only thing standing between these shifters and whatever trap Victor was setting.

"This is where you saw him plant it?" Rooster asked as we approached the spot where Victor had knelt earlier.

I nodded, then released his jacket and dropped to my knees in the dirt. The sun was beginning its afternoon descent, casting long shadows across the compound as I placed my palm flat against the ground. Closing my eyes, I focused on the subtle vibrations pulsing through the soil—the silent language of roots and microorganisms that humans couldn't hear, but I had understood since childhood.

*Here-danger. Buried-death. Here-here-here.*

The message came immediately, the plants' distress sharp and clear. They hated the foreign object buried among them, this metal intruder leaking its poisonous signals into their network.

I opened my eyes and pointed to an exact spot near the fence post, not quite where Victor had appeared to place it—he'd been clever enough to misdirect, burying the actual device several inches from where he'd pretended to kneel.

"Right here?" Rooster confirmed, crouching beside me.

I nodded, watching intently as he pulled a small folding knife from his pocket and began to carefully loosen the soil. He worked with surprising

delicacy for such large hands, removing small scoops of dirt until a glint of metal reflected the afternoon sunlight.

"There," he murmured, brushing away the last of the soil to reveal a small disc about the size of a quarter. A tiny red light blinked steadily on its surface, and what looked like a minuscule antenna protruded from one side. "Son of a bitch."

He moved to pick it up, but I caught his wrist, shaking my head frantically. If the device could detect shifters, touching it directly might trigger some kind of alert. Instead, I gestured for him to scoop it onto the knife blade, which he did with a nod of understanding.

Once the device rested on the flat of his blade, I leaned in to study it more closely. The design was familiar—similar to others I'd seen, but with subtle differences. This one was newer, more sophisticated.

I pulled my notepad from my pocket and quickly sketched the device, adding details of its internal components based on what I'd observed in other locations when hunters had been less careful about concealing their technology.

Rooster watched me draw with undisguised amazement. "How do you know what's inside it?"

I tapped my eye, then made a gesture encompassing various cities—I'd seen these things before, in different stages of assembly, in different locations.

"You've been watching them a long time," he said softly. "Learning their methods."

I nodded, then stood and pointed toward another section of the fence about fifty yards away. The plants were already calling to me, their distress signals forming a map of buried threats around the compound's perimeter.

"Another one over there?" Rooster asked, carefully wrapping the first device in his bandana before pocketing it.

I nodded again, already moving in that direction. For the next hour, we worked our way around the compound's perimeter, with me leading Rooster from one buried device to another.

At each location, I'd kneel, commune with the plants through touch, then point to the exact spot where the tracker was hidden. Rooster would dig it up, wrap it carefully, and add it to our growing collection.

By the time we'd found the fifth device, a pattern had emerged—they formed a perfect ring around the clubhouse, positioned at strategic intervals

that covered all possible entry and exit points.

Someone had spent weeks, maybe months, establishing this surveillance network. The thought sent a chill down my spine despite the warmth of the afternoon sun.

"How many more?" Rooster asked as we approached the sixth location, wiping sweat from his brow with his forearm.

I held up six fingers. Half done, half to go.

"We should split up," came a deep voice from behind us. "Cover more ground before sunset."

I whirled around, startled to find Butch approaching with Bear and two other club members I didn't recognize. My body tensed instinctively, ready to bolt, but Rooster's steady presence beside me kept me grounded.

"Kid's got a special way of finding them," Rooster explained, gesturing toward me with surprising pride in his voice. "Works with the plants somehow. They tell him where to look."

Butch's eyebrows rose slightly, but he didn't question the explanation. Instead, he nodded toward the devices Rooster had collected. "These match what you drew in your sketches. Impressive eye for detail."

I shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise. Observation wasn't a skill I'd developed by choice—it was a necessity for survival. When your life depends on spotting threats before they spot you, you learn to notice everything.

"We'll follow your lead," Butch continued, addressing me directly. "Just show us where to dig."

The next hour passed in a blur of activity as I led the group around the remaining perimeter, pointing out the buried devices one by one. The men worked efficiently, following my gestures without question, digging where I indicated and carefully collecting each tracker we found. By the time we unearthed the final device, the sun was setting, painting the western sky in shades of orange and crimson.

"Twelve," Rooster confirmed, laying out our collection on an oil cloth spread across the hood of a truck. "Just like your drawing showed."

I nodded, a small measure of satisfaction warming my chest at having successfully mapped the entire surveillance network. For the first time in my life, my strange ability had served a purpose beyond my individual survival. I'd helped protect others—this makeshift family of shifters who had unknowingly sheltered me on the edges of their territory.

Butch studied the devices with narrowed eyes before gathering them into a metal box. "We'll need to examine these more closely, figure out exactly how they work. But they stay contained until then—no telling if they can still transmit our location even when removed."

The others nodded in agreement, and I felt a weight lift from my shoulders. They were taking the threat seriously, preparing to defend themselves. Maybe they'd have a chance against whatever was coming tomorrow.

As the group turned to head back toward the clubhouse, Butch paused beside me. "You should stay with us tonight," he said, his tone casual but his eyes serious. "Whatever's coming tomorrow, you're safer inside our walls than out there on your own."

The suggestion hit me like a physical blow, stopping me in my tracks. Stay? Inside? The very thought made my chest tighten with anxiety. The clubhouse meant walls, doors, limited escape routes. It meant sleeping somewhere new, somewhere unfamiliar, somewhere I couldn't disappear from in seconds if danger approached.

For fifteen years, I'd survived by staying mobile, by never sleeping in the same place twice if I could help it. The forest had been my refuge, its countless hiding spots and secret paths my security system. The thought of abandoning that proven survival strategy for the uncertain protection of brick walls and locked doors felt like stepping off a cliff into darkness.

I glanced toward the trees beyond the fence line—my escape route, my safety net, my home for as long as I could remember. The plants there seemed to sense my indecision, their leaves rustling gently despite the still evening air. A silent acknowledgment of the choice before me.

Then I looked at Rooster, standing a few feet away, watching me with those patient eyes that had never demanded, never pressured, never expected anything in return for his kindness. He'd fed me for months without asking questions. He'd respected my boundaries even after discovering I was his mate. He'd believed me about the devices without hesitation.

My hands trembled at my sides as the internal battle raged—instinct versus possibility, isolation versus connection, the familiar forest versus this man who looked at me like I mattered.

"Your choice, kid," Rooster said softly, as if reading my thoughts. "No one's gonna force you to stay if you need to go."

And that, perhaps, was what finally tipped the balance. The simple acknowledgment of my freedom to choose, the respect for my autonomy that I'd never been granted before—not by my parents, not by the street gangs, not by anyone until this red-haired cook with the gentle hands and bottomless patience.

I took a deep breath, my golden eyes darting once more toward the forest that had been my only true home. The trees seemed to sway slightly, branches bending in what almost looked like a gesture of farewell. Or perhaps encouragement.

*Choose-path. Choose-strength.*

With a decision that felt momentous in its simplicity, I took a step forward—not toward the trees and the security of isolation, but toward Rooster and the terrifying uncertainty of belonging. One step became two, then three, until I stood beside him, close enough that our shoulders nearly touched.

I didn't know if I was making the right choice. Didn't know if I could ever fully trust these people, this place. Didn't know if I could overcome fifteen years of conditioning that screamed at me to run, hide, survive alone.

But as the setting sun cast long shadows across the compound and Rooster's face broke into a smile that warmed something cold and lonely inside me, I thought that maybe—just maybe—this was what it felt like to come home.

# Chapter Ten

~ Rooster ~

I sat on the edge of my bed, watching Liam move around my room like he was exploring uncharted territory. Every step was calculated, every glance assessing potential threats or escape routes.

It was strange seeing someone else in this space—my private sanctuary away from the chaos of the clubhouse.

Strange, but not unwelcome.

My bear rumbled contentedly inside me at the sight of my mate exploring our den, even as I forced myself to remain perfectly still. The last thing I wanted was to spook him after he'd finally decided to stay.

His slender fingers trailed along my dresser, hesitating over a framed photograph I kept there. It was the whole club, taken after a successful charity run last year. We were all grinning like idiots, arms thrown around each other's shoulders, our cuts gleaming with patches in the summer sun.

I felt oddly exposed as he studied the image. It was one thing to have my space invaded, but another entirely to have my relationships examined. The photograph revealed something intimate about me—that beneath my gruff exterior, these people were my family.

"That was taken at the children's hospital," I said, breaking the silence. "We raised enough money to buy them new equipment for the cancer ward."

Liam nodded, his golden eyes flicking to me briefly before returning to the photo. He traced the outline of my face in the picture with one finger, then set it down exactly where he'd found it. There was something touching about his careful handling of my possessions.

He moved to my bookshelf next, where my collection of cooking magazines sat in neat stacks. Some were dog-eared, pages marked with recipes I'd wanted to try or techniques I'd been practicing.

His head tilted slightly as he ran his fingers along the spines, pulling one out at random to flip through it.

"Cooking's not just my job," I explained, feeling strangely self-conscious. "It's... how I take care of people. Always has been."

He paused on a page featuring an elaborate knife skill demonstration, studying the photographs with obvious interest before carefully returning the magazine to its exact place in the stack.

A half-eaten breakfast sat abandoned on my nightstand—I'd been too worried about Liam to finish it earlier. He approached it cautiously, picking up the fork with an expression that made my chest tighten. It reminded me of that first day teaching him how to use utensils, watching his fierce concentration as he mimicked my grip.

"You're a fast learner," I said softly. "Took to that fork like you'd been using one all along."

His lips quirked in what might have been the ghost of a smile as he set the fork back down.

My bear stirred restlessly beneath my skin, growing impatient with this slow dance. The animal in me wanted to cross the room in two strides, wrap my arms around his thin frame, bury my nose in the crook of his neck where his scent would be strongest. Wanted to sink teeth into soft flesh and claim what was mine by right of fate and instinct.

I dug my fingers into the bedspread to anchor myself. Fifteen years of solitude had taught Liam to fear touch, to equate it with danger. I wouldn't be the one to reinforce that lesson, no matter how much my bear protested.

Patience, I reminded myself. We have time.

Liam's exploration took him to the far wall where my pride and joy hung on a custom-made rack—my collection of chef's knives, each one selected for a specific purpose, maintained with religious care.

His golden eyes widened, and for the first time since entering my room, his defensive posture relaxed slightly. He leaned in close to examine them, hands clasped behind his back as if to resist the temptation to touch without permission.

"You can look closer," I offered. "They don't bite."

The irony of my word choice hit me a moment too late, but Liam didn't seem to notice. He reached out cautiously, fingers hovering over the largest blade without quite touching it.

I stood slowly, telegraphing my movements as I approached. "That's my cleaver. For breaking down large cuts of meat, chopping through bone." I pointed to each knife in turn. "Santoku—for vegetables, precision cutting. Bread knife, serrated edge for crusts without crushing the soft inside. Boning knife, flexible for working around joints."

He nodded at each description, absorbing the information with that intense focus I was coming to recognize. When I reached the smallest knife in the collection, his head tilted in question.

"Paring knife," I explained. "For detail work. Peeling fruit, deveining shrimp, intricate garnishes."

He pointed to a knife with a distinctive hammered pattern on the blade, his expression clearly asking for more information.

"That one's special," I admitted. "Damascus steel. Hand-forged in Japan. Cost me a month's salary, but it holds an edge like nothing else. Perfect balance, too." I hesitated, then added, "You can hold it, if you want."

His eyes darted to mine, surprise evident in their golden depths. I understood why—these knives were clearly valuable, obviously cherished. And I was offering to let him, a virtual stranger who had been stealing from our dumpster until recently, handle my most prized possession.

With careful movements, he lifted the knife from its magnetic holder, testing its weight with a reverence that told me he understood exactly what I was sharing with him. He held it professionally, I noticed—not by the handle like a weapon, but balanced with respect for the blade.

"You've handled knives before," I observed.

He nodded, making a small gesture with his free hand that I interpreted as having needed them for survival.

"Makes sense," I said. "Hard to prepare food in the wild without decent tools."

He ran his thumb along the flat of the blade, not the edge, then made a small, appreciative sound in the back of his throat—the first voluntary vocalization I'd heard from him. The noise sent a warm shiver through me, more affecting than any words could have been.

He was about to return the knife to its place when a sharp knock sounded at the door.

The transformation was immediate and stark. Liam's entire body tensed, the knife instinctively shifting in his grip to a defensive position. In three quick steps, he was behind me, using my larger frame as a shield between himself and the potential threat.

I felt his presence at my back, the heat of him close but not quite touching. The knife was still in his hand, I realized—he hadn't had time to replace it in his rush for safety.

"It's okay," I murmured, not turning around for fear of startling him further. "No one enters without permission. You're safe here."

Another knock, followed by Bug's unmistakable voice. "Mr. Rooster? We bring presents! For kitten!"

I glanced over my shoulder at Liam, whose expression had shifted from fear to wary confusion. "It's Bug," I explained. "And it sounds like he's brought some friends. They want to welcome you."

Liam's golden eyes met mine, searching for reassurance. After a moment's hesitation, he carefully handed me the Damascus knife, his fingers brushing against mine in the process.

The brief contact sent a jolt through me that had nothing to do with my bear's desires and everything to do with the trust implicit in the gesture.

I returned the knife to its place on the rack, then moved toward the door, acutely aware of Liam hovering just behind my right shoulder.

"Ready?" I asked softly.

He drew in a deep breath, then gave a single, decisive nod.

I opened the door to find Bug practically vibrating with excitement, a brightly wrapped package clutched in his thin hands. Behind him stood Treat, Butch's omega mate, holding what looked like folded fabric, and slightly further back was Percy, Gearhead's shy fox shifter.

Each of them carried something—gifts, I realized with a start. They'd brought gifts for Liam. Something warm unfurled in my chest at the gesture. The omegas had taken it upon themselves to welcome my mate, even though he was practically a stranger to them.

"We come in?" Bug asked, bouncing on his toes. "Bear say only few minutes. Not bother. We bring welcome things!"

I glanced back at Liam, who had pressed himself against the wall beside my dresser, his golden eyes wide as he assessed the newcomers. After a moment's hesitation, he gave me a small nod.

"Sure," I said, stepping aside to let them enter. "But maybe one at a time? Might be less overwhelming."

Bug didn't need to be told twice. He darted into the room with that strange, fluid grace he possessed, stopping a respectful distance from Liam. The others followed more cautiously, Treat with his calm, measured steps and Percy with his characteristic hunched posture, eyes downcast.

"For you!" Bug declared, thrusting his package toward Liam. "From Bug and Bear. Well..." He giggled. "Bug pick. Bear pay."

Liam stared at the offered gift like it might explode, making no move to take it.

"It's okay," I said softly. "They just want to welcome you to the club."

With painfully slow movements, Liam reached for the package, his fingers trembling slightly as they closed around the bright paper. He handled it with such reverence that my chest ached watching him. Had no one ever given him a gift before?

Bug bounced impatiently. "Open! Open!"

Liam carefully unwrapped the package, taking care not to tear the paper. Inside was a stuffed lynx toy, amber-colored with tufted ears and a red ribbon around its neck. It was a good likeness of his shifter form, I realized with surprise.

"Is you!" Bug exclaimed proudly. "Soft friend for when scared. Mine help me." He patted his pocket where I knew he kept a small stuffed bear that Bear had given him early in their relationship.

Liam's fingers stroked the plush fur, his expression a mixture of confusion and wonder. He looked up at Bug, then at me, as if seeking explanation for this unexpected kindness.

Before I could say anything, Treat stepped forward with his offering. "I made this," he said, his voice gentle as he held out what I now recognized as a quilt. "Everyone needs something warm that belongs just to them."

As Liam accepted the quilt, it unfurled partially to reveal intricate patchwork in earthy tones—browns, greens, and amber that matched his lynx coloring. The craftsmanship was evident even to my untrained eye.

"Treat's been working on that for days," I explained to Liam. "Ever since I mentioned you might be staying."

Liam ran his fingers over the soft fabric, tracing the stitching with a look of absolute wonder. His chest rose and fell rapidly, and I worried for a moment that he might be overwhelmed. But he managed a small nod of thanks to Treat, who smiled in return.

Percy was last, hanging back until Treat nudged him forward. "I—I thought you might need these," he said so quietly I almost missed it, offering a leather-bound journal and a set of drawing pencils. "For when words are... difficult."

Liam froze, his eyes locking with Percy's in a moment of silent understanding. They were alike in many ways—both skittish, both traumatized, both struggling to communicate in a world that demanded words. But where Liam remained silent by choice or circumstance, Percy had found his voice.

The journal was beautiful—simple but elegant, with a sturdy cover and thick pages that would stand up to heavy use. The pencils were artist-grade, far better than the stub Liam had been using for his drawings.

Liam clutched all three gifts to his chest, his golden eyes suspiciously bright in the late afternoon light. He looked utterly overwhelmed, like someone who'd been dying of thirst suddenly offered an ocean.

"There's space on the shelf," I said gently, nodding toward my bookshelf. "If you want to put them somewhere safe."

He nodded, moving carefully to arrange his new possessions on an empty shelf. The lynx toy was positioned just so, the quilt folded neatly beside it, the journal and pencils placed with precision. His fingers lingered on each item, as if reassuring himself they were real.

The three omegas settled around my room—Bug cross-legged on the floor, Treat perched on the edge of my desk chair, and Percy standing with his back against the wall near the door. All of them kept a respectful distance from Liam, instinctively understanding his need for space.

I watched as Liam returned to his spot near me, still casting wondering glances at his gifts. A sudden inspiration struck me.

"I've been trying to explain to Liam about mates," I said, addressing the three omegas. "About what it means. But I think he might understand better hearing it from your perspective."

Bug clapped his hands, eyes lighting up. "Oh! Bug tell! Bug know about mates!"

Treat nodded thoughtfully. "That's not a bad idea, actually. We've all had... different experiences finding our mates."

Percy remained silent, but his posture shifted slightly, a small nod indicating his willingness to participate.

"Would that be okay?" I asked Liam directly. "To hear what it's been like for them? Might help you understand better than my clumsy explanations."

Liam considered for a long moment, his eyes moving from one omega to the next. Finally, he gave a cautious nod.

"Who wants to go first?" I asked.

"Me! Me!" Bug raised his hand like an eager schoolchild. "Bug tell about Bear and mates and everything!"

I smiled, gesturing for him to proceed. "Go ahead, Bug. Just remember to give Liam space, okay?"

Bug nodded seriously, then scooted forward on the floor until he was about five feet from Liam—close enough for conversation, but far enough to respect his boundaries. He crossed his legs and settled his hands on his knees, his scarred face alight with enthusiasm.

"Bug tell story now," he announced, his fragmented speech taking on the cadence of a storyteller. "About Bear and Bug and how we became forever-people together."

Liam slid down the wall to sit on the floor, mirroring Bug's cross-legged position. His golden eyes were fixed intently on Bug's face, absorbing every word with the same careful attention he'd given my knife collection.

I settled back on my bed, hoping these three damaged souls who'd found healing through their mate bonds might succeed where I had failed—in helping Liam understand that being my mate didn't mean surrendering his hard-won freedom.

Bug rocked back and forth excitedly as he began his story, his fragmented speech painting a surprisingly clear picture of his claiming by Bear.

It was strange hearing such an intimate moment described in Bug's childlike vocabulary, but there was a raw honesty to his account that no polished storyteller could have matched.

I watched Liam's face carefully as Bug spoke, trying to gauge his reaction to this first account of what a claiming could be like when built on trust rather than fear.

"Bear found Bug hurt. Bad men chase Bug. Try hurt Bug more," he explained, gesturing to the faded scar that ran along his hairline. "Bear protect. Make safe place. Not touch Bug until Bug say okay."

He smiled at the memory, his scarred face transforming with genuine happiness. "Bug scared first. Many bad touches before. But Bear different. Bear wait. Bear gentle."

Liam leaned forward slightly, his golden eyes never leaving Bug's face. I recognized the intensity in his gaze—he was searching for deception, analyzing every word and expression for hidden meanings or dangers.

"When Bear bite Bug," Bug continued, touching his shoulder where his claiming mark would be hidden under his oversized shirt, "it not hurt much. Just pinch! Then everything better. Like puzzle piece click." He made a satisfied snapping gesture with his hands. "Bug know Bear always find. Always protect. Not scary anymore."

Bug's simplified explanation stripped the mate bond down to its essence—protection, belonging, security. His childlike perspective removed any hint of possession or control that might have frightened Liam.

"Bug not belong to Bear," he added, as if sensing Liam's unspoken concern. "Bug and Bear belong together. Different."

Liam blinked, his head tilting slightly as he absorbed this distinction. I saw his fingers brush unconsciously against his own shoulder, the spot where a claiming bite would someday go—if he ever chose to accept it.

Treat cleared his throat softly, drawing our attention. Unlike Bug's animated storytelling, Treat's demeanor was calm and measured, his voice steady as he picked up the narrative thread.

"My experience was a bit different," he said, smoothing an invisible wrinkle from his jeans. "I was running when Butch found me, protecting Doby. I'd been hunted for a long time because of what I am."

He didn't elaborate on his omega status—that explanation could wait for another day.

"I collapsed at Butch's feet, literally," Treat continued with a wry smile. "Wasn't exactly the dignified first meeting most mates dream about. I was terrified, exhausted, and I didn't trust anyone, especially not some massive bear shifter claiming I was his destined mate."

Liam's eyes widened slightly at this admission. Perhaps he'd assumed the others had accepted their mate bonds immediately, without hesitation.

"Butch didn't push," Treat said. "He gave me space, safety, time to heal. But he was always there, this steady presence I could count on when everything else in my life had been chaos." His fingers unconsciously traced the outline of his claiming mark through his shirt. "When we finally completed the bond, it wasn't about possession. It was about connection. The bite itself was just... a physical manifestation of something that already existed between us."

He leaned forward, his expression earnest as he addressed Liam directly. "The claiming bite doesn't trap you. It grounds you. I spent years running, always looking over my shoulder. Now I have somewhere—someone—to run to instead of from."

I watched understanding bloom in Liam's eyes, his rigid posture softening almost imperceptibly.

"It's different for everyone," Treat added, glancing at Percy. "Some of us need more time than others. And that's okay."

The room fell silent as all eyes turned to Percy, who had remained nearly motionless against the wall. His gaze was fixed on his shoes, arms wrapped around himself in that self-protective gesture he often adopted when uncomfortable.

"You don't have to share if you don't want to," I told him gently.

Percy shook his head, then straightened his shoulders with visible effort. "No. It's important." His voice was barely above a whisper, but in the quiet room, every word was clear. "Liam should hear... all our stories. Not just the easy ones."

He took a deep breath before continuing. "I grew up in a traditional fox skulk. Alpha Biggins—" His voice caught on the name. "He arranged for me to be mated to his son when I was fourteen. Forced mating. I wasn't given a choice."

Liam's entire body had gone rigid, his golden eyes wide with a recognition that made my stomach clench. Whatever Percy was describing, it clearly resonated with something in Liam's past.

"My father helped me escape," Percy continued, "but I spent years believing that's what mating was—something forced on the weak by the strong. When I met Gearhead..." He gave a small, humorless laugh. "I was terrified. Especially when he told me about the claiming bite."

Percy's eyes finally lifted, meeting Liam's directly. "I flinched every time he came near my neck. Panicked if he touched me unexpectedly. The thought of being bitten—being claimed—brought back every nightmare I'd been running from."

Liam nodded, a tiny movement that spoke volumes. Here was someone who understood his fear, who had lived with the same terror.

"Gearhead promised to wait," Percy said. "For as long as I needed. He said we were already mates in every way that mattered—the bite was just a formality. So he waited." His voice dropped even lower. "Six months. He waited six months while I worked through my fear."

Percy's hand moved to his collar, pulling it aside to reveal the edge of a claiming mark on his shoulder. Unlike the shame I might have expected, his expression held nothing but pride. "And when I was finally ready, it felt like coming home. Like the final piece falling into place."

I watched as Liam's eyes locked with Percy's in a moment of profound understanding. Whatever silent communication passed between them in that look, it seemed to reach Liam in a way nothing else had.

"It's not about ownership," Percy concluded simply. "It's about choice. Your choice. On your terms. In your time."

The room fell quiet as his words settled over us. Bug had stopped his rocking, sitting unusually still as he sensed the weight of the moment. Treat watched with quiet approval, his hand resting over his own claiming mark.

"We should go," Percy said finally, pushing himself away from the wall. "Bear said not to stay too long."

Bug bounced to his feet, his solemn mood evaporating as quickly as it had come. "Bug tell Bear about kitten gifts! Bear be happy!"

Treat rose more slowly, gathering himself with his usual composed dignity. "Remember what we said, Liam. Every claiming story is different. Yours will be your own—if and when you decide to write it."

As the three omegas moved toward the door, I stood to see them out, murmuring my thanks for their willingness to share such personal stories. Bug hugged me impulsively, Treat clasped my shoulder with a knowing smile, and Percy gave me a slight nod that somehow conveyed more understanding than a thousand words could have.

When I turned back from closing the door, I found Liam standing by my bookshelf, his fingers gently touching the gifts he'd arranged there. The stuffed lynx, the handmade quilt, the leather-bound journal—tangible reminders that he belonged here, with us. With me.

I approached slowly, giving him plenty of time to retreat if he wished. But instead of backing away, he turned to face me. For a long moment, he simply stood there, studying my face as if searching for answers to questions he couldn't voice.

Then, with a deliberateness that made my heart ache, he extended his hand toward mine.

The gesture was small but monumental—perhaps the first time he'd initiated contact with anyone in years. His fingers trembled slightly in the space between us, uncertainty warring with determination in his golden eyes.

I kept my movements slow and gentle as I reached to meet him halfway, giving him every opportunity to pull back. When our fingers finally intertwined, the simple touch sent a jolt through me more powerful than any claiming bite could have been.

His golden eyes held mine, asking a question he couldn't speak aloud. Not whether he would stay—that decision seemed made already. But

whether I truly meant what I'd said, what Percy had confirmed. Whether I would be patient enough to wait until he was ready—days, months, years, however long it took.

I tightened my fingers around his, careful not to squeeze too hard, just enough to confirm the connection between us. "As long as it takes," I whispered, answering his unspoken question. "We have all the time in the world."

The corner of his mouth lifted in the closest thing to a smile I'd seen from him yet—a tiny, fragile thing, but genuine.

In that moment, I understood what Bug had tried to explain in his simple way: this wasn't about belonging to each other. It was about belonging together.

And for now, that was more than enough.

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# Chapter Eleven

~ Liam ~

I stepped toward the garden as the sunset painted the sky in shades of amber and gold. Each footstep felt weighted with purpose and terror. The notepad Percy had given me pressed against my palm, the edges digging into my skin as I clutched it like a lifeline.

I hadn't planned this conversation, hadn't prepared the words I would write, but the need to explain—to make Rooster understand—had been building inside me since our moment of connection in his room.

The garden behind the clubhouse wasn't much—just a small patch of vegetables, some wildflowers, and a few trees providing shade—but it felt safer than being inside. Open spaces. Multiple escape routes. The plants here had already reached out to me in greeting when I'd passed by earlier, their energy curious but welcoming.

I spotted Rooster sitting on a weathered wooden bench, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the dying light. He hadn't seen me yet. I could still turn and disappear into the shadows, return to the safety of silence and isolation that had protected me for fifteen years.

The clover beneath my feet shifted slightly, pressing upward against my soles. *Stay. Speak-truth. Safe-here.*

I pulled my hood lower over my face—a habit so ingrained I hardly noticed doing it anymore—and continued forward. My breathing felt shallow, trapped in my chest.

My fingers trembled around the pencil Percy had sharpened for me earlier. "For when words are difficult," he'd said, understanding in a way the others couldn't.

Rooster looked up as I approached, his face transforming with a smile so warm and genuine it made my chest ache. He didn't stand, didn't approach, didn't make any sudden movements that might send me bolting for the trees. He simply stayed where he was, leaving the space beside him open.

An invitation, not a demand.

"Hey, baby boy," he said softly. "Beautiful evening, isn't it?"

I nodded, hovering at the edge of the garden. The sunset cast long shadows across the grass, stretching like fingers between us. I took another step, then another, until I reached the bench.

Instead of sitting beside him, I perched at the far end, maintaining a careful distance. The wooden slats were warm beneath me, holding the day's heat. I opened the notepad, the blank page staring back at me like a challenge.

Where to begin? How to explain the broken pieces of my past to this man who had already seen more of me than anyone in fifteen years?

I started writing, the pencil scratching against paper the only sound besides our breathing and the gentle rustle of leaves above.

"I want you to understand why I ran."

I tore out the page and passed it to him, watching as he read the words, his expression open and attentive.

"You don't owe me any explanations, Liam," he said, handing the page back. "But I'm honored you trust me enough to share."

His response gave me courage. I pressed the pencil harder against the fresh page, words flowing faster now.

"When I was seven, my parents found out I could talk to plants. Not with words. With feelings. Energy. The plants answered back. Dad caught me in the garden telling him the tomatoes were getting too much water. They were dying. I could feel it."

I passed him the note, my heart hammering against my ribs. This was the secret I'd guarded most closely, the strangeness that had marked me as different even.

The grass around our bench grew taller as I wrote, straining upward as if listening. The nearby tomato plants turned their leaves toward me, recognizing the story I was telling. I felt their silent support flowing through the soil beneath my feet.

Rooster read my words carefully, his expression thoughtful rather than disturbed. When he looked up, his brown eyes held only interest, not the disgust or fear I'd expected.

"That's an incredible gift," he said simply.

I blinked, uncertain I'd heard him correctly. Gift? My parents had called it an abomination, a sign that something was deeply wrong with me.

With shaking hands, I wrote more, the words spilling onto the page faster than I could control them. "They called me a monster. Unnatural. Wrong. Three nights later they took me to a bus station, gave me twenty dollars, and left me there. I was seven. They said they couldn't keep something like me in their house."

The plants around us responded to my distress, leaves rustling despite the still evening air. A vine from a nearby cucumber plant stretched subtly toward my ankle, not touching but offering silent comfort.

Rooster's face darkened as he read, his jaw tightening beneath his red beard. For a moment, I tensed, ready to flee—but then I realized his anger wasn't directed at me. He was angry for me.

"What kind of parents abandon their child for having a gift?" he growled, the bear in him rumbling just beneath the surface. He closed his eyes, visibly collecting himself before adding more gently, "I'm so sorry that happened to you, Liam."

His acceptance, so different from the rejection I'd faced as a child, loosened something tight in my chest. I found myself writing more, revealing truths I'd never shared with anyone.

"I lived on the streets after that. The plants helped me. Showed me where to hide, which berries were safe to eat, warned me of danger. Without them, I would have died that first winter."

The grass beneath the bench curled upward, almost touching the wooden slats where we sat. A subtle confirmation of my words. I wondered if Rooster could see it—this silent conversation happening around us—or if it was visible only to me.

Rooster nodded as if he understood completely, though I knew he couldn't possibly grasp the depth of my connection to the green world. "They're still looking out for you, aren't they? That's how you found all those devices Victor planted."

I nodded, relieved he'd made the connection without me having to explain further. His acceptance gave me courage to continue writing, to unearth more painful memories I'd buried deep.

"Nobody wanted me. The street kids were worse than being alone. They hurt me. Tried to make me theirs." My pencil faltered, the lead breaking under the pressure of memories I couldn't fully articulate. "I learned to hide. To run. To trust nothing human."

The broken pencil point glared back at me, a fitting symbol for my shattered childhood. Before I could try to sharpen it, Rooster carefully offered me another from his pocket.

Our fingers didn't touch during the exchange, but the gesture itself—this simple act of making it easier for me to continue my story—meant more than any physical contact could have.

The new pencil moved across the paper with determination as I wrote about those first terrible years alone. How I'd learned to become invisible, to scavenge what I needed without being seen, to move from city to city when people started recognizing me or asking questions. How plants had become my only constants, my silent guardians and guides.

As I wrote, the setting sun cast Rooster's face in golden light, highlighting the compassion in his eyes. He read each note carefully, never rushing me, never judging. Just accepting. Understanding. His eyes remained fixed on the pages I handed him, giving me the privacy to compose my thoughts without the pressure of his gaze.

Outside the MC compound, I had been the feral kitten, the wild creature who survived on scraps and shadows. But here in this simple garden, with this man who looked at my brokenness and saw strength, I felt something unfamiliar beginning to take root. Not quite belonging. Not yet. But the possibility of it. Like a seedling breaking through hard soil toward the sun, fragile but determined.

The twilight deepened around us as I continued writing, the pencil moving faster now that I'd broken through the initial barrier of silence. I noticed Rooster shifting slightly on the bench, closing the distance between us by a few careful inches.

My body tensed automatically, but I forced myself not to move away. The closeness was uncomfortable but not unbearable—a strange new feeling after years of maintaining precise boundaries between myself and others.

The notepad felt warm beneath my fingers, absorbing my body heat as I pressed the pencil harder against the paper. What I needed to explain next was the hardest part—the source of my terror when Rooster had mentioned the claiming bite.

The memory I'd run from that night.

"When I was on the streets, older boys found me hiding in an abandoned building during a storm." My hand trembled as I wrote the words. "They offered food. Shelter. Said I could stay if I passed their 'initiation.'"

I passed the note to Rooster, watching his face carefully as he read. His expression remained neutral, though I saw his fingers tighten slightly on the edge of the paper.

I took the notepad back, my chest tightening as I forced myself to continue. Some things needed to be said—or written—no matter how painful.

"They held me down. Their leader bit me, hard enough to draw blood." My pencil dug into the paper, nearly tearing through it. "He said it marked me as theirs. Their property. When they passed out drunk later, I ran. I've been running ever since."

I couldn't look at Rooster as I handed him this note. Instead, I stared at the darkening garden, at the shadows stretching across the grass like elongated fingers.

The memory felt so fresh that I could almost feel phantom hands pinning my arms, the sharp pain as teeth broke skin, the helplessness of being claimed against my will.

The plants around us reacted to my distress—leaves curling inward, stems bending as if in shared pain. A nearby rosebush seemed to fold its thorns closer to its stems, as if offering protection.

When I finally gathered the courage to glance at Rooster, his face had transformed. The usual gentleness in his eyes had hardened into something dangerous—not directed at me, but at the memory of those who had hurt me. His bear was close to the surface, protective and fierce.

"That's not what a claiming bite is supposed to be," he said finally, his voice rough with emotion. "What they did to you wasn't claiming, Liam. It was assault. Violence. A true claiming is about connection, not control."

I nodded, having heard similar explanations from the omegas. But understanding something intellectually didn't erase fifteen years of visceral fear.

I wrote again, the words more hesitant now. "When you talked about biting me that night, all I could remember was being held down. Being marked as property. I couldn't separate the memory from your words."

Rooster's eyes softened as he read. "I should have explained it better," he said quietly. "I'm so sorry I scared you."

For several moments, we sat in silence as the last light faded from the sky. Stars began appearing overhead, pinpricks of silver against deepening blue. I could feel Rooster watching me, patient and steady, waiting for whatever came next without pushing.

The garden had fallen completely still, as if the plants themselves were holding their breath. This moment felt pivotal, though I wasn't entirely sure

why.

Perhaps it was because I'd shared my deepest fears with someone and they hadn't rejected me. Perhaps it was because, for the first time in fifteen years, I was sitting beside another person without planning my escape route. Or perhaps it was simply that Rooster's steady presence had created a space where I felt something dangerously close to safe.

Whatever the reason, I found myself reaching for the edge of my hood. My fingers trembled as they curled around the worn fabric that had been my shield against the world for so long.

Rooster noticed the movement, his eyes widening slightly in recognition of what I was considering. "You don't have to," he said softly. "Not for me. Not for anyone."

But I needed to. If we were to be mates in any sense of the word—if I was going to take this leap of trust—he deserved to see exactly what he was getting.

With a deep breath, I pulled back my hood completely for the first time since entering the compound. The cool evening air brushed against my exposed skin, making me hyperaware of every scar, every mark that told the story of my years alone.

I kept my eyes downcast at first, not ready to see his reaction. The longest scar ran from just below my left ear to my jawline—a jagged line where a man with a knife had tried to "teach me a lesson" for stealing from his grocery store when I was ten.

Smaller scars dotted my right temple and cheek—remnants of being pushed through a window during my escape from those boys and their "initiation."

My hair fell past my shoulders in uneven lengths, dirty blonde strands that I'd cut myself with whatever sharp edge I could find when it grew long enough to be grabbed. And my eyes—my lynx eyes—glowed golden in the fading light, marking me as inhuman even in this form.

I waited for the grimace of disgust, the subtle shifting away that would tell me I'd made a mistake. My heart pounded so hard I could feel it in my throat.

But when I finally found the courage to meet his gaze, Rooster was looking at me with an expression I couldn't immediately identify. Not pity, which would have sent me running. Not disgust, which would have broken

something inside me. No—his eyes held something closer to reverence, as if he were witnessing something precious rather than damaged.

"Thank you," he said simply, his voice thick with emotion. "For trusting me enough to show me."

He didn't reach for me, didn't try to touch the scars or comment on them. He simply maintained eye contact, his warm brown eyes steady on my golden ones.

The moment stretched between us, fragile but unbroken. I felt naked without my hood, exposed in a way that had nothing to do with physical clothing. Yet somehow, the vulnerability wasn't as terrifying as I'd expected. Rooster's acceptance wrapped around me like a blanket, warmer and more substantial than any fabric could be.

"Liam," he said finally, my name sounding like a prayer on his lips. "I need you to know something."

I tilted my head slightly, waiting.

"Being mates doesn't have to follow anyone else's rules," he continued, his words careful and measured. "We can build our bond without the traditional claiming. There are other ways to honor what we are to each other without recreating something that holds such terrible memories for you."

My eyes widened slightly. After everything the omegas had told me about the importance of the claiming bite in shifter culture, I hadn't expected Rooster to suggest bypassing it entirely.

"The bite is just one tradition," he explained, as if reading my thoughts. "But not all traditions work for everyone. What matters is what happens here—" he touched his own chest over his heart "—not what marks we wear on our skin."

He shifted on the bench, angling his body toward me without crowding me. "We'll find our own way," he said softly. "I would never hurt you, Liam. Not for tradition, not for anything."

The conviction in his voice reached something deep inside me—a place that had been frozen for so long I'd forgotten it existed. A place where hope might someday grow, if given enough time and care.

I nodded slowly, my golden eyes never leaving his face. For the first time since I was seven years old, I allowed myself to consider the possibility that not all connections led to pain. That perhaps, with this red-

haired cook with gentle hands and endless patience, I might find a kind of belonging I'd never dared to imagine.

Twilight had fully surrendered to evening, the last traces of sunset fading from the western horizon as stars claimed the darkening sky. I sat completely still, Rooster's words settling over me like a gentle rain after years of drought.

We'll find our own way. Not his way, not the traditional way, but our way—something new built between us that honored my boundaries while still acknowledging what fate had brought together.

The garden around us had changed as darkness fell. The plants' energy shifted from the busy productivity of daytime to something deeper, more contemplative. I felt their awareness like a soft hum beneath my skin, a chorus of silent witnesses to this moment between Rooster and me.

*Near-friends*, the clover whispered through subtle movements against my shoes. *Good-for-you. Heart-opening.*

I wouldn't have expected plants to understand human emotions, but they'd been my only companions for so long that perhaps they'd learned to interpret my feelings better than I could myself. They sensed the shift happening inside me—walls crumbling, possibilities emerging.

A memory surfaced—something Percy had shared during one of our quiet conversations in the kitchen. He'd been teaching me to use the journal he'd given me, showing me how to express complicated feelings through words and drawings when speaking felt impossible.

"There's a tradition among traumatized shifters," he'd said softly, his eyes fixed on the countertop rather than meeting mine. "Something that pre-dates the claiming bite. It's about... trust. The deepest kind."

He'd explained how shifters who had survived violence often couldn't bear the vulnerability of a claiming bite, at least not initially. So they'd developed another ritual—placing a potential mate's hand over their heart.

Hearts were difficult to protect, he'd said. They betrayed our true feelings, our fear, our hope. To allow someone to feel your heartbeat was to let them witness your most unguarded self.

"It's not something you offer lightly," Percy had warned. "But when words fail, sometimes it's the only way to say what matters."

Now, sitting beside Rooster in the garden, I understood what Percy had meant. Words—even written ones—couldn't fully express what I needed to say. The claiming bite was still too fraught with terrible memories, too

associated with violence and ownership. But there were other ways to acknowledge what was growing between us.

My hand trembled as I reached for Rooster's much larger one. His fingers were thick and calloused from years of cooking, knife scars marking his skin like a roadmap of his life's work. He remained perfectly still as I lifted his hand, his breath catching when he realized what I intended.

With deliberate slowness, I placed his palm flat against my chest, directly over my heart. The heat of his hand seeped through my thin shirt, warming my skin as he felt the rapid, uneven rhythm beneath. My heartbeat spoke the truth my voice couldn't—that I was terrified, yet choosing this connection despite my fear.

Rooster's eyes widened in recognition. He'd spent enough time with Percy and other traumatized shifters to understand exactly what this gesture meant, how rare it was, how much trust it required.

"Liam," he whispered, my name soft and reverent in the quiet garden.

My heart raced beneath his palm, but I didn't pull away. This was my choice—perhaps the first real choice I'd made since being abandoned at seven years old. Not running to survive, not hiding to avoid pain, but deliberately stepping toward something I wanted, despite the risk.

His fingers spread slightly against my chest, gentle but solid, as if to cradle the fragile trust I was placing in his hands. Neither of us moved for several heartbeats, the connection between us deepening in the stillness.

I reached for my notepad one more time, needing to make my intentions perfectly clear. The pencil moved with certainty now, no hesitation in my strokes.

"I choose you as my mate, but I need time for the rest."

I handed him the note, watching as he read it in the faint moonlight that had replaced the sunset. His expression softened, eyes crinkling at the corners as a smile spread across his bearded face.

"All the time you need," he promised, his deep voice barely above a whisper. "We have a lifetime, baby boy."

The nickname that had once made me nervous now felt like something precious between us—not diminishing, but acknowledging both my youthfulness and his protective nature. I found myself leaning slightly toward him, bridging the gap I'd maintained since sitting down.

Around us, the garden seemed to respond to our moment of connection. Leaves rustled in the still night air, branches bending subtly inward as if

drawing closer to witness. The wildflowers that had closed for the night seemed to turn toward us despite the absence of sunlight. Even the grass beneath the bench felt different—softer, more yielding.

The plants were celebrating, I realized with wonder. They'd sensed my isolation for so long, had been my only companions through years of lonely hiding. Now they were acknowledging this new connection, this tentative bridge being built between myself and another living being.

The final inches between us closed as I shifted on the bench, moving closer to Rooster's solid warmth. Our shoulders touched, the contact sending a tremor through me—not fear, but something deeper, more primal. Recognition, perhaps. The sense that something long broken was finding its matching piece.

Rooster's arm lifted slowly, giving me every opportunity to pull away. When I didn't, he settled it gently around my shoulders, the weight both strange and somehow familiar. I stiffened momentarily before allowing myself to lean into the embrace, my head coming to rest cautiously against his chest.

The steady thump of his heart beat beneath my ear, strong and reassuring. Nothing like the frantic, terrified pounding of my own. His scent surrounded me—kitchen spices, pine, something uniquely him that called to my lynx nature.

For the first time since childhood, I felt truly safe. Not the temporary safety of a good hiding spot or a locked door, but something deeper—the safety of being seen completely, scars and all, and still accepted. Still wanted.

Rooster's hand moved in slow, gentle circles on my upper arm, careful to avoid any motion that might feel like restraint. His touch was light, easy to break if I needed to flee. But for once, I didn't want to run.

The garden enfolded us in its quiet embrace, branches and vines forming a loose canopy that seemed to shield us from the outside world. In this moment, in this space, there were no hunters with tracking devices, no traumatic memories clawing at the edges of my mind. Just Rooster and me, and the beginning of something neither of us had quite believed possible.

My eyes drifted closed as exhaustion from the emotional revelations washed over me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd allowed myself to relax in another person's presence, to lower my guard enough that sleep seemed possible. Yet here, with Rooster's heart beating steadily beneath my

ear and his arm providing gentle protection, the impossible seemed within reach.

"Rest," he murmured, the word rumbling through his chest and into mine. "I'll keep watch."

And for the first time in fifteen years, I believed someone else when they promised to keep me safe. I let my breathing slow, my body growing heavier against his as the tension drained away.

The plants whispered their approval through subtle movements in the darkness, their ancient wisdom recognizing what my battered heart was just beginning to understand—that sometimes the bravest act of survival isn't running away, but allowing yourself to stay.

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## Chapter Twelve

~ Rooster ~

I gazed at Liam's profile in the fading sunset, still hardly believing he was here beside me, his slight weight leaning against my side. The garden had fallen silent around us, as if respecting this fragile moment of peace we'd carved out together.

His hood was still pulled back, exposing his face to the evening air—a trust so profound it made my chest ache. I'd waited decades to find my mate, had nearly given up hope of ever experiencing this connection, and now he sat beside me, his golden eyes reflecting the last crimson streaks of daylight.

"We should probably head inside soon," I murmured, though I made no move to disturb our position. "It's getting dark."

Liam didn't respond verbally—he never did—but he shifted slightly closer, his shoulder pressing more firmly against mine. The simple gesture spoke volumes from someone who normally maintained careful distance from others. My bear rumbled contentedly inside me, satisfied by this small evidence that our mate bond was slowly, cautiously developing.

The roses around us released their sweet perfume into the cooling night air, their scent intensifying as darkness fell. Above us, stars were beginning to appear one by one, pinpricks of silver against deepening blue. It was the kind of perfect moment that seemed suspended in time, where nothing existed outside our small corner of the garden.

Then everything changed.

The plants surrounding us suddenly jerked as if struck by an invisible hand. Rose stems whipped violently back and forth, leaves trembling and twisting. The grass beneath our feet rippled like water disturbed by a thrown stone.

Liam stiffened against me, his body going rigid. He pulled away abruptly, golden eyes wide with alarm as he stared at the thrashing plants.

"What the hell?" I muttered, scanning the garden for whatever had spooked the vegetation. There wasn't a hint of breeze to explain the chaotic movement. "Liam, what's—"

He was already on his knees, palm pressed flat against the soil, head bowed as if listening intently. His entire body went completely still, a stark contrast to the frenzied motion of the plants around us. I could see his chest

rising and falling with rapid breaths, tension radiating from every line of his slender frame.

When he looked up at me, the contentment that had softened his features just moments ago had been replaced with raw terror. His golden eyes were wide beneath the fringe of his dirty blonde hair, pupils contracted to pinpoints despite the gathering darkness.

"Liam?" I reached for him instinctively, concern flooding through me. "Baby boy, what's wrong?"

Instead of shrinking from my outstretched hand as he typically would, Liam lunged forward and grabbed my wrist. The contact was so unexpected, so contrary to his usual behavior, that I froze in shock.

His fingers wrapped around my forearm with surprising strength, his grip tight enough that I could feel his pulse hammering against my skin—or maybe that was my own.

He tugged urgently, pulling me to my feet with a force I wouldn't have believed his slender frame capable of. His free hand pointed frantically toward the clubhouse, his meaning unmistakable even without words: we needed to go. Now.

"What is it? What did you sense?" I asked as he pulled me forward, nearly stumbling in his haste. "Liam, talk to me—well, not talk, but—you know what I mean."

He didn't pause to write or gesture beyond another urgent tug on my arm. His eyes darted around the darkening yard, scanning the perimeter fence and tree line with the hyper-vigilance of prey sensing a predator's approach.

The notepad Percy had given him remained tucked in his pocket, untouched. Whatever he'd sensed through the plants, there wasn't time to explain it.

I'd never seen him like this before—not even during the warehouse attack. Then, he'd been cautious, calculating. Now, he radiated pure panic, an animal instinct to flee that overrode everything else. This was the raw survival mode that had kept him alive for fifteen years on the streets.

As we crossed the open space between the garden and the clubhouse, I noticed something that sent a chill down my spine. Liam was heading straight for the back door—the main entrance that led directly into the common room where most of the club would be gathered at this hour. Not

the kitchen's side door where I'd first brought him, not my private entrance that bypassed the crowded areas.

The main door. Where people would be.

Liam, who couldn't bear to be in enclosed spaces with multiple people, who panicked at the prospect of being trapped with nowhere to run, was deliberately charging toward the most populated area of the clubhouse.

"Shit," I muttered, realization dawning. "This is bad, isn't it?"

He nodded frantically without breaking stride, his golden eyes reflecting the security lights that had automatically clicked on around the compound as darkness fell. His hood had fallen back in our rush, exposing his scarred face and fearful expression.

We were halfway across the yard when Liam suddenly yanked me sideways, changing course so abruptly I nearly lost my balance. He dragged me behind a stack of empty oil drums, pressing his back against them and pulling me down into a crouch beside him.

His breathing was quick and shallow, his entire body trembling with tension as he peered around the edge of our makeshift shelter toward the fence line. I followed his gaze, but saw nothing unusual in the darkness beyond our compound.

After a tense moment, he tugged my arm again, indicating we should continue toward the clubhouse, but now on a different, less direct route. Understanding dawned—he was taking us on a path with more cover, avoiding open spaces where we'd be exposed.

"Someone's out there," I whispered, the statement rather than a question. "You're taking us the safest way in."

He nodded once, sharp and certain.

As we crept from shadow to shadow, I marveled at the transformation in my mate. Gone was the cowering, skittish man who flinched at sudden movements. In his place was someone focused and determined, moving with the silent grace of a predator—or more accurately, prey that had learned to outsmart predators through years of brutal necessity.

We reached the back door without incident, though Liam hesitated before opening it, his hand hovering over the knob as his head tilted slightly—listening again, but not with his ears. Whatever the plants were telling him caused another flash of alarm to cross his face.

He grabbed my wrist again, his fingers digging in almost painfully this time, and wrenched the door open. The warmth and noise from inside the

clubhouse—music playing, voices talking, the familiar sounds of our daily life—spilled out into the night.

Liam didn't hesitate. He pulled me through the doorway into the light and heat of the building, into the space he feared most, proving beyond any doubt that whatever threatened us from outside was far more terrifying than his dread of enclosed spaces and crowds.

As the door slammed shut behind us, I caught a final glimpse of the garden. In the harsh glare of the security lights, the plants had gone completely still, as if holding their breath. Waiting.

Something was coming. And only Liam knew what it was.

I nearly collided with Bug as Liam dragged me through the common room, my mate weaving between startled club members with surprising agility.

Bug's scarred face registered shock as we barreled past him, Liam's golden eyes fixed determinedly on Butch's office door at the far end of the hallway.

The usual evening card games and conversations stuttered to a halt as we passed, confused glances following our frantic progress through the clubhouse.

I'd never seen Liam voluntarily enter a crowded room before, let alone pull me through one with such urgency.

"Rooster? What the hell—" Treat called out from the bar, Butch's mate setting down a glass he'd been drying.

I shook my head, unable to explain what I didn't understand myself. Liam's grip on my wrist remained firm as he pulled me forward, his slender body coiled with tension.

When we reached Butch's office door, he didn't hesitate or knock—another unprecedented breach of his usual caution. He simply shoved it open and pulled me inside.

Butch looked up from behind his desk, irritation flashing across his features at the interruption. Bear and Gunner flanked him, the three of them hunched over what looked like building plans for the warehouse renovation.

The irritation quickly morphed to surprise as he registered Liam's presence—this feral, skittish man who normally avoided enclosed spaces and strangers had just willingly entered the inner sanctum of the club's leadership.

"What's going on?" Butch demanded, straightening up.

Instead of cowering or retreating to a corner as I'd half-expected, Liam released my wrist and lunged for Butch's desk. Before anyone could react, he'd snatched up a pencil and shoved aside the building plans, flipping them over to expose the blank side. His hands moved with feverish speed as he began to draw.

Bear took a step forward, his massive frame tensing protectively, but I held up a hand. "Wait," I said, watching Liam work. "Something's wrong. Let him show us."

In under a minute, Liam had sketched a detailed map of the compound and surrounding area. The accuracy was startling—every building precisely placed, the tree line rendered with perfect spatial awareness, even the hidden security cameras marked in their exact locations. It was the work of someone who'd spent months observing every inch of our territory.

"How does he know where all the cameras are?" Gunner muttered, moving closer to the desk.

Liam didn't acknowledge the question. His pencil continued moving rapidly across the paper, adding new elements to the drawing—small X marks forming a perimeter around the compound. Then he added crude, but recognizable human figures at each X, equipped with what were clearly meant to be weapons.

"What am I looking at, kid?" Butch asked, leaning over the drawing. "What are these?"

Liam gestured urgently around the perimeter of his drawing, then made a gun shape with his fingers, pointing it toward the center of the compound. His meaning was unmistakable.

"We're surrounded?" Bear growled, his voice dropping to that dangerous register that indicated his shifter was close to the surface.

Liam nodded emphatically, adding more details to the figures—tactical gear, communication devices, positions of concealment. His golden eyes flickered up to Butch's face, silently pleading to be believed.

"How do you know this?" Butch demanded, skepticism warring with concern in his expression.

I stepped forward. "He can talk to plants," I said, the words sounding absurd even to my own ears despite having witnessed Liam's ability firsthand. "They warned him. That's how he found all the surveillance devices yesterday."

Three pairs of eyes stared at me like I'd lost my mind.

"Plants," Gunner repeated flatly. "You're saying plants told him we're about to be attacked."

Liam's pencil moved faster, adding more figures to the drawing, arrows indicating movement patterns. He tapped the paper impatiently, golden eyes blazing with frustration at their hesitation.

"Look, I know how it sounds," I said. "But you saw how he found those bugs. Twelve of them, exactly where he said they'd be."

Butch's expression hardened. "Check the monitors," he ordered Gunner. "External cameras, full perimeter."

Gunner moved to the security console in the corner of the office, typing rapidly. Multiple screens flickered to life, showing different angles of the compound's exterior. At first, nothing seemed amiss—just the usual views of empty yard, fence line, and surrounding forest.

Then movement caught my eye on the northernmost camera. "There," I said, pointing.

A shadow detached from the tree line, moving with practiced stealth toward our fence. The figure was dressed in dark tactical gear, face obscured by what appeared to be night vision goggles.

"Jesus," Gunner muttered, fingers flying over the keyboard to cycle through more cameras. Each screen revealed similar figures—professional, coordinated, positioning themselves strategically around our perimeter.

"Son of a bitch," Butch breathed, moving to the console for a closer look. "The kid was right."

Liam had abandoned his drawing and moved to the security monitors. He pointed urgently at one particular figure who appeared to be directing the others. Even through the grainy night-vision feed, the expensive cut of his tactical gear and commanding posture were unmistakable.

"Victor Markus," Bear growled, recognition dawning on his face. "That sneaky piece of shit."

Butch's expression darkened as he turned to face us, years of leadership crystallizing into decisive action. "Bear, weapons. Now. Full distribution. Gunner, get everyone into position. Lockdown protocol." His orders came rapid-fire, each man moving immediately to comply.

Bear headed for the hidden gun safe behind a false panel in the wall, while Gunner grabbed the internal communication system.

"Attention," Gunner's voice echoed through the building-wide intercom. "This is not a drill. Hostile forces surrounding the compound. Lockdown

protocol. Repeat, lockdown protocol."

Throughout the clubhouse, I could hear the immediate response—furniture being moved, weapons being retrieved from hidden caches, those that couldn't fight being moved to safety, and my MC brothers taking up pre-assigned defensive positions.

We'd drilled for this, prepared for this, but the reality of it happening sent a cold weight settling in my stomach.

"Rooster," Butch said, breaking into my thoughts. "Get the kid somewhere safe, then report to the kitchen position."

But Liam wasn't interested in being taken to safety. He'd returned to his drawing, adding new elements with quick, sure strokes. When he finished, he tapped the paper insistently, drawing Butch's attention back to the desk.

The additions showed blind spots in our security setup—places where our cameras didn't quite overlap, where the fence could be breached without detection, where attackers could potentially slip through our defenses unnoticed.

"How the hell does he know all this?" Bear asked, returning with an armful of weapons.

"He's been watching us," I said, a strange pride blooming in my chest as I realized the full extent of Liam's knowledge. "For months. From outside. He's seen things we can't see from in here."

Butch studied the drawing with new respect, then looked at Liam directly. "These blind spots—they're accurate?"

Liam nodded firmly.

"Gunner, adjust the defensive positions based on this," Butch ordered, sliding the drawing across to his second-in-command. "Cover these gaps."

I watched in amazement as my usually cowering mate stepped forward, pointing to specific locations on the drawing and making quick gestures that somehow conveyed tactical suggestions. His slender body radiated confidence and focus, nothing like the skittish creature who'd been afraid to enter a room with more than one person.

This was a different Liam—not the traumatized man who flinched at sudden movements, but the survivor who'd kept himself alive against impossible odds for fifteen years. Someone who understood danger on an instinctual level, who'd developed skills I couldn't begin to comprehend.

Bear handed me a shotgun, his eyes never leaving Liam. "Your boy's full of surprises," he muttered.

"You have no idea," I replied, still processing the transformation I was witnessing.

"They're moving," Gunner announced from the monitors, tension threading his voice. "Approaching the fence line from all sides."

Liam's head snapped up, his golden eyes widening as he pointed urgently at the monitor showing the eastern perimeter—the side nearest to Butch's office. His hands moved in a frantic gesture I somehow understood instantly: They would breach there first.

Butch's phone rang, the sound startlingly normal amid the crisis unfolding around us. He checked the screen, his expression hardening further. "It's Victor," he said. "The bastard is calling me."

"What does he want?" Bear growled.

"Let's find out," Butch replied, hitting the speaker button as he answered. "You've got a lot of nerve, Markus."

Victor's smooth voice filled the office, the cultured tones at odds with the violence he was orchestrating. "Good evening, Mr. Cassidy. I believe we have some unfinished business to discuss."

The first shots came while Victor was mid-sentence, his smooth threat cutting off abruptly as bullets shattered the office windows. Glass exploded inward, sparkling deadly shards catching the overhead lights like twisted confetti before raining down on us.

I reacted on instinct, diving toward Liam to shield his smaller body with mine as gunfire peppered the walls, wood splintering and plaster dust filling the air.

The calm planning of moments before dissolved into chaos as more windows exploded, the sound of automatic weapons fire surrounding the compound from all sides.

"Take cover!" Butch bellowed, already moving toward the door, gun drawn. "Bear, east side! Gunner, coordinate from the central post!"

I felt Liam squirming beneath me, trying to break free from my protective hold. My bear roared inside me, demanding I keep my mate safe, shielded from the bullets tearing through the office. But Liam was unexpectedly strong, pushing against my chest with surprising force.

"Liam, stay down," I hissed, trying to keep him protected as another burst of gunfire sent a picture frame crashing from the wall.

But he wasn't cowering in fear as I'd expected. Instead, his golden eyes were clear and focused, his movements purposeful rather than panicked. He

wriggled free from my grasp and immediately grabbed my wrist—that same urgent grip he'd used in the garden—and pulled me toward the far corner of the office.

"We need to move," I protested, glancing toward the door where Butch and Gunner were already organizing a defensive position. "The others—"

Liam shook his head sharply, tugging more insistently. His face was set with determination, not fear, as he dragged me past the filing cabinet toward what appeared to be a solid wall.

"Liam, there's nowhere to—"

He reached the paneled wall and pressed his palm against it in a specific spot—not randomly, but with the confidence of someone who knew exactly what he was doing. To my utter shock, a section of the wall slid sideways, revealing a narrow, dark passage beyond.

"What the fuck?" I breathed, staring at the opening. "How did you—"

Another explosion rocked the building, closer this time, cutting off my question. Somewhere in the main room, someone shouted in pain. Bear roared—not a human sound, but the full-throated rage of his shifter form—followed by the distinctive sound of his shotgun.

Liam tugged me toward the hidden passage, his eyes imploring me to follow.

"Hold up," I said, resisting his pull. "Bear doesn't even know about this. How do you?"

Liam huffed in frustration, clearly unwilling to waste time explaining. He gestured urgently toward the dark opening, then pointed back toward the office door, making a gathering motion with his hands.

"You want to... get the others?" I guessed, trying to interpret his frantic gestures amid the chaos.

He nodded emphatically, then pointed down the passage and made a series of turns with his hand, indicating a path through whatever lay beyond.

"There's a way out," I realized. "Through here."

Another nod, even more urgent than before. A bullet thudded into the wall inches from where we stood, sending splinters of wood flying. Liam flinched, but didn't retreat, his eyes fixed determinedly on mine, waiting for my decision.

I found myself torn between conflicting instincts. My bear demanded I get my mate to safety, follow him into the dark passage and away from

danger. But fifteen years in the MC had ingrained another loyalty just as deep—to my brothers, my family, the men fighting to defend our home just outside that door.

"I need to help them," I said, my voice rough with emotion. "I can't just run, Liam."

His expression shifted, frustration giving way to a strange understanding. He released my wrist—the first time he'd let go since grabbing me in the garden—and stepped back toward the hidden passage. He pointed to himself, then down the dark corridor, then made a circular motion that ended with pointing back at me.

The meaning was clear enough: he would go ahead, then circle back for me.

"No," I said immediately, grabbing his arm before he could slip away. "We stay together."

The gunfire outside intensified, accompanied by shouts and the crash of furniture being overturned for cover. We were running out of time.

Liam's gaze darted between me and the passage, indecision clear on his scarred face. Then he seemed to make up his mind, grabbing my hand once more and pulling me firmly into the narrow corridor. As soon as we were through, he pressed another hidden mechanism that caused the panel to slide closed behind us, sealing us in darkness.

For a terrifying moment, I couldn't see anything. Then a faint phosphorescent glow appeared ahead—Liam's outline, moving confidently forward despite the lack of light. He tugged my hand, urging me to follow.

The passage was barely wide enough for my shoulders, forcing me to turn slightly sideways in spots. The ceiling hung low, making me duck my head repeatedly to avoid hitting it. But Liam moved through the cramped space with practiced ease, never hesitating at turns or low spots, his slender form perfectly adapted to this hidden route.

"How long have you known about this?" I whispered, my voice sounding unnaturally loud in the enclosed space.

He didn't answer, of course, just continued leading me deeper into what I was beginning to realize was an entire network of hidden passages built into the walls of our compound. The gunfire and shouting grew more muffled with each step, though I could still hear the battle raging outside.

The path turned sharply left, then right again, following what I imagined must be the interior structure of the building. The glowing outline of Liam

ahead of me was my only reference point in the darkness, his hand still gripping mine firmly as he navigated the maze with unwavering confidence.

I'd thought I knew every inch of this compound—every room, every closet, every hiding place. I'd lived here for nearly a decade, after all. But Liam had discovered secrets about our home that none of us had ever suspected existed.

How many hours had he spent watching us, learning our patterns, exploring our territory? The feral kitten I'd tried to coax with food for months had been far more aware of us than we'd ever been of him.

My gentle, traumatized mate was revealing himself to be something else entirely—a survivor with skills and knowledge I couldn't begin to comprehend. Someone who had not just existed on the margins of society for fifteen years, but had thrived there, developing instincts and abilities that most people couldn't imagine.

The passage widened slightly as we reached what felt like a junction point, branches leading in different directions. Liam paused, turning back to face me. In the faint phosphorescent glow, I could just make out his features—the determined set of his jaw, the intensity in his golden eyes.

He pointed down one branch of the passage, then gestured toward his ear and made a circling motion that encompassed the areas where I knew the main fighting was happening. Then he pointed down another passage and mimicked Bear's bulky shape.

"You know where they all are," I realized with sudden clarity. "You can get to them from here."

He nodded, his expression serious but confident.

"And these passages run throughout the entire compound?"

Another nod.

I stared at him in amazement as understanding dawned. "We can flank them. Move our people through these passages and hit Victor's team from behind."

A ghost of a smile crossed Liam's face—not amusement, but satisfaction that I'd grasped his plan. He tugged my hand again, pulling me toward the passage he'd indicated would lead to Bear's position.

The sound of gunfire was more distinct in this direction, growing louder as we moved forward. Liam slowed his pace, approaching what appeared to be another hidden panel. He pressed his ear against the wall, listening carefully before placing his hand on yet another concealed mechanism.

Before activating it, he turned to me, his golden eyes serious in the dim light. He pointed to himself, then to me, then made a protective gesture that encompassed an imaginary circle around us. The message couldn't have been clearer if he'd spoken it aloud: Stay close. Stay together.

For fifteen years, Liam had survived by running, hiding, keeping to the shadows. Now he was deliberately heading back toward danger, not away from it. For me. For the club. For the family he'd only just begun to consider his own.

I nodded, squeezing his hand in silent promise. "Together," I whispered.

As he prepared to open the panel, I realized that I'd been wrong about our relationship from the beginning. I'd seen myself as the protector, Liam as the vulnerable one needing shelter. But here in the darkness, guided by his sure hand through passages only he knew existed, I understood the truth. We would protect each other. And with Liam's hidden knowledge of the compound, we might just survive this night after all.

He pressed the mechanism, and the panel slid silently open.

# Chapter Thirteen

~ Liam ~

The panel slid open silently, revealing Bear's massive form crouched behind an overturned table, his shotgun aimed at the shattered window. Blood trickled from a cut on his forehead, his eyes wild with battle rage as he swung toward our sudden appearance.

Recognition flickered across his face a moment before he would have fired. I'd been watching these men for months from the shadows, learning their habits, their expressions, their triggers—knowledge that was now keeping us alive.

"What the fuck?" Bear's voice was a harsh whisper, disbelief etched across his features as his gaze darted between us and the wall that had just opened.

I didn't have time to explain—not that I would have spoken anyway. Another explosion rocked the building, closer this time, plaster dust raining down from the ceiling. I gestured urgently, pointing down the passage behind me, then toward the center of the building.

Rooster translated for me, his voice tight with tension. "He says there's a network of passages throughout the compound. We can use them to outflank Victor's men."

Bear hesitated only a moment before nodding, years of survival instinct overriding his questions. "Gunner's pinned down in the common room with three others," he said, checking his shotgun. "We need to get to them first."

I nodded, already calculating the fastest route through the passages. I'd spent countless nights exploring these hidden corridors while the club slept, mapping every inch of this territory that had become my reluctant home.

What they didn't know was that the original builder had been paranoid, constructing escape routes throughout the entire compound—passages I'd discovered by scent and sound long before I'd ever entered their doors.

Bullets peppered the wall above us, sending splinters flying. I grabbed Rooster's sleeve and pulled him back into the passage, motioning urgently for Bear to follow. He squeezed his bulk through the opening, the panel sliding closed behind him, sealing us in darkness once more.

I led them through the maze of passages, my lynx vision cutting through the gloom with ease. For me, this darkness was safety, comfort—the kind of space where I'd hidden from threats most of my life. But I could feel

Rooster's growing distress behind me, his breathing becoming shallow and quick. His hand, still clasped in mine, grew slick with sweat.

When we reached the junction that would take us toward the common room, I paused, listening. The walls here were thinner, letting in the sounds of gunfire and shouting. I could make out Gunner's voice barking orders, the position of Victor's men by their footfalls above and around us.

I turned to check on Rooster and found his face ashen in the faint light filtering through a crack in the wall. His chest heaved with rapid, shallow breaths, eyes wide with panic.

"Tight spaces," Bear muttered, his voice surprisingly gentle despite the circumstances. "Rooster's never done well with them."

I hadn't known this about my mate—this fear he carried. I'd spent my life seeking out precisely these kinds of spaces, the tighter and more hidden the better. But for Rooster, with his bear's need for open air and freedom, this cramped darkness was its own kind of prison.

Without thinking, I released his sleeve and found his hand instead, squeezing gently. His eyes found mine in the darkness, panic swimming in their depths. I placed my other hand over his heart, feeling its frantic rhythm beneath my palm. Then I took a slow, deliberate breath, holding his gaze, silently urging him to match my pace.

He tried, his breath shuddering as he fought against the panic. I kept my hand over his heart, my own pulse steady and calm, a counterpoint to his fear. Gradually, his breathing slowed, syncing with mine.

"I'm okay," he whispered, though the tremor in his voice suggested otherwise. "Just keep going. Don't worry about me."

But I did worry. This man who had left food for me when I was nothing but a shadow at the edge of his world, who had never demanded or pushed or grabbed—he mattered to me in ways I was only beginning to understand.

I tugged his hand gently, pulling him forward, but kept my pace slower now. When dirt showered down from a bullet impact above, I reached back instinctively, brushing the debris from his beard before it could catch in his eyes.

The passage narrowed further as we approached the common room. Bear's bulk became a serious impediment, his shoulders scraping both walls as he hunched forward, cursing under his breath. Rooster wasn't much smaller, both men forced to contort themselves to fit through spaces that accommodated my slender frame with ease.

"Jesus," Bear muttered as another shower of dirt cascaded down when bullets thudded into the ground above. "How much farther?"

I held up three fingers, then pointed forward. Three more turns and we'd reach the panel that opened into the storage closet adjacent to the common room.

"How the hell did you find these tunnels, kid?" Bear asked, his voice strained from the uncomfortable position. "We've been here for years and never knew they existed."

I couldn't answer with words, so I tapped my nose, then my ears. When he looked confused, I mimicked sniffing along the walls, then pressed my ear against the passage, showing him how I'd discovered the hollow spaces through senses honed by years of survival.

"Christ," Bear muttered, a new respect in his tone. "You've been watching us this whole time, haven't you? All those months when Rooster was trying to coax you in with food. You were already inside."

Not quite accurate, but close enough. I nodded, then continued forward, pulling Rooster along behind me. His breathing had steadied somewhat, though his hand still trembled in mine.

When we reached a particularly low section of tunnel, I guided his head down with gentle pressure on his shoulder, helping him navigate the space that was second nature to me but alien to him.

The final turn brought us to another panel. I pressed my ear against it, listening carefully for movement on the other side. The storage closet should be empty, but I'd learned long ago that assumptions led to death.

Satisfied it was clear, I located the mechanism and prepared to open it. But before I did, I turned back to Rooster, studying his face in the dim light. The panic had receded, replaced by determination, but I could still feel his discomfort in the tight space.

I reached up, brushing my fingers across his cheek in a gesture so intimate it surprised even me. His eyes widened slightly, understanding crossing his features. He nodded once, silently acknowledging my concern.

"I'm good," he whispered. "Lead on, baby boy."

The nickname that had once made me flinch now felt like a lifeline—a connection to something beyond the blood and gunfire waiting on the other side of this panel. I squeezed his hand once more, then turned to the mechanism, ready to rejoin the fight that threatened everything this man and his family had built.

Everything that, somehow, against all odds and my better judgment, I now found myself fighting to protect as well.

\* \* \* \*

The fresh air hit my lungs like a blessing as we emerged from the tunnel into the moonlit woods behind Gearhead's garage. After the suffocating closeness of the passage, the open space felt like freedom, though I knew better than most that open spaces meant exposure.

I crouched low automatically, scanning our surroundings with practiced efficiency. The others followed me out, Rooster's shoulders relaxing visibly as he escaped the confines of the tunnel, Bear and Gunner close behind, weapons ready.

Gunfire still echoed from the direction of the clubhouse, muzzle flashes illuminating windows like deadly lightning. I needed height, perspective—the advantage that had kept me alive for fifteen years.

Without hesitation, I moved to the nearest pine tree, a towering sentinel with branches spaced perfectly for climbing.

"Liam, what are you—" Rooster started, but fell silent as I leaped, catching the lowest branch with practiced ease.

My body remembered this, even if my conscious mind sometimes forgot what I was capable of. My muscles coiled and released, propelling me upward with fluid motions that felt as natural as breathing. Branch after branch, I ascended with lynx-like precision, barely disturbing the needles around me.

This was who I really was—not the cowering figure they'd first met, but a survivor who had learned to use every advantage, every skill my shifter nature afforded me.

From thirty feet up, the compound spread below me like a diorama. Victor's men had established a perimeter, their tactical positions revealing professional training.

Two groups had breached the main building from opposite sides. Three snipers had taken positions on neighboring rooftops, their rifles trained on exit points. A command vehicle idled behind the tree line to the east—Victor's position, I'd bet my life on it.

More concerning were the four figures moving toward Gearhead's garage—directly where we'd emerged. They'd be on us in minutes.

I descended even faster than I'd climbed, dropping the last ten feet to land silently beside Rooster. His eyes widened at my approach, clearly startled by how quickly I'd moved.

I pressed my finger to my lips, then pointed in the direction of the approaching men, holding up four fingers. Bear nodded grimly, understanding immediately. I gestured for them all to stay low, then indicated a path that would take us deeper into the woods, away from the immediate threat.

We'd barely made it twenty yards when a voice called out behind us.

"Gunner! Rooster!"

Butch appeared from between the trees, half-carrying a club member whose leg was soaked with blood. Three more injured men followed, supported by Percy and Treat.

"The fuckers hit us from all sides," Butch growled, lowering the wounded man to the ground. "They knew exactly where our defenses were weakest."

Bear moved forward. "How many still inside?"

"Maybe ten of ours, holding the central rooms," Butch answered, his face grim in the moonlight. "Victor's on a goddamn walkie giving orders. This isn't some random attack—it's a fucking military operation."

I glanced back toward where I'd spotted the approaching figures. We had minutes, maybe less.

Butch seemed to read my concern. "We need to split up," he said decisively. "I'll take the wounded to Henry's clinic—they need medical attention now. You three follow the kid." He nodded toward me. "He seems to know what he's doing."

Rooster looked at me, a question in his eyes. I nodded once, though anxiety churned in my stomach. What I was about to show them was my most closely guarded secret—the network I'd spent months building around their territory.

I hesitated only briefly before leading them deeper into the forest, away from the approaching threat. The others followed silently, trusting me despite having no reason to. The weight of that trust pressed against my chest like a physical thing.

After ten minutes of careful navigation through the underbrush, I brought them to the first of my observation posts—a hollow log positioned with precise sightlines to the eastern approach of the compound.

To casual observers, it looked like a natural deadfall. But I'd carefully hollowed it to create a sheltered viewpoint, complete with a small cache of supplies hidden in a waterproof compartment beneath.

Bear crouched to examine it, his massive frame dwarfing my carefully constructed hiding place. "What the hell?" he muttered, running his fingers along the smooth interior where I'd painstakingly carved away the rot.

I didn't wait for further questions, just continued leading them through my network. Twenty yards north was a platform nestled in the branches of an ancient oak, positioned to overlook the main road. Beyond that, a small depression beneath a rock outcropping that gave clear views of the clubhouse's southern exposure.

At each location, I'd stashed essentials—water, protein bars, a first aid kit, matches sealed in wax. Not enough to live on permanently, but sufficient for surveillance or emergency retreat.

"Jesus Christ," Bear muttered as he examined the tree platform. "This is professional-grade work. Military level observation post." He turned to stare at me with new eyes. "Who the hell taught you to build something like this?"

I tapped my temple. Necessity. Survival. The best teacher I'd ever had.

Gunner circled the platform, his tactician's mind clearly assessing its strategic value. "How many of these do you have?"

I held up both hands, fingers spread. Ten. Ten observation posts surrounding their compound, positioned for optimal surveillance of every approach.

"How long?" Rooster asked quietly, his eyes meeting mine. "How long have you been watching us?"

I hesitated, then held up seven fingers, followed by a circular motion. Seven months. Longer than any of them had realized. Since before Rooster had first noticed me scavenging from their dumpsters, before he'd started leaving food at the picnic table.

"Seven months," Rooster repeated, his voice barely above a whisper. Understanding dawned on his face. "That's why you knew about the surveillance devices. Why you could find them all. You've been..." He trailed off, struggling to find the words.

"You've been protecting us," Bear finished for him, incredulity coloring his tone. "All this time, we thought you were just some homeless kid

Rooster was feeding. But you've been watching our perimeter, tracking threats."

I shrugged uncomfortably under their stares. It hadn't been entirely selfless. Their territory had become my territory by proximity. Their enemies potentially mine. Protecting them had been protecting myself.

But even I knew that wasn't the whole truth.

The four men stood silent around me, the hardened bikers studying me with new eyes. In their expressions I saw something I hadn't expected—respect. Not pity, not the cautious concern they'd shown the traumatized mute who flinched at sudden movements. But genuine respect for a fellow survivor, a watcher, a protector.

"Well, I'll be damned," Gunner said finally, breaking the silence. "Looks like our stray cat's got some serious claws."

Rooster's hand found my shoulder, the weight of it warm and steadying. I didn't flinch away from his touch this time. Something had shifted between us—between all of us—in the revelation of my secret surveillance network. I wasn't just Rooster's damaged mate anymore. I was someone with skills they needed, knowledge they valued.

For the first time in fifteen years, I felt like I might belong somewhere. And it had taken an attack to reveal it.

The distant crack of gunfire reminded us that revelations wouldn't keep us alive. We had work to do.

I led them higher up the ridge to my most strategic observation post, a natural depression between two boulders that offered perfect sightlines to the entire compound while remaining virtually invisible from below.

The moon cast enough light for the others to follow my silent steps, though I doubted they could appreciate just how carefully I'd selected this location—how I'd spent days testing visibility angles, calculating blind spots, ensuring multiple escape routes. This wasn't just another hiding place. This was my command center.

"Down," I mouthed silently, gesturing for them to crouch as we approached the edge of the outcropping. They obeyed immediately, veterans of enough combat to recognize the authority in my movements.

Below us, the clubhouse burned in sections, tactical flashlights cutting through smoke as Victor's men methodically cleared rooms. Their movements betrayed professional training—coordinated, disciplined, ruthlessly efficient.

I reached for a stick nearby, then cleared a patch of dirt between us. Without hesitation, I began to draw, my hands moving with practiced precision. First the clubhouse, each window and door placed exactly where it stood. Then the garage, the fence line, the tree line.

My fingers worked quickly, adding details most would overlook—the slight depression near the east gate, the drainage ditch that offered concealed approach from the north, the blind spot behind the propane tank.

Bear leaned forward, his breath catching as I marked Victor's team positions with X's—twelve men total, divided into four three-man teams. I indicated their movement patterns with arrows, showing how they'd systematically herded the MC members toward the central rooms while cutting off escape routes.

"Jesus Christ," Gunner whispered, studying my dirt map with growing astonishment. "This is Special Forces level tactical analysis. How the hell do you—"

I held up my hand for silence, continuing to add details. I marked their likely extraction routes, the command vehicle's position, the snipers' fields of fire. Every detail rendered with military precision, informed by years of watching similar operations unfold. Years of being the invisible observer as communities like this one were methodically destroyed.

When I finished, I sat back on my heels, giving them time to absorb what I'd drawn. They crowded around the dirt map, their expressions shifting from confusion to grudging respect as they recognized the accuracy of my assessment.

"This is how they knew our blind spots," Bear muttered. "They've been planning this for months."

Rooster's eyes met mine across the drawing. "But why? What do they want with us?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small, weathered notebook I carried everywhere—the one I'd had long before Percy's gift. Its pages were filled with observations, maps, sketches compiled over years of silent witness. I flipped to a specific page and held it out.

Gunner took it carefully, angling it toward the moonlight. His eyes widened as he studied my detailed sketch of another compound—a wolf shifter pack in Wyoming I'd stumbled across two years ago.

The drawing showed an attack pattern identical to what was happening below us now—same team formations, same approach vectors, same

systematic sweep.

"This... this is the same tactical approach," Gunner said, his voice tense. "Same team composition."

I nodded, flipping to another page—a fox shifter community in Nevada. Then another—bear shifters in northern California. Three separate attacks, months apart, hundreds of miles distant. All executed with the same precision, the same methodology.

But it was the fourth drawing that made Bear curse under his breath. My sketch showed the aftermath—bodies arranged in clinical rows, blood samples being taken, distinctive markers indicating scientific documentation rather than simple slaughter.

"This isn't just an attack," Bear whispered, horrified understanding dawning on his face. "It's a collection. A harvest."

I nodded grimly, then pulled out my pencil and wrote in the margin of the page: *"No survivors found in previous attacks. All bodies removed after documentation. Special interest in rare shifter types."*

"Like Preston Markus's experiments," Rooster said, the connection clicking into place. "This is the same operation, just under Victor now."

I flipped to a blank page and wrote rapidly, my pencil nearly tearing the paper with urgency: *"This isn't random. It's systematic extermination of shifters. Been tracking for years. You're the only ones who fed me. Only ones I warned."*

The words hung in the air between us, heavy with implication. Not just that I'd witnessed other attacks—but that I'd chosen not to intervene, to remain hidden and survive. Until now. Until them.

Rooster read the words aloud softly, his voice catching on the final sentence. "Only ones I warned." He looked at me, understanding dawning in his eyes. "Because we were the first ones who treated you like a person instead of a threat."

I dropped my gaze, uncomfortable with the raw gratitude in his expression. It hadn't been just that. There were practical considerations—this group was larger, better armed, with underground passages I could leverage. My chances of successful intervention were higher. My risk of capture lower.

But even as I thought it, I knew it wasn't entirely true. Something had shifted when Rooster had first left that plate of food on the picnic table. Something I hadn't experienced in fifteen years of solitary survival.

Something that had made me risk exposure to warn them about Victor's surveillance devices. Something that had pulled me back to the compound after I'd fled in terror at the mention of a claiming bite.

Something that felt dangerously close to caring.

"How long have you been tracking these attacks?" Gunner asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

I held up five fingers.

"Five years? You've been following these bastards across the country for five years?" The incredulity in his voice was matched by the new respect in his eyes. "Why?"

I couldn't easily explain that answer without speaking, and I wasn't ready to break my silence. How could I tell them that after watching the first attack—after seeing the clinical efficiency with which the shifters were cataloged, sampled, and removed—I'd recognized a pattern that terrified me to my core? That I'd been marked as "specimen of interest" once before, barely escaping with my life? That I'd survived by becoming the watcher, staying one step ahead of those who would cage me?

Instead, I just tapped my chest, then pointed to my golden lynx eyes. Because I was like them. Because it could have been me.

"All this time," Bear muttered, shaking his head. "We thought we were watching out for you, but you've been the one protecting us."

Below us, Victor's men continued their methodical search of the compound. One team had reached the garage, flashlight beams sweeping through the windows. Another approached the tree line where our tunnel had emerged. They were thorough, professional—and getting closer to our position with every passing minute.

The weight of Rooster's hand settled on my shoulder, warm and steady. I didn't flinch away this time, didn't tense at the contact. Instead, I found myself leaning slightly into his touch, accepting the connection it offered.

"What happens now?" Gunner asked, his eyes fixed on the destruction below.

I looked at these men—these fighters who had unknowingly given me something worth fighting for after fifteen years of running—and made my decision. With my pencil, I wrote one more message in my notebook, the words stark against the page: *"Now we hunt the hunters."*

Rooster's hand tightened on my shoulder, a silent promise of protection and partnership. As Victor's men moved through the compound below us,

searching for prey that had slipped through their fingers, I felt something unfamiliar settle in my chest—a fierce determination that went beyond mere survival.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't just trying to stay alive. I was fighting to protect something that mattered. Something that might, against all odds, be worth the risk of being seen.

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## Chapter Fourteen

~ Liam ~

Bear studied my scribbled message with narrowed eyes, his massive shoulders tensing as he read the words. "Hunt the hunters," he repeated, a dismissive grunt following the words. He looked down at me, skepticism radiating from his entire body. "No offense, kid, but what exactly do you know about hunting men? You've spent fifteen years hiding from them."

I didn't blame him for his doubt. In his eyes, I was still the feral creature who'd been scavenging from their dumpsters, the broken thing who flinched at sudden movements and couldn't—or wouldn't—speak. He had no way of knowing that surviving alone for fifteen years hadn't just taught me how to hide. It had taught me how to hunt.

I moved away from the edge of the outcropping, finding a fresh patch of dirt in the moonlight. The earth was cool beneath my knees as I knelt, my fingers already moving to clear away small rocks and twigs. I sensed rather than saw the others gathering around me, their shadows falling across the makeshift canvas I was creating.

The compound spread below us like a battlefield chess board. Victor's men were still methodically searching the buildings, their tactical lights cutting through smoke and darkness.

I let my eyes unfocus slightly, seeing beyond what was happening now to what could happen—what I could make happen—if these men trusted me enough to follow my lead.

I dipped my finger into the soil and began to draw a more detailed map than the one I had drawn before.

First, the terrain—a precise topographical map emerging from quick, practiced strokes. The clubhouse and outbuildings. The access road. The fence line. The natural features I'd catalogued during months of observation. Depressions. Rises. The drainage ditch that offered concealed approach from the north. The fallen log that created a natural blind on the western edge.

Years of surveillance had taught me that victory often hinged on these details—the aspects of terrain most people overlooked.

"What is he..." Gunner started, but Rooster hushed him with a raised hand.

Bear watched with crossed arms as my fingers continued their dance across the dirt. I added Victor's men next, marking their current positions with X's, then drew arrows indicating their most likely movement patterns based on their training level and previous operations I'd witnessed.

Bear's posture shifted subtly. The dismissive tension in his shoulders gave way to something closer to curiosity.

I kept working.

With my free hand, I gestured for Bear's knife. He hesitated only a moment before handing it over. I used the tip to draw four clear circles at strategic points surrounding Victor's projected positions.

I pointed to the first circle, then to Bear, then traced a path through the underbrush to a granite outcropping I'd discovered months ago. The natural formation created a perfect firing position—high ground with multiple sight lines, but sufficient cover for someone of Bear's bulk.

"There?" Bear asked, leaning closer to study the position I'd indicated. "That doesn't give me a clean shot at their command vehicle."

I shook my head, adding Victor's likely extraction routes to the map. Then I drew a series of figures fleeing toward the road—right past Bear's position. I mimed a shotgun blast, then pointed to the narrowest part of the path where the undergrowth would funnel them directly into his line of fire.

Understanding dawned on his face. "You want me to let them get past me. Catch them in retreat."

I nodded, then continued marking positions. Gunner's circle appeared near a cluster of mature pines I'd used as a surveillance post in early spring. The positioning would give him clear sight of the main approach while providing multiple angles to shift his fire as needed.

I drew small figures representing the rest of Victor's team, adding arrows to show how they'd likely scatter once they realized they were under attack. Then I made a sweeping gesture with my hand before pointing to Gunner's position.

"I can cover three directions from there," Gunner observed, his tactical mind immediately grasping what I was showing him. "Cut off their retreat to the vehicles."

My final circle was for Rooster, placed at a seemingly insignificant point halfway between the other two positions. It wasn't until I added the projected escape routes of Victor's men that the strategic value of the

position became clear. Anyone fleeing Bear's ambush would run directly into Rooster's waiting arms.

"Jesus Christ," Bear muttered, his eyes narrowed as he studied the completed map. "You've actually thought this through."

I reached for my pencil and notebook, scribbling quickly before turning it for them to see: *"5 years tracking these teams. Same tactics, same extraction plans. Predictable."*

Bear's skepticism was visibly eroding as he examined the positions I'd marked. He pointed to his assigned location with a thick finger. "This spot gives me cover from all sides," he said, less a question than a realization.

I nodded, then gestured to his broad shoulders. The granite formation was one of the few positions in the area that would accommodate his size while still providing adequate protection. I'd sheltered there once during a thunderstorm, noting how the rock face deflected sound and shielded me from view on three sides.

"And this cluster of pines," Gunner added, indicating his position. "Multiple angles, easy repositioning between them." His eyes met mine with new respect. "You picked positions based on our individual strengths."

I hadn't just assigned positions randomly. I'd watched these men for months, learning their habits, their preferences, how they moved in combat situations. Bear relied on raw power and frontal assault. Gunner was more methodical, preferring to control the battlefield through superior positioning. And Rooster...

I turned to my mate, pointing to his circle on the map, then miming someone walking into an unexpected obstacle. What I couldn't explain in words was that I'd chosen his position specifically because it played to his protective instincts. Anyone fleeing in that direction would be running blindly, panicked—less of a threat to Rooster than a head-on confrontation would be.

"Ambush position," Rooster said softly, understanding crossing his features. "You want me to catch anyone who gets past the others."

I nodded, relieved he understood. Then I added one final mark to the map—a small 'X' in a dense patch of underbrush with clear sightlines to all three of their positions. I pointed to myself, then to the X.

"No," Rooster said immediately, shaking his head. "You're not putting yourself in the middle of this."

I fixed him with a steady gaze, then deliberately wrote in my notebook: *"Need coordinator. Someone who can signal each position when to move."*

"The kid's right," Bear said, his voice gruff but tinged with something that sounded remarkably like respect. "We need someone coordinating our movements or we'll just end up shooting at shadows." He studied me with narrowed eyes. "You really think this will work?"

I nodded once, confident in my assessment. These weren't random assignments. They were calculated positions based on months of observation, years of survival instinct, and a lifetime of learning to read terrain like others read books.

Bear held my gaze for a long moment, his expression unreadable in the moonlight. Then, with a decisive nod, he turned to the others. "Let's gear up. You heard the kid. We've got positions to take."

As they moved to gather their weapons, Bear paused beside me, his massive frame blocking out the moonlight for a moment. "Not bad for a guy who doesn't talk," he muttered, the closest thing to a compliment I'd ever heard from him.

I didn't respond. Didn't need to. The dirt map between us said everything necessary—that while they had been watching me, I had been watching everything. Learning. Planning. Preparing for a moment I'd hoped would never come, but knew eventually would.

Rooster caught my eye from where he was checking his weapon, a question in his gaze. I gave him a small nod of reassurance. This wasn't my first time facing hunters in the night. It was just the first time I wouldn't be facing them alone.

I felt the notebook slip from my pocket before I heard it hit the ground. The sound of paper hitting dirt was barely audible, but to me it was like a gunshot—fifteen years of secrets splayed open on the forest floor.

Before I could react, Rooster had already bent to retrieve it, his eyes catching on the pages that had fallen open to my detailed surveillance notes from two months ago. I froze, watching his expression shift from curiosity to shock as he realized what he was looking at.

"What's this?" he murmured, his fingers hovering over the meticulously sketched patrol routes I'd documented around the compound.

My heart hammered against my ribs. That notebook contained everything—every observation, every pattern, every weakness I'd spotted in both the MC's defenses and their enemies' tactics. It was my survival

manual, my insurance policy, my most private thoughts rendered in drawings and sparse notations.

I could have snatched it back. Part of me wanted to. The part that had survived by keeping secrets, by letting no one see the full extent of what I knew or what I could do. But another part—the part that had placed Rooster's hand over my heart in the garden—hesitated.

Rooster looked up at me, a question in his eyes, seeking permission.

I gave a small nod, my throat tight with an emotion I couldn't name.

He turned the page slowly, revealing my documentation of Victor's men from their first appearance three months ago. I'd sketched their faces with precise detail—the scar on the tallest one's jaw, the distinctive gait of the radio operator, the left-handed draw of their leader.

Beside each figure, I'd noted their weapons, their communication patterns, even small behavioral habits that might be exploited in combat.

"Jesus," Rooster whispered, turning another page to find a hand-drawn map of their vehicle placements during their surveillance operations. I'd recorded times, dates, shift changes—building a complete picture of their operational security through weeks of patient observation.

Bear and Gunner moved closer, drawn by Rooster's reaction.

"What is it?" Gunner asked, peering over Rooster's shoulder.

"It's... it's everything," Rooster replied, his voice hushed with something like reverence. "Everything about Victor's operation. Details I wouldn't have noticed if I'd been staring right at them."

Bear let out a low whistle as Rooster turned to pages documenting the surveillance devices we'd dug up yesterday. I'd sketched their internal components, noted their broadcast frequencies based on similar devices I'd examined in other locations.

My fingers twitched at my sides, fighting the urge to grab the notebook and run. I'd never allowed anyone this deep into my private world—this glimpse of how I'd survived when everyone else had perished.

Rooster must have sensed my discomfort because he looked up, his eyes softening. "This is incredible, Liam," he said quietly. "You've been building a case against them for months."

I shook my head slightly. Not months. Years.

As if hearing my unspoken correction, Rooster turned more pages, moving deeper into the notebook's history. His breath caught as he found

the older entries—the ones documenting the destruction of other shifter communities.

Wyoming. The wolf pack. Twelve members, all taken in a night raid similar to the one happening below us now. I'd sketched the aftermath from my hiding place in a lightning-struck tree—the methodical collection of blood samples, the tagging of bodies like specimens, the careful documentation of each shifter's type before they were loaded into unmarked vans.

Nevada. The fox shifter family. Seven of them, from elderly grandmother to infant. I'd watched from a distant hill, unable to intervene as the same team executed the same playbook. Same tactical approach, same equipment, same clinical aftermath.

Northern California. The bear shifter community living deep in the forest. Fifteen members who thought their isolation protected them. I'd tracked the hunting team for days before they struck, documenting their preparations while staying just out of their detection range.

Each attack meticulously documented with dates, locations, tactical diagrams, and the most damning detail of all—the survivor counts that dwindled to zero as the operation refined its methods.

Rooster looked up from the pages, his face pale in the moonlight. "You've been tracking them across the country," he said. "All this time, you've been..." He seemed at a loss for words.

Gunner leaned in, his tactician's mind quickly processing what he was seeing. "These are professional after-action reports," he said. "Military grade intelligence gathering." His eyes met mine with new respect. "Where did you learn to do this?"

I tapped my temple. Nowhere. Everywhere. Survival didn't come with formal training—only brutal lessons that killed you if you failed to learn them.

Bear's expression had transformed completely from the skepticism he'd shown earlier. He studied the pages with the somber recognition of someone who understood exactly what he was seeing—a war journal.

"You're the only survivor," he said quietly. "From any of these attacks."

I nodded once, the weight of that truth settling heavily between us. I hadn't just been running all these years. I'd been witnessing, documenting, carrying the evidence of systematic extermination that no one else had lived to report.

Rooster turned to the final pages—my observations of the Soldiers of Fortune MC from the first day I'd spotted them several months ago. My initial assessment had been clinical, detached: strengths, weaknesses, threat level, potential value as temporary territory.

But as the pages progressed, something had changed in my notations. The day Rooster first left food on the picnic table was marked with a simple asterisk. The entries after that contained more details about him specifically—his routines, his habits, the way he never looked directly at the woods where I was hiding when he left the food, giving me the dignity of privacy even in his act of charity.

I felt heat rise to my face as Rooster lingered on these pages. They revealed more than I'd intended anyone to see—the gradual shift from observing potential threats to something far more personal.

I reached for the notebook and Rooster handed it back without hesitation. Our fingers brushed during the exchange, the brief contact sending a familiar warmth through my hand.

Flipping to a clean page, I wrote quickly: *"They always follow the same pattern. First surveillance, then infiltration, then elimination. We're at stage two."*

I held the page up for all of them to see, watching their expressions harden as the full implications sank in.

"Then we don't have much time," Gunner said, checking his weapon one final time.

Bear nodded grimly. "Let's move. Everyone knows their positions."

As they slipped into the shadows, moving toward the locations I'd designated on my dirt map, Rooster lingered behind. His eyes held mine for a long moment, filled with questions he didn't voice.

"Thank you," he said simply. "For trusting us with this."

I ducked my head, uncomfortable with his gratitude. It wasn't trust that had made me start documenting Victor's operation. It was survival. Pure, simple, cold-blooded survival.

But as I watched him move toward his assigned position, I had to acknowledge that something had changed. My reasons for being here, now, weren't the same as they'd been when I'd first started tracking these hunters years ago.

I hesitated at the edge of the clearing, my body instinctively pulling toward the deepest shadows, the safest hiding places. Fifteen years of

conditioning screamed at me to retreat, to find a high, secure position and observe from a distance. To document without engaging. To survive.

But my eyes fixed on Rooster's receding form as he moved silently through the underbrush. On Bear's massive shadow as he circled toward the granite outcropping. On Gunner's tactical precision as he slipped between the pines.

These men weren't just subjects in my observation journal anymore. They weren't just a temporary territory to exploit for food and protection before moving on. They were something I hadn't allowed myself in fifteen years of running.

They were my reason to stop.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped away from the protective shadows and moved toward the small X I'd marked for myself. Not hiding. Not running. For the first time since I was seven years old, I was standing my ground.

I crouched in the underbrush, my body perfectly still as I watched Victor's men emerge from the tree line. They moved with the confident precision of predators who'd never been prey, their tactical formation spread in a standard sweep pattern. Moonlight glinted off their weapons as they advanced toward our positions, unaware they were walking into a trap I'd spent fifteen years perfecting.

My fingers tightened around the small stone I'd picked up—my signal to the others when the time was right. Three heartbeats. Two. One. I hurled the stone against the metal shed to my right, the sharp clang echoing through the night like a starter's pistol.

The reaction was immediate. Victor's point man halted, signaling the others with a raised fist. They froze in textbook formation, weapons raised, scanning for the source of the noise.

Exactly as I'd predicted.

From his position on the granite outcropping, Bear made his move. His massive form emerged from shadow like a nightmare given flesh, shotgun thundering in the still night air. The first blast caught Victor's rear guard squarely in the chest, sending him sprawling backward in a spray of blood and tactical gear.

Before the others could react, Gunner opened fire from the pine cluster, his shots precisely placed to drive them toward the funnel point I'd identified in my dirt map. Three short bursts, each one finding its target—

not killing shots, but disabling ones that forced Victor's men to seek cover in the only direction available to them.

My heartbeat remained steady as I watched my plan unfold. Years of observation had taught me how these teams operated, their training so consistent it had become predictable. They broke left under pressure, always left, regrouping to establish a defensive position before counterattack.

Exactly where Rooster waited.

Two of Victor's men stumbled into his position, already wounded from Gunner's fire. Rooster emerged from the shadows like an avenging spirit, his attack brutally efficient. No wasted movement, no hesitation.

I'd never seen this side of him before—the trained fighter beneath the gentle cook's exterior. He took both men down in seconds, leaving them unconscious, but alive for questioning later.

Victor's remaining forces scattered, their coordinated attack dissolving into chaos as our ambush claimed half their team in the opening moments. I allowed myself a moment of grim satisfaction. The hunters had become the hunted, their carefully planned operation unraveling before my eyes.

But victory evaporated in an instant when I spotted movement where there should have been none.

A slender figure darted between trees at the edge of the clearing—too small to be one of Victor's men, moving with the distinctive quick gait of a fox shifter. My enhanced vision caught a flash of his face in the moonlight. Young. Barely more than a teenager. Wearing an MC prospect cut that hung too large on his narrow shoulders.

What the hell was he doing here?

The kid was moving parallel to the fight, clearly trying to circle behind Bear's position—perhaps thinking he could help, maybe prove himself worthy of full membership.

Instead, he was running directly into the path of Victor's communications specialist, who had separated from the main group during the initial attack.

I tensed, ready to signal a warning, but it was already too late. The operator's head snapped up, spotting the prospect's movement. In three swift strides, he closed the distance between them, grabbing the young shifter before he could react.

The knife appeared at the prospect's throat, steel gleaming dully in the moonlight. The operator dragged him into the clearing, using the kid's body as a shield while backing toward the tree line.

"Drop your weapons!" he shouted, his voice carrying across the suddenly silent battlefield. "Drop them now or the kid dies!"

The night went still. Bear and Gunner had emerged from their positions, weapons trained on the operator, but unable to fire without risking the prospect's life. Rooster appeared at the edge of the clearing, his face tight with restrained fury.

"Let him go," Bear growled, his massive frame tensed to spring despite the impossible distance between them. "He's just a kid. He's not part of this."

The operator's laugh was hollow. "He made himself part of it when he followed you out here." The knife pressed tighter against the prospect's throat, drawing a thin line of blood. The kid's eyes were wide with terror, his body trembling against his captor's grip. "Now drop the weapons or I start cutting deeper."

From my hidden position, I assessed the situation with the cold clarity survival had taught me. The angles were wrong. Bear couldn't get a clean shot. Gunner was too far to the left. Rooster was unarmed, having lost his weapon in the close-quarters fight.

And I was safe. Hidden. Unnoticed.

I could stay that way. Could let this play out, document another tragedy in my notebook, and disappear before dawn. It's what I'd done five times before. It's how I'd stayed alive for fifteen years while others died.

Run. Hide. Survive. The mantra that had kept me breathing when everyone else stopped.

The prospect whimpered as the knife drew another bead of blood. His eyes—green with golden flecks, the eyes of a young fox shifter—darted frantically between the MC members, silently pleading for help.

"Five seconds," the operator announced, his voice steady despite the chaotic situation. Professional. Trained. Dangerous. "Four. Three..."

My hand moved to my chest, touching the spot where Rooster's palm had rested in the garden. The place where my heart had spoken when my voice couldn't. Run. Hide. Survive.

But not this time.

I closed my eyes, surrendering to the change I'd been fighting every day of my life. My bones cracked and reformed, muscles stretching and compressing, skin yielding to fur in a cascade of agony that rivaled anything I had ever felt before. The transformation was faster than I expected—my body responding to the urgent need with primal efficiency.

When I opened my eyes again, the world had shifted into the sharper, scent-driven perspective of my lynx form. Every sound magnified, every movement crystallized into potential threat or prey. The operator's heartbeat was a thunder in my ears, his sweat-fear-determination scent a beacon in the night.

I launched from the underbrush without warning, my lynx body a tawny blur of muscle and purpose. The operator had just enough time to register the movement before I was on him, my weight hitting his chest as my claws found purchase in tactical fabric and the flesh beneath.

The knife clattered to the ground as I drove him backward, my teeth bared inches from his throat. His training abandoned him in the face of primal fear—the ancient terror of prey caught by predator. He screamed, the sound cutting through the night as my claws dug deeper, pinning him to the forest floor.

Part of me—the wild part, the part that had been caged for too long—wanted to tear into his exposed throat. To taste the hot copper of his life and end the threat permanently. But the human part, the part that had placed Rooster's hand over my heart, held back.

I wasn't a killer. Even now, even after everything, I wasn't that.

The remaining members of Victor's team fled at the sight of their comrade pinned beneath my snarling form, abandoning their mission in the face of unexpected resistance. Bear moved quickly to secure the operator, pressing his shotgun against the man's temple while Gunner checked the prospect for serious injuries.

"Holy shit," the kid whispered, his hand pressed against his bleeding neck. "That was..."

"That was Liam," Rooster finished for him, approaching slowly.

I backed away from the captured operator, my lynx form vibrating with unspent adrenaline. For fifteen years, I'd hidden this part of myself, knowing I was different in ways no one ever explained to me. Now I stood exposed in the moonlight, my true nature revealed to these men who had somehow become important to me.

Rooster knelt a few feet away, his hands open at his sides in a gesture of peace. "You okay, baby boy?" he asked softly.

The gentleness in his voice, the familiar nickname that had become something precious between us—it reached past the lynx's defensive instincts to the human heart beneath. I felt the change coming again, my body responding to the emotional pull rather than physical need.

The shift back to human form was smoother, the pain dulled by familiarity. I knelt naked in the moonlight, my human skin prickling with the cool night air. Rooster shrugged out of his jacket immediately, draping it around my shoulders with careful hands that never lingered too long.

"You saved him," Rooster said quietly, nodding toward the prospect who was still staring at me with wide, awestruck eyes. "You could have stayed hidden, safe, but you didn't."

I looked up at him, at Bear securing the prisoner, at Gunner helping the injured prospect. At this makeshift family that had somehow become mine in the span of days rather than the years most relationships required.

Something shifted inside me—a wall crumbling, a door opening after fifteen years locked tight. My throat worked, muscles long unused suddenly remembering their purpose. The sound built from somewhere deep in my chest, rising through my throat like magma through stone.

When I opened my mouth, what emerged wasn't words, but something more primal—a roar that contained fifteen years of silence, of rage, of loneliness and fear and finally, finally belonging. The sound echoed through the trees, causing leaves to tremble and birds to take startled flight from their roosts.

The forest fell silent in its wake, as if the very air had been stunned by my reclamation of sound. Bear froze, his hands stilling on the zip ties he was using to secure the prisoner. Gunner looked up sharply, the prospect beside him shrinking back instinctively from the raw power in my cry.

Only Rooster moved, stepping closer until he stood directly before me. His eyes were wet in the moonlight, his expression a complex mixture of pride and wonder and something deeper I wasn't ready to name.

"Welcome home, Liam," he whispered, the words meant only for me despite the thunderous sound that had preceded them.

I didn't speak again. Couldn't yet. That single roar had emptied fifteen years of silence, leaving me drained and shaking. But it had been enough—

enough to mark the ground beneath my feet as somewhere I would fight to defend rather than a temporary shelter to abandon at the first sign of danger.

For the first time since my parents had left me at that bus station, I had stopped running.

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# Chapter Fifteen

~ Rooster ~

I stood in the kitchen doorway as the first light of dawn spilled across what remained of our compound. The destruction looked worse in daylight, stark evidence of how close we'd come to losing everything.

My hand gripped the doorframe, knuckles white against splintered wood, as I counted our blessings among the ruins. We'd survived. Liam had survived.

And somehow, in the chaos of gunfire and blood, my mate had found something he'd lost fifteen years ago—his voice, even if just for one primal roar that still echoed in my memory.

Glass crunched beneath my boots as I stepped outside, surveying the full extent of the damage. Bullet holes peppered the walls like deadly constellations, their trajectories telling the story of last night's firefight.

Blood had dried in rusty patches across the concrete, some ours, some Victor's men. Shell casings glinted in the early light, scattered like malicious confetti. The picnic table where I'd first left food for Liam months ago had been reduced to splinters.

It should have felt devastating. Our home had been violated, our security breached, our people wounded. But as I stood amid the wreckage, what filled my chest wasn't despair but a fierce, protective relief. We were still here. My found family. My mate.

Liam.

The memory of his transformation flashed through my mind—the fluid grace as he'd shifted from cautious human to predatory lynx in the span of heartbeats. The way he'd launched himself at the operator threatening our prospect, all golden fur and righteous fury.

But it was what came after that kept replaying in my mind. His roar—primal, powerful, profound—breaking fifteen years of silence.

He hadn't spoken since. Hadn't needed to. That single sound had said everything necessary about who he was choosing to become.

"Hell of a mess."

I turned to find Butch picking his way through the debris, his usually impeccable appearance marred by dirt and dried blood. A bandage covered a graze wound on his forearm, but otherwise he seemed intact. His eyes were sharp despite the exhaustion etched into the lines of his face.

"Could've been worse," I replied, stepping aside as he joined me in the doorway. "How's the prospect? Sammy, right?"

Butch grunted. "Kid's throat needed a few stitches, but he'll live. Might even learn something from this—like not following armed men into a fucking ambush without backup." His expression softened slightly. "He's been telling anyone who'll listen about how your mate saved his ass."

My mate. The words sent a warmth spreading through my chest despite the morning chill. Liam had earned that title last night, not through any traditional claiming ritual, but through his choice to fight at my side when he could have run.

"And Victor's men?" I asked.

"Three dead, two wounded badly enough they won't be going anywhere soon. The rest scattered." Butch's face hardened. "We've got the communications specialist locked down in the basement. Bear's been having a chat with him."

I nodded, understanding exactly what kind of "chat" that would be.

"No sign of Victor himself though," Butch continued, scowling. "Slippery bastard must have hung back, letting his men take the risks." He surveyed the destruction around us, then straightened his shoulders with the air of a man who'd rebuilt from ashes before. "I need a final perimeter sweep before we start cleaning this mess up. Make sure none of those fuckers are still hiding on our property."

"I'll do it," I volunteered immediately.

"Take someone with you. No one moves alone until we're sure the compound is secure."

I hesitated only briefly. "I'll take Liam."

Butch's eyebrow rose slightly. "You sure that's wise? Kid's been through enough already."

"He's not staying here alone," I said, my tone brooking no argument. "And he sees things the rest of us miss. He knew about the hidden passages, remember? Found all those surveillance devices."

I didn't add that the thought of letting Liam out of my sight made my bear pace restlessly beneath my skin, claws scraping against my control.

Something in Butch's expression shifted as he studied me—a knowing recognition of the protective instinct that had taken root in my soul. He nodded once. "Fair enough. Get it done and report back."

"Liam?" I called, turning toward the back room where I'd left him sleeping just an hour earlier. The makeshift bed I'd arranged in the pantry—the only room with no windows and only one entrance, the kind of space where Liam felt safest—had been empty when I'd checked on him last.

For one heart-stopping moment, old fears surfaced. Had he fled in the night? Decided the danger of staying outweighed whatever tentative connection we'd formed?

Then I heard the soft scrape of boots against tile and he appeared in the hallway. My breath caught at the sight of him. He still moved with the cautious grace of someone accustomed to remaining unnoticed, but something fundamental had shifted in his demeanor.

His hood was pulled back, exposing his scarred face and golden eyes to the morning light. His shoulders weren't hunched defensively around his ears.

And when his gaze met mine, he held it for three solid seconds before looking away—an eternity compared to the fleeting, skittish glances of before.

"We need to check the perimeter," I explained, keeping my voice gentle despite the surge of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. "Make sure none of Victor's men are still hanging around. Will you come with me?"

I phrased it as a question rather than an order, giving him the choice I'd promised him in the garden. For a long moment, he simply studied me, his golden eyes unreadable. Then he gave a single, decisive nod and moved to my side.

Not behind me, as he would have before. But beside me, close enough that our sleeves nearly brushed. Close enough that I could smell his unique scent—pine needles and wild things and something uniquely Liam that called to my bear nature.

Butch observed this subtle shift with silent approval. "Be careful out there," he said, his eyes moving between us. "We'll start gathering materials to patch up this mess."

As we moved toward the door, another club member emerged from the common room—Razor, our treasurer, sporting a makeshift bandage across his cheek. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of Liam walking openly beside me instead of skulking in my shadow.

"Hey," Razor greeted, nodding to me before his gaze flicked curiously to Liam. "Good work last night. Both of you."

What happened next nearly stopped my heart. Instead of shrinking away or staring at the floor, Liam met Razor's eyes directly and inclined his head in acknowledgment. A simple gesture that spoke volumes about the transformation taking place inside him.

When we stepped outside into the morning light, Liam's hand brushed against mine so briefly it might have been accidental, except that nothing Liam did was ever without purpose.

I resisted the urge to grab his fingers and hold them, to anchor him to me with physical touch. Instead, I let him set the pace as we moved across the debris-strewn compound to begin our search.

My feral kitten was finding his courage. And I would give him all the time and space he needed to discover just how brave he truly was.

We moved around the compound in silence, Liam and I, checking familiar corners now made strange by bullet holes and bloodstains. He matched my pace step for step, no longer trailing behind me like a shadow afraid of the light.

Instead, he moved with deliberate purpose, his golden eyes constantly scanning, missing nothing. More than once, he diverted our path to check something I would have overlooked—a disturbed patch of earth beneath a window, shell casings partially hidden by debris.

The feral kitten had become something else overnight—still cautious, still vigilant, but now channeling his survival instincts toward protecting what was his.

I watched him crouch to examine a boot print pressed deep into the mud near our fence line. His fingers hovered above the impression without touching it, his head tilting slightly as he studied the direction and depth.

Without speaking, he pointed northwest, toward the dense tree line where several of Victor's men had fled during the chaos.

"You think some might still be out there?" I asked softly.

He shook his head, then held up two fingers before making a walking motion with them, followed by a gesture indicating departure. Two men had escaped in that direction, but they were long gone.

"How can you be sure?"

His response was to tap his nose, then point to the mud where rain had started to fill the boot prints. The tracks were old, at least several hours. His certainty was oddly comforting, this quiet confidence in his abilities that he no longer tried to hide.

We completed our circuit of the main buildings with no sign of lingering threats. The garage had taken heavy fire but remained structurally sound. The clubhouse walls were peppered with bullet holes, windows shattered, but the damage was repairable. We'd rebuild, stronger than before.

Only Gearhead's workshop remained unchecked—a large corrugated metal structure. Gearhead himself was still at Henry's clinic, having taken a bullet to the shoulder while evacuating the wounded. I pushed open the side door, which creaked ominously on damaged hinges.

"Last stop," I said, stepping into the familiar space of oil-soaked concrete and tool-lined walls. Weak sunlight filtered through dusty windows, casting long shadows across workbenches and half-completed motorcycle projects. The air smelled of gasoline, metal, and something else, something that didn't belong.

Liam's hand shot out suddenly, gripping my wrist with surprising strength. I froze mid-step, trained by years of survival to trust warning signs without question. His entire body had gone rigid beside me, his nostrils flaring as he scented the air.

Blood. Fresh blood, not the day-old stains we'd been stepping around all morning.

His golden eyes met mine, conveying the warning without words. Then his gaze shifted deliberately toward the far corner of the workshop, where Gearhead's main workbench stood partially obscured by a torn tarp hanging from the ceiling.

Someone was breathing behind that workbench. Someone trying very hard to remain silent, but whose pain made each breath a subtle whistle through clenched teeth.

I reached slowly for the knife at my belt, nodding once to show Liam I understood. We'd surprised someone—likely one of Victor's men who'd chosen to hide rather than flee with the others.

I took a careful step forward, placing my boot soundlessly on the concrete. "Whoever's back there," I called, my voice echoing in the cavernous space, "I suggest you come out now. My patience is thin after the night we've had."

Silence stretched for three heartbeats, four, five. Then a low chuckle broke the stillness, a sound that sent ice through my veins.

"Ah, Rooster. Always the diplomat." Victor Markus emerged from behind the workbench, one hand pressed against his bloodied side, the other

raised in mock surrender. "I'd hoped for a bit more time to recover before our next... interaction."

He looked terrible—face ashen beneath designer stubble, his tactical gear soaked with blood on one side. But his eyes were sharp and calculating as ever, taking in both of us with cold assessment.

"You should have run while you had the chance," I said, moving forward cautiously, knife raised. "Not smart to get cornered in enemy territory."

Victor's smile was tight with pain. "Sometimes the safest place to hide is right under your enemy's nose. Your men are all looking outward, not inward." His gaze flicked to Liam, who had gone preternaturally still beside me. "Besides, I still have unfinished business here."

"The only business you have left is answering our questions," I growled, closing the distance between us. "Starting with why you targeted us in the first place."

"Nothing personal," Victor replied, his hand shifting subtly at his side. "Just completing what my uncle started. Eliminating variables. Specimens of interest."

His eyes locked on Liam again, filled with cold scientific curiosity. "Like your little lynx friend there. Quite the rare find. My uncle would have been particularly interested in his abilities."

I felt rage build in my chest—hot and dangerous. The bear inside me rose to the surface, demanding blood for the threat to my mate. "You're never getting near him," I snarled, stepping closer. "Your specimen collection days are over."

Victor's smile widened slightly. "We'll see about that."

The movement was so quick I barely registered it—Victor's hand flashing from his side, steel glinting in the dusty light. The concealed knife arced toward my chest with deadly precision, aimed straight for my heart.

I had no time to react, no chance to dodge. One heartbeat I was advancing on a wounded opponent; the next, death was rushing toward me in the form of eight inches of serrated steel.

Then Liam was there.

I didn't see him move—just a blur of motion too fast for human eyes to track. One moment he was beside me; the next, his arm was extended between me and the blade, his hand closing around Victor's wrist with inhuman speed and strength. The knife clattered harmlessly to the concrete

as Liam twisted, using Victor's own momentum to slam him face-first into the workbench.

Victor howled in pain as his wounded side collided with solid metal. He struggled, but Liam held him pinned with surprising strength, golden eyes blazing with protective fury. There was nothing feral or frightened in his demeanor now—just cold, calculated efficiency as he neutralized the threat to his mate.

I recovered quickly, grabbing Victor's arms and forcing them behind his back. "Find something to tie him with," I told Liam, pressing my knee into Victor's spine to keep him immobilized.

Without hesitation, Liam released his grip and moved to a nearby shelf, returning seconds later with a coil of nylon rope. His movements were fluid and purposeful—nothing like the hesitant, skittish behavior I'd grown accustomed to. He handed me the rope, then retrieved the dropped knife, examining it with clinical detachment before placing it carefully out of reach.

"You're making a mistake," Victor wheezed beneath me as I bound his wrists tightly. "I'm just one branch. Cut me down, two more will take my place. The research will continue."

"Save it for your interrogation," I growled, hauling him roughly to his feet. "You've got a lot to answer for."

The workshop door banged open and Butch strode in with Bear and Gunner flanking him like avenging angels. Their expressions darkened simultaneously at the sight of Victor.

"Well, well," Butch drawled, approaching with measured steps. "Look what the cat dragged in."

Bear's massive hands clenched into fists as he took in the scene. "Want me to take out the trash, Boss?"

"With pleasure," Butch replied. "But keep him breathing. For now."

Bear and Gunner moved forward to take Victor from my grip, their hands none too gentle as they marched him toward the door. Butch lingered behind, his gaze moving between me and Liam.

"Everyone alright?" he asked.

I nodded mechanically, still processing what had just happened. "He tried to knife me. Liam..." My voice faltered as the reality sank in. "Liam stopped him."

Butch's eyebrow rose slightly as he looked at my mate with new respect. "Fast little bastard, aren't you?"

Liam ducked his head, some of his earlier confidence receding now that the immediate danger had passed. But he didn't retreat behind me or reach for his hood.

Progress, even if small.

"We'll handle Victor," Butch said, clapping me briefly on the shoulder. "You two take a moment."

As the door closed behind him, I turned to Liam, really seeing him now that the adrenaline was fading. His hands were trembling slightly, the delayed reaction of someone coming down from combat focus. But his eyes were steady on mine, a question in their golden depths.

"You saved my life," I said simply.

He nodded once, accepting the statement without pride or hesitation. Just fact.

The realization hit me with the force of a physical blow. No claiming bite could have created a bond stronger than this moment. No ritual or ceremony could match the raw truth of what had just happened—Liam choosing to place himself between me and death. Not because fate demanded it, not because tradition required it, but because he'd decided I was worth protecting.

In that split second of deadly danger, he hadn't run. Hadn't hidden. Hadn't saved himself as fifteen years of survival instinct should have dictated.

He'd chosen me.

And in that choice was a claiming more profound than any mark teeth could leave on flesh.

A little while later, I leaned against the wall of the infirmary, arms crossed over my chest, unable to tear my eyes away from Liam as he worked alongside Doc.

Henry Nash—the doctor we all called Doc since he'd joined our extended family—had been skeptical when Liam first approached him with a handful of plants retrieved from beyond our fence line.

That skepticism had lasted exactly three minutes, dissolving the moment he'd witnessed what my mate could do with those unassuming leaves and stems.

Now they moved in careful tandem around the wounded, Doc handling the stitches and bandages while Liam prepared poultices that seemed to ease pain and reduce inflammation right before our eyes.

"Hold still," Doc murmured to Gearhead, who was gritting his teeth as a bullet wound in his shoulder was examined. "This is deep but missed anything vital."

Liam approached with a small bowl of crushed leaves mixed into a paste, the scent sharp and medicinal. Without hesitation—without the skittish dance of approach and retreat that had marked his every interaction until yesterday—he placed the bowl beside Doc and demonstrated with careful hands how the mixture should be applied.

"What is that?" Doc asked, professional curiosity overriding his exhaustion.

Liam, of course, didn't answer verbally. Instead, he reached for the notepad Percy had given him, writing quickly before showing it to Doc: *"Yarrow, plantain, comfrey. Stops bleeding, prevents infection, speeds healing."*

Doc's eyebrows rose slightly as he read. "And you're certain about the proportions?"

Liam nodded firmly, no doubt in his golden eyes.

"Where did you learn this?" Doc pressed, already applying the paste as instructed.

Liam hesitated before writing again: *"Plants taught me."*

Any other time, such a statement might have earned dismissal or skepticism. But we'd all witnessed too much in the past twenty-four hours to question abilities that defied easy explanation.

Doc simply nodded and continued working, accepting this revelation as yet another piece of the puzzle that was my mate.

I watched with swelling pride as Liam moved to the next injured brother, his approach gentle but confident. His hands, which I'd only ever seen clenched in fear or raised defensively, now worked with delicate precision as he applied a different mixture to the burns on Bear's forearm.

There was something mesmerizing about his focus—the way his golden eyes narrowed slightly in concentration, the careful economy of his movements, wasting nothing.

"That actually helps," Bear rumbled, surprise evident in his deep voice as Liam's concoction took the heat from his burns. "What the hell is in this

stuff, kid?"

Liam didn't write a response this time, just offered the ghost of a smile—an expression so rare I found myself staring, memorizing the slight upturn of his lips. Bear watched him with new respect, nodding his thanks when Liam finished wrapping clean gauze around the treated area.

Around the room, other club members were observing with varying degrees of amazement. The feral kitten they'd barely glimpsed, who'd hidden in shadows and flinched at sudden movements, was now moving among them with purpose, his healing touch somehow more shocking than his fighting skills had been the night before.

"Well, I'll be damned," Gunner muttered beside me, his voice low enough that only I could hear. "He's full of surprises, your mate."

"Yeah," I agreed, unable to keep the pride from my voice. "He is."

"Victor's secured in the basement," Gunner added, his tone shifting to business. "Butch wants to let him stew a bit before questioning."

I nodded, though my attention remained fixed on Liam. He'd moved to Sammy now, the young prospect whose life he'd saved during the attack. The kid was watching Liam with undisguised awe as gentle fingers applied a salve to the knife wound on his neck.

"Kid hasn't stopped talking about how Liam saved him," Gunner continued, following my gaze. "Called him 'a golden blur of fucking badassery' – direct quote."

A chuckle escaped me. "He's not wrong."

Gunner clapped me on the shoulder before moving away. "You got lucky, brother. Real lucky."

I couldn't argue with that assessment. Twenty-four hours ago, I'd been worried Liam might flee at the first sign of danger. Now he was voluntarily touching strangers, healing their wounds, making eye contact. The transformation was as remarkable as his shift from human to lynx—less physically dramatic perhaps, but every bit as profound.

After another hour watching Liam work, I found myself needing space to process everything that had happened. I slipped away quietly, retreating to the one place that had always centered me, regardless of the chaos surrounding us—my kitchen.

The damage was immediately apparent as I stepped through the doorway. Bullet holes pockmarked the walls, the window above the sink had been shattered, and dried blood stained the tile floor in rusty patches. A

bag of flour had been hit during the crossfire, coating everything in a thin white dust that mixed with plaster from the damaged walls.

It should have felt devastating, this violation of my sanctuary. But as I surveyed the destruction, all I could think was: we're still here. We survived. We'll rebuild.

I found a broom in the pantry and began sweeping, the familiar motion soothing despite the circumstances. Glass tinkled as I pushed it into neat piles, shell casings clinked against tile, plaster dust billowed and settled. The methodical work gave my hands something to do while my mind processed the night's events.

Victor hiding in Gearhead's workshop. The knife flashing toward my chest. Liam's impossible speed as he'd intercepted the attack. I'd been a heartbeat away from death. One second from losing everything before it had truly begun.

My movements became more determined as I swept, each stroke infused with growing resolve. The clubhouse could be repaired. Bullet holes patched, glass replaced, bloodstains scrubbed away. What mattered was that we'd survived to do the rebuilding.

I filled a bucket with soapy water and dropped to my knees, scrubbing at the bloodstains on the tile. My mind returned to that moment in Gearhead's workshop—Victor's knife slicing toward me, Liam's blur of motion as he'd placed himself between me and death. No hesitation. No fear. Just pure, instinctive protection.

For fifteen years, Liam had survived by running. By hiding. By trusting no one but himself.

Until me.

Until us.

The realization hit me with such force that I sat back on my heels, wet cloth still clutched in my hand. He'd chosen me. Not because fate had declared us mates, not because of some primal instinct he couldn't control, but because somewhere in that brilliant, damaged mind of his, he'd decided I was worth the risk.

I attacked the bloodstains with renewed vigor, as if I could scrub away the last barriers between us through sheer determination. Each stroke of the cloth was a promise—to rebuild, to protect, to create something unbreakable from the broken pieces we'd both been given.

I was so absorbed in my task that I didn't hear him approach. Only the soft scuff of boots against tile alerted me to Liam's presence. I looked up to find him standing in the doorway, his golden eyes watching me with an intensity that stole my breath.

He'd put his hood back up—not pulled tight as before, but loosely framing his face, a compromise between old comfort and new courage. In his hands, he held Percy's notebook, open to a fresh page.

I sat back on my heels, wiping my hands on my jeans. "Hey, baby boy. Everyone patched up?"

He nodded, then crossed the room with deliberate steps. When he reached me, he turned the notebook so I could read what he'd written.

Three simple words filled the page: "*I choose you.*"

My throat tightened painfully, emotion rising like a tide I couldn't control. I rose to my feet, the bloody cloth forgotten on the floor. For a long moment, we simply looked at each other, this scarred, silent man and me, standing amid the ruins of my kitchen as morning sunlight streamed through the shattered window.

Then I opened my arms.

He stepped into my embrace without hesitation, his body fitting against mine as if we'd been designed as matching pieces of the same puzzle. My arms closed around him, careful not to hold too tight, still mindful of fifteen years of conditioned fear. But he surprised me again, pressing closer, his face tucking against my neck in an act of trust so profound it made my chest ache.

I buried my face in his hair, breathing in his scent—pine and wild things and now the medicinal herbs he'd been working with. My mate. My lynx. My feral kitten who'd found his courage in the heart of battle.

"I choose you too," I whispered against his temple. "Always."

He didn't respond verbally—perhaps never would—but his arms tightened fractionally around my waist, and I felt the slight dampness of tears against my neck. Not tears of fear or pain, but of something we were both just beginning to recognize as possibility.

Standing there in my bullet-riddled kitchen, holding this man who'd placed himself between me and death without hesitation, I made a silent vow. I would rebuild not just these walls, but a life where Liam never again had to face the world alone. Where my feral kitten could finally feel safe

enough to find his voice—whether in words, in writing, or simply in the language of trust we were creating between us.

The morning light caught in his dirty blonde hair, turning it to burnished gold, and I knew with bone-deep certainty that whatever came next – Victor's interrogation, the inevitable retaliation from his organization, the long process of rebuilding—we would face it together.

Not because fate had decreed it.

Not because tradition demanded it.

But because, against all odds, we had chosen each other.

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## Chapter Sixteen

~ Liam ~

I stood outside Butch's office, my fingers tracing nervous patterns against my thigh. The hallway felt too narrow, the air too thin. Just yesterday, I'd been nothing but a shadow on the edge of their lives—a feral creature they tolerated because of Rooster. Now Butch himself had summoned me, wanting everything I knew about Victor Markus and his operation.

Fifteen years of watching from the darkness had taught me much, but nothing had prepared me for this—stepping into the light, being asked to share rather than hide.

Rooster's hand settled gently on my shoulder, his touch no longer making me flinch as it once had. "He just wants information, baby boy. Nothing to be afraid of."

Easy for him to say. He hadn't spent most of his life learning that attention from powerful men usually ended in pain.

I took a deep breath and nodded once, reaching up to adjust my hood. Though I no longer pulled it tight around my face as I once had, the familiar fabric still provided comfort against my scarred skin. The weight of Percy's notebook pressed against my chest from its place in my inner pocket, a tangible reminder of why I was doing this.

*I choose you.* The words I'd written to Rooster just hours ago. And by extension, I'd chosen this—his family, his world.

Rooster knocked on the heavy wooden door, then squeezed my shoulder once more before stepping back. "I'll be in the kitchen when you're done."

The door swung open before I could panic about facing Butch alone. The MC president stood in the doorway, his massive frame blocking the light from inside his office. His eyes flickered briefly between Rooster and me before he stepped aside.

"Come in," he said, his voice carrying the easy authority of a man accustomed to being obeyed without question.

I slipped past him, immediately cataloguing the room as I'd done with every new space for fifteen years. Exits—there was one door and one window. Threats—none immediate. Hiding spots—behind the filing cabinet and under the desk.

The office was all dark wood and leather, motorcycle memorabilia covering the walls alongside framed photographs of men in club cuts. Trophy weapons hung on display—knives with ornate handles, a Civil War era revolver, brass knuckles mounted in a shadow box.

Butch's desk dominated the center of the room, massive and scarred with history. Papers were spread across its surface, some bearing official-looking letterhead, others covered in handwritten notes. A laptop sat open to one side, its screen displaying what looked like security camera feeds.

"Sit," Butch said, gesturing to the chair across from his desk.

I perched on the edge of the seat, my body tense and ready for flight. Butch moved around the desk and settled into his own chair with the unhurried confidence of a predator in his territory. He studied me openly, his gaze neither hostile nor particularly warm—just assessing.

"Victor's talking," he said finally, leaning back. "But I need to know if what he's saying matches what you know."

My fingers started tapping against my thigh again—a nervous habit I'd never managed to break. How could I possibly explain years of observation, patterns recognized across state lines, the systematic destruction of shifter communities?

My throat tightened at the very idea of speaking, the familiar panic rising as it always did when faced with verbal communication.

"What exactly was Victor Markus doing tracking our compound? And how long has his organization been hunting shifters?"

The direct questions made my mind race too fast for coherent thought. Images flashed before my eyes—the wolf pack in Wyoming, the fox shifter family in Nevada, the bear community in northern California. All gone. All taken. All while I watched from the shadows, documenting, but never intervening. Until now.

Butch must have recognized my rising panic, because his expression softened slightly. He reached for a notepad and pencil on his desk, sliding them toward me.

"Take your time," he said, his tone still firm but with an undercurrent of patience I hadn't expected. "Write it down if that's easier."

I stared at the blank page, my heart still hammering against my ribs. The pencil felt awkward in my fingers as I picked it up—I was more accustomed to the small stub I kept in my pocket for emergency notations. The first few lines I wrote were shaky, barely legible even to me.

*"5 years tracking. Started in Wyoming. Wolf pack."*

I frowned at the inadequate words. How could I possibly convey the horror of what I'd witnessed through such simplified notes? Frustration built inside me as I crossed out the words and tried again, my hand still unsteady.

Butch watched without comment as I struggled, neither rushing me nor showing impatience. After a few failed attempts at written explanation, I flipped to a fresh page and began to draw instead.

The lines flowed more easily as I sketched a rough map of the western United States, marking locations with small X's. Beside each X, I drew crude representations—a wolf for Wyoming, a fox for Nevada, a bear for California, and finally, a motorcycle for the Soldiers of Fortune MC. Then I started adding dates, creating a timeline that spread across two pages.

As my hands found their purpose, my anxiety receded enough for clearer thought. I added more details—surveillance patterns, infiltration methods, extraction techniques.

With each stroke of the pencil, my confidence grew. This was something I knew. Something I'd studied with the intense focus of someone whose survival depended on understanding predators.

"These all followed the same pattern?" Butch asked, leaning forward to study my drawings.

I nodded, then continued sketching. Three phases for each target:

Surveillance—cameras, planted devices, perimeter watchers.

Infiltration—agents inserted into the community or nearby towns.

Extraction or elimination—coordinated night raids, clinical collection of "specimens," no survivors.

Butch's eyes narrowed as he processed the information. "And you witnessed all of these personally?"

I nodded again, then wrote beside the Wyoming X: "Watched from lightning-struck tree. 200 yards distance. 12 wolves taken."

Beside Nevada: "Hill observation post. 7 foxes. Youngest was infant."

California: "Forest blind. 15 bears. Collection team used tranquilizers before blood sampling."

Each notation carried the weight of memories I'd tried to bury—the silent screams as shifters were loaded into unmarked vans, the clinical efficiency of men in tactical gear as they documented their "specimens."

"Jesus Christ," Butch muttered, studying my timeline. "They've been doing this systematically. Testing methods, refining their approach."

I tapped the MC's location on my map, then added a final notation: "Only ones who fought back. Only ones I warned."

Something shifted in Butch's expression as he read those words—a recognition that went beyond the tactical information I was providing. He looked up from the papers to study me directly, his gaze more penetrating than before.

"Why us, Liam? Why warn us when you didn't warn the others?"

The question hit me like a physical blow. I stared at the notepad, the pencil suddenly heavy in my hand. There were practical reasons, of course—this group was larger, better armed, with escape routes I'd mapped through their hidden passages. My chances of successful intervention were higher. My risk of capture lower.

But those weren't the real reasons, and something in Butch's steady gaze told me he wouldn't accept such a calculating answer.

I wrote slowly, the words coming with difficulty: *"Rooster left food. No one ever just... gave before. No demands. Just gave."*

Butch nodded, something like understanding crossing his features. "Simple kindness," he said quietly. "That was all it took."

I shrugged uncomfortably, not wanting to acknowledge how completely that simple act had transformed my existence. Instead, I returned to the safer ground of tactics, adding more details about Victor's operation—the rotation of surveillance teams, the communication protocols I'd observed, the equipment they used for tracking shifters.

As I worked, I felt a strange sense of unburdening. For years, I'd carried these observations alone, my notebook the only record of communities that had been systematically erased. Now, finally, someone else was seeing what I'd seen. Someone with the power and resources to potentially stop it.

"This is good work," Butch said finally, gathering the pages I'd filled. "Better than good. Military-grade intelligence gathering." He studied me with new respect. "Rooster was right about you. There's more to you than meets the eye, kid."

I ducked my head, uncomfortable with the praise. My skills hadn't developed through any noble purpose—just the brutal necessity of staying one step ahead of those who would cage or kill me.

"I have more questions," Butch continued, "but they can wait. You've given me plenty to start with." He stood, signaling the end of our meeting.

"We'll use what you've shared to verify Victor's statements. See if he's feeding us bullshit."

I rose quickly, relieved the interrogation was over. As I turned to leave, Butch's voice stopped me.

"Liam."

I looked back, tensing slightly.

"What you did—watching, documenting, staying alive when everyone else didn't—that took courage. And bringing this information to us instead of running when things got hot..." He shook his head slightly. "That's loyalty I don't take lightly."

I didn't know how to respond to that. Courage wasn't a word I'd ever associated with my existence. Survival, yes. Necessity. But not courage.

As I slipped out of the office and headed toward the kitchen where Rooster waited, Butch's words echoed in my mind. Perhaps there was more to my years of hiding than simply fear. Perhaps watching and remembering when everyone else forgot was its own kind of strength.

The thought settled uncomfortably in my chest as I walked away, neither embraced nor rejected—just another piece of myself I was only beginning to understand.

\* \* \* \*

I didn't expect the second summons to Butch's office. The first had been necessary—urgent even—as they sorted through the aftermath of the attack. But this call, coming just after breakfast the next morning, caught me off guard.

Rooster squeezed my shoulder as I stood from the kitchen table, his eyes conveying reassurance I wasn't sure I deserved. Whatever Butch wanted, it felt different this time. Not an interrogation, but something else. Something that made my heart beat faster for reasons that weren't entirely fear.

The walk down the hallway seemed shorter than before. My fingers still traced nervous patterns against my thigh, but my shoulders weren't hunched around my ears as they had been yesterday. I'd survived one meeting with the MC president. I could survive another.

When I knocked on the heavy wooden door, Butch's voice immediately called for me to enter. He was seated behind his massive desk again, but this time the surface was covered with stacks of papers rather than just a

few notes. The laptop was closed and pushed aside, all attention focused on whatever these documents contained.

"Come in," he said, gesturing to the chair across from him. "And close the door behind you."

I did as instructed, noting that my assessment of the room remained the same—one door, one window, hiding spot behind the filing cabinet if needed. The knowledge settled my nerves, as it always did. Escape routes identified. Safety confirmed.

"We spent most of the night interrogating Victor," Butch said without preamble, pushing a stack of papers toward me. "These are the transcripts. I want you to read them and tell me if his story matches what you've observed."

I stared at the pages, momentarily frozen. No one had ever asked for my opinion like this before. No one had ever treated my observations as valuable. For fifteen years, staying unseen had been my only goal—my thoughts and knowledge kept hidden along with my physical presence.

Butch watched me with unexpected patience, apparently understanding my hesitation. "You saw things we didn't," he said simply. "You've been tracking these bastards for years. Your perspective matters here."

My perspective matters. The concept was so foreign I could barely process it.

With slightly trembling fingers, I reached for the pages. The top sheet contained a formal-looking header: "Interrogation Subject: Victor Markus. Date: April 15. Time: 22:47."

Below that was a transcript of questions and answers. Bear had conducted the initial questioning, his blunt style evident in the terse, sometimes profane questions. Victor's responses were measured, calculated, revealing just enough to appear cooperative without giving away anything truly significant.

I turned to the second page, then the third, my eyes scanning rapidly. Fifteen years of survival had taught me to process information quickly, to identify patterns and inconsistencies that might mean the difference between safety and capture.

As I read, something shifted in my focus—the world around me fading as my attention narrowed to the words before me.

Victor claimed his operation began three years ago, after his uncle's death.

Lie.

He stated they'd only targeted two previous communities—one in Idaho and one in Colorado.

Lie.

He described their approach as "purely scientific," claiming they tranquilized subjects before collection, ensuring no unnecessary casualties.

The bloodiest lie of all.

Without conscious thought, I reached for the pencil Butch had placed beside the papers. I circled Victor's statement about the timeline, then wrote in the margin: *"5+ years. Started earlier. Wyoming wolf pack, 2021."*

Next to his claim about only two previous targets, I noted: *"Nevada foxes 2022. California bears 2024. Idaho wolves? Colorado unknown—possible additional sites?"*

When I reached his description of their collection methods, my hand pressed so hard against the paper that the pencil lead nearly broke. I underlined his claim about humane treatment three times, then wrote with stark clarity: *"False. Wyoming: 4 adults shot resisting. Nevada: entire family executed after sampling, including infant. California: 3 elderly bears killed on site, deemed 'unsuitable specimens.'"*

My hands moved faster now, confidence growing as I analyzed the document. Victor's careful lies began to unravel under my scrutiny. He'd altered locations, confused timelines, combined separate operations into single events. But the patterns were unmistakable to someone who'd watched his organization evolve from the shadows.

I flipped to a fresh page and quickly sketched a more accurate timeline, marking known operations with precise dates and locations. Then I added a second layer—the evolution of their tactics over time. Each attack had refined their approach, their extraction methods becoming more efficient, their containment procedures more sophisticated.

When Butch shifted in his chair, I looked up, suddenly aware that I'd been completely absorbed in my analysis. I'd forgotten to be afraid, forgotten to monitor the room, forgotten everything except exposing the truth buried in Victor's lies.

"Find something?" Butch asked, his voice neutral though his eyes were sharp with interest.

I nodded, then pointed to a specific paragraph where Victor claimed his operation maintained strict scientific protocols with oversight from

legitimate research institutions.

My fingers rapped against the paper impatiently, then I wrote: "*No oversight. Field operatives make collection decisions based on predetermined criteria. Specialized interest in rare shifter types. Higher value placed on young specimens with unusual abilities.*"

I'd seen their field notes. Had retrieved them from an abandoned observation post after the Nevada operation, when they'd been forced to evacuate quickly due to an unexpected forest fire.

The clinical language couldn't disguise the horror of what they'd documented—shifters ranked by potential research value, marked for collection or elimination based on cold calculations of scientific utility.

Butch leaned forward, studying my notations with growing intensity. "You're certain about these dates? These locations?"

I nodded emphatically, then flipped through my notebook until I found the relevant pages—my detailed documentation of each operation, complete with dates, locations, and tactical approaches. I'd been meticulous, recording everything from team compositions to equipment specifications.

Nothing like the sanitized version Victor was presenting.

As I compared the interrogation transcript with my own records, my hands became increasingly animated, pointing out discrepancies, connecting related operations that Victor had deliberately separated in his account. I underlined key phrases, circled obvious lies, and filled the margins with corrections.

Without words, I was painting a comprehensive picture of Victor's true operation—larger, older, and far more deadly than he was admitting.

"He's protecting someone," Butch observed, watching me work. "Compartmentalizing information to shield higher-ups?"

I looked up, surprised by his insight, then nodded. I sketched a quick organizational chart showing Victor as just one node in a larger structure—not the architect but a key lieutenant.

Above him, I drew a question mark, then wrote: "*Funding source. Someone with significant resources. Military connections?*"

"You think there's military involvement?" Butch asked sharply.

I hesitated, then qualified my response: "*Tactics suggest military training. Equipment is military-grade. Access to restricted areas indicates possible government connections.*"

Butch ran a hand through his hair, his expression darkening as he processed the implications. "So we've got a bigger problem than just Victor and his team."

I nodded grimly, then tapped the papers spread before us, trying to convey the scope of what we were facing. This wasn't a rogue operation that would end with Victor's capture. It was systematic, well-funded, and deeply embedded in structures that would survive the loss of any single operative.

Butch studied me for a long moment, his expression thoughtful. "You know, when Rooster first started leaving food out for you, some of the guys thought he was wasting his time." He gestured to my notations covering the transcripts. "But he saw something in you the rest of us missed. Turns out he was right."

I ducked my head, uncomfortable with the implicit praise.

"You've got a mind for this," Butch continued, tapping the papers. "You see patterns, connections. And you've got experience no one else here has."

I hadn't thought of my years of solitary survival as valuable experience before. I'd considered it just existence—breathing another day, avoiding capture, moving on before anyone looked too closely. But Butch was right—I'd developed skills during those years. Skills that were proving useful now.

"I'm going to need your help deciphering the rest of his statements," Butch said, reaching for another stack of papers. "If that's alright with you."

It wasn't a command from an MC president to someone at the bottom of the hierarchy. It was a request—a recognition of agency I wasn't used to being granted.

I nodded slowly, something warm unfurling in my chest at the realization that I wasn't being tolerated here. I was being valued. For the first time in fifteen years, my existence wasn't defined by what I needed to hide from others, but by what I could offer them.

My fingers reached for the next transcript, no longer trembling but steady with purpose. The atmosphere in the room had shifted completely from our first meeting—no longer an interrogation, but a collaboration between equals with different but complementary knowledge.

I hadn't expected this second summons, and I certainly hadn't expected what it would reveal—not about Victor, but about myself.

Several hours later, Butch gathered the transcript pages, arranging them into a neat stack. "One more thing before you go," he said, his tone shifting slightly. "After what happened with Victor's men, we need to reassess our security. All of it." He leaned back in his chair, eyes steady on mine. "You found ways into our compound that none of us knew existed. You spotted surveillance devices we missed. And you've survived alone for fifteen years without getting caught." He paused, letting the implication hang in the air. "So tell me, Liam—how would you protect this place?"

The question caught me off guard. I'd been asked to recall information, to analyze patterns, but never to offer solutions. Never to build rather than hide. My fingers twitched against my thigh, the familiar nervous rhythm returning as I processed his request.

Butch must have sensed my uncertainty, because he pulled a fresh sheet of paper from a drawer and slid it across the desk along with the pencil. "Just show me what you're thinking," he said. "No pressure."

No pressure. As if sharing fifteen years of survival techniques wasn't exposing my very soul.

I stared at the blank page, feeling the weight of his expectation. Then, almost of its own accord, my hand reached for the pencil. I'd spent months observing this compound, mapping its strengths and weaknesses from the shadows. I knew its vulnerabilities better than anyone.

The first lines were tentative—the main building's foundation, the fence line, the access road. But as the familiar shapes emerged beneath my pencil, something shifted inside me. This wasn't just recalling information—this was applying it. Using it. Giving form to knowledge that had kept me alive when everyone around me died.

My strokes became more confident, more precise. The compound took shape with remarkable accuracy—every building, every door and window, every camera position.

I added topographical features around the perimeter—the slight rise to the north that provided cover for approaching vehicles, the drainage ditch that offered concealed access from the east, the dense tree line where I'd hidden for so many months.

As I drew, I felt my body changing—my hunched shoulders straightening, my breathing deepening, my movements becoming more deliberate. This was my territory—not the physical space of the compound, but the realm of security and survival. Here, in this domain, I wasn't

damaged or broken. I was experienced. Knowledgeable. Perhaps even skilled.

Once the basic layout was complete, I began marking vulnerable points with small X's—places where the fence could be breached without triggering alarms, blind spots in the camera coverage, areas where the building's construction created natural entry points.

I circled three locations where Victor's men had gained access during the attack, then marked four additional points they could have used but didn't.

Butch leaned forward, studying my work with growing interest. "You've really analyzed this place," he said, his tone a mixture of concern and admiration.

I nodded, then continued drawing. Now came the part that mattered most—not just identifying problems but solving them. I sketched a secondary perimeter around the property, not a fence but a natural barrier. Specific plants arranged in strategic patterns—blackberry brambles with their protective thorns, tall grasses that would rustle with movement, flowering bushes that attracted insects whose flight patterns could indicate approaching threats.

My pencil moved faster as my confidence grew. I wasn't just drawing physical barriers, but an entire early warning system—a living network that could communicate danger to someone with the ability to listen.

Someone like me.

I tapped the paper, then pointed to my eyes, trying to convey that these weren't just random plantings, but carefully selected species with specific purposes. I reached for my notepad and wrote quickly: "*Plants talk. Different languages, but patterns. Warning signals.*"

Butch's brow furrowed slightly. "You mean you can... communicate with them? Get information from them?"

I hesitated, then nodded. It was the part of myself I'd hidden most carefully—this strange connection that had kept me alive, but would mark me as truly other if discovered. But hiding it now served no purpose. Not if I wanted to truly protect this place. These people. Rooster.

I placed my palm flat against the wooden desk, closing my eyes briefly. The connection formed instantly—not as strong as with living plants, but still present. Wood remembered being alive. I could feel the echo of its growth, its years taking in sunlight and rain.

Opening my eyes, I pulled my hand back and wrote: *"Everything green has patterns. Disruptions show threats. Can feel approach through root systems, wind movements, insect behaviors."*

I sketched a crude representation of what I sensed—a web of awareness spreading through the soil, up through stems and branches, across leaves that registered subtle changes in air current and vibration. Then I added human figures disrupting this network, their presence creating ripples through the system long before cameras would detect them.

"Jesus," Butch muttered, studying my drawing. "You're talking about a biological security system. One that can't be hacked or disabled with technology."

I nodded emphatically, relieved he understood without more explanation. Writing was exhausting, inadequate for conveying complex concepts. But Butch was making connections without requiring every detail spelled out.

"And you can interpret these... signals?" he asked, his tone careful but not disbelieving. "You'd know if someone was approaching even before they reached the fence line?"

I nodded again, then drew a rough map of the surrounding area, marking the natural features I'd already been using to monitor the compound—the ancient oak whose branches gave clear sightlines to the main approach, the dense thicket where I'd hidden while observing their movements, the wildflower meadow whose subtle patterns had alerted me to Victor's surveillance team long before I spotted actual devices.

"That's how you knew," Butch said softly, understanding dawning on his face. "That night, during the attack. The plants warned you."

I tapped my nose, confirming his insight. Then I continued sketching, adding details about how specific plantings could funnel intruders toward predetermined interception points—natural choke points where the MC's defenders would have tactical advantages.

"Can you implement this?" Butch asked, gesturing to my design. "Supervise the plantings, make sure it's done right?"

The question startled me. Implementing meant staying. Meant committing to this place beyond the immediate danger. Meant accepting that I wasn't just passing through but putting down roots—literal and figurative.

After fifteen years of running, the concept was almost too enormous to process.

Butch seemed to read my hesitation correctly. "You've chosen us," he said quietly, echoing the words I'd written to Rooster the day before. "And we're choosing you. This isn't temporary, Liam. Not unless you want it to be."

I stared at him, searching for deception or manipulation in his expression. But all I found was steady certainty—the same authority that kept a motorcycle club of alphas functioning as a cohesive unit.

I swallowed hard, then nodded once. Yes, I could implement this. Yes, I would stay.

"Good," Butch said simply. He opened a drawer in his desk and removed something small that he kept concealed in his palm. "Because I was hoping you'd accept a more formal position."

He placed what he'd been holding on the desk between us, and my breath caught in my throat. It was a patch—oval-shaped fabric with the Soldiers of Fortune insignia embroidered in black and gold threads. But below the standard design was something new, something I'd never seen on any of the members' cuts: the words "SECURITY ADVISOR" in stark lettering.

"We create positions based on need and skill," Butch explained, watching my reaction carefully. "And right now, we need someone with your particular talents." He pushed the patch toward me. "This would go on your cut—when you're ready for one. No pressure, no timeline. But the position is yours if you want it."

I stared at the patch, unable to move.

For fifteen years, I'd defined myself by my isolation—the feral kitten, the lynx shifter, the silent observer who existed on the margins of society. I'd survived by belonging nowhere, to no one.

But here was tangible proof of a different possibility—a symbol of connection, of value, of place. My hand trembled slightly as I reached for it, the embroidered threads rough against my fingertips.

"It's official," Butch said. "You're part of this family now. If you want to be."

Family. The word echoed in my mind, foreign yet aching familiar. I'd had a family once, before the bus station, before fifteen years of solitary survival. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to belong somewhere.

I closed my fingers around the patch, holding it tightly enough that the edges pressed into my palm. Then I nodded, a single decisive movement that committed me more thoroughly than words ever could.

"Welcome to the Soldiers of Fortune, Liam," Butch said, extending his hand across the desk.

For once, I didn't hesitate to take it. His grip was firm but not crushing, an acknowledgment of strength rather than a display of dominance. In that handshake was recognition—not of the broken creature they'd found scavenging at their edges, but of the survivor who had valuable skills to offer.

As I left Butch's office with the patch secured in my pocket, I felt a strange lightness in my chest. The patch wasn't just a symbol of belonging—it was acknowledgment that my years of isolation hadn't been wasted. The very skills that had kept me separate from others were now the foundation for connection.

The feral kitten had found not just shelter, but purpose. Not just safety, but home.

## Chapter Seventeen

~ Rooster ~

I stood behind Liam's chair with my feet planted shoulder-width apart, my hands clasped behind my back to keep from touching him. The conference room felt foreign with its formal setup—leather portfolios placed precisely at each seat, the club's emblem hanging beside the Shifter Council insignia on the wall.

The Shifter Council investigator sat across from Liam, his charcoal suit impeccably pressed, not a single silver hair out of place. He'd introduced himself as Investigator Crosby, his clipped tone revealing his wolf shifter heritage even before the distinctive amber flecks in his eyes confirmed it.

Wolves always carried that edge of formal dominance, like they needed everyone to know they were apex predators even when discussing mundane matters.

"The evidence provided by your Security Advisor has proven invaluable," Crosby said, sliding a folder toward Butch, who sat at the head of the table. "We've coordinated raids on seven facilities based on the intelligence he gathered."

The projector hummed to life, casting a blue-white glow across the conference table as Crosby tapped his tablet. Satellite images appeared on the screen—an isolated compound in Wyoming, surveillance photos of armed guards, thermal imaging of interior spaces.

"Based on Mr. Liam's intel," Crosby continued, "we identified this facility as one of Victor Markus's primary processing centers."

Liam's head tilted slightly to the right—a gesture I'd come to recognize as disagreement. His fingers began their rhythmic tap against his thigh, barely audible but speaking volumes to me.

I caught Butch's eye across the table and gave a subtle shake of my head. Butch nodded once, understanding my silent translation: Liam didn't agree with Crosby's assessment.

"Something wrong with the intel?" Butch asked, interrupting Crosby's methodical presentation.

The investigator paused, frowning slightly at the interruption. "No, the intelligence was sound. As I was saying—"

"I believe my Security Advisor has concerns about your characterization," Butch pressed, nodding toward Liam.

All eyes turned to Liam, who reached for the notepad that never left his side. His pencil moved with quick precision before he slid the pad toward Crosby. I leaned forward slightly to read over Liam's shoulder: *"Not primary. Tertiary at best. The real processing happens elsewhere. This was just sorting and temporary holding."*

Crosby's lips thinned as he read the note. "Yes, well. That's a matter of interpretation. The Council classifies any facility housing shifter subjects as processing centers."

The dismissive tone made my bear stir beneath my skin. I shifted my weight, moving a half-step closer to Liam's chair, my hand dropping to rest casually on its back. The motion wasn't lost on Crosby, whose nostrils flared slightly as he registered my protective stance.

The presentation continued, with Crosby clicking through images of other raided facilities—a warehouse in Nevada, an abandoned mining operation in Colorado, a private medical facility in northern California.

With each new location, I watched Liam's reactions, fascinated by the subtle language of his body that spoke so clearly to me now.

A slight forward lean when something interested him. The barely perceptible tightening around his eyes when Crosby oversimplified complex operations. The way his golden eyes narrowed when important connections went unmentioned.

"The most significant discovery," Crosby said, bringing up a series of photographs showing laboratory equipment, "was the extensive blood and tissue sample collection. Over three thousand cataloged specimens, many from shifter communities that have been missing for years."

Liam's pencil tapped three times against his notepad—our signal for something important being overlooked. I caught Butch's eye again and tipped my head slightly. Butch immediately picked up the thread.

"Any indication of where the processed samples were sent?" he asked.

Crosby hesitated, his confidence faltering for the first time. "We're still analyzing the data recovery. The systems were quite sophisticated."

Liam's fingers drummed faster against his thigh, his frustration evident to me even if invisible to others. I fought the urge to place my hand over his, to soothe the agitation I could feel radiating from him.

In these formal settings, he preferred minimal contact—something I respected even when my bear grumbled about it.

"Mr. Liam's contribution to this investigation cannot be overstated," Crosby continued, his tone shifting to something almost reverential. "His detailed maps of surveillance points, his documentation of extraction protocols, his timeline of operational evolution—it's unprecedented intelligence work."

Photos appeared on screen of Liam's hand-drawn maps and diagrams—the same ones I'd watched him create late into the night, hunched over our kitchen table, his golden eyes intense with concentration.

Seeing his private work displayed so publicly sent a surge of contradictory emotions through me—fierce pride in my mate's abilities, and protective anger at having his methods exposed.

"The Council extends its formal gratitude," Crosby said, looking directly at Liam, who immediately dropped his gaze to the table. "Your observation skills may have saved hundreds of shifters from capture and experimentation."

I felt Liam's discomfort like a physical wave rolling off him. Public praise was still something he struggled with, especially from authority figures. His fingers gripped the edge of the table, knuckles whitening slightly.

Without thinking, I shifted again, moving close enough that my leg pressed lightly against the back of his chair—not touching him directly, but close enough that he could feel my presence, my support.

The tension in his shoulders eased fractionally. We'd developed our own language of proximity and pressure over the past weeks—how close was comforting versus suffocating, when touch was grounding versus overwhelming.

"We've prepared a formal commendation," Crosby said, removing an embossed document from his briefcase. "The Shifter Council recognizes Liam of the Soldiers of Fortune Motorcycle Club for exceptional service to shifter-kind."

He placed the document on the table and slid it toward Liam, who stared at it with an unreadable expression. I knew what this moment symbolized—not just recognition of his contributions, but formal acknowledgment of his existence after fifteen years of invisibility.

For someone who had survived by leaving no trace, having his name on an official document was both validation and vulnerability.

Butch looked to me, a question in his eyes. I gave a slight nod, indicating Liam was handling the moment well enough. Our silent communication had become seamless in the weeks since the attack—Butch deferring to my understanding of Liam's limits, me translating Liam's unspoken thoughts when necessary.

"The Council is particularly interested in how you developed such detailed knowledge of Victor's operation," Crosby said, fixing Liam with a penetrating stare. "Your tracking methods could be valuable for our other investigations."

Liam's body went completely still—the stillness of prey deciding whether to freeze or flee. I felt my muscles tense in response, prepared to intervene if necessary. This was straying dangerously close to questioning Liam's past, territory we'd all tacitly agreed was off-limits.

"I think we've covered enough ground for today," Butch said smoothly, rising from his chair. "The Soldiers of Fortune appreciate the Council's recognition and will continue to cooperate with your investigation where appropriate."

The dismissal was polite, but unmistakable. Crosby hesitated, clearly wanting to press further, but Butch's stance—arms crossed, shoulders squared—left no room for negotiation.

The investigator nodded once, gathering his materials with efficient movements. "Of course. We'll be in touch regarding the next phase of the investigation."

I remained standing behind Liam's chair as the formalities concluded, my presence a shield between my mate and the wolf shifter's probing questions. Fifteen years of running had taught Liam to recognize predatory interest, and right now, Crosby's curiosity about his methods felt far too much like hunting for comfort.

As the investigator finally exited, I felt the collective tension in the room release like air from a punctured tire. Liam's shoulders dropped a full inch, and I allowed my hand to settle lightly on one of them, offering the contact I'd been restraining throughout the meeting.

He didn't pull away. Progress that still made my heart swell, even weeks after he'd first allowed my touch without flinching.

"You did good, baby boy," I murmured, pitching my voice low enough that only he could hear. "Real good."

The door clicked shut behind Investigator Crosby and the artificial formality drained from the room like air from a popped balloon. Butch immediately loosened his tie with a grunt of relief. Bear slouched back in his chair, propping his boots on the table edge. I rolled my shoulders, grateful to shed the diplomatic stiffness I'd been maintaining throughout the presentation.

But Liam's reaction caught me completely off guard. Instead of relaxing, he snorted—an actual, audible sound of dismissal—and reached for his notepad.

His pencil scratched rapidly across the page, and he slid the pad toward Butch with unusual force. Two words stood out in his neat handwriting: *"Too easy."*

Butch raised an eyebrow, glancing between the notepad and Liam. "Care to elaborate?"

Something shifted in Liam then—a transformation so subtle yet profound that I found myself leaning forward, transfixed. His usual hunched posture began to straighten, his shoulders squaring as he pulled the notepad back and flipped to a fresh page.

His golden eyes, typically wary and quick to look away, now held a fierce intensity I'd only glimpsed during moments of danger.

"What's he saying?" Bear asked, dropping his boots from the table with a thud.

I moved to Liam's side as his pencil flew across the page, filling it with a complex web of connections. "He thinks the Council is only seeing the surface," I translated, though I was still processing what I was witnessing myself.

Liam's writing grew messier, more urgent, his normal careful print giving way to rapid notations that crowded the margins. He was writing faster than I'd ever seen, filling the page with observations about shipment schedules, communication protocols, security measures that seemed too sophisticated for Victor's known resources.

*"Look at the pattern,"* he wrote, underlining the words three times before sketching a timeline of raids. *"Seven facilities taken down, but all tertiary. Main processing centers untouched. Why?"*

Butch leaned closer, his brow furrowing as he studied Liam's notes. "You think they're being deliberately fed the smaller operations?"

Liam nodded emphatically, flipping to another page where he sketched a hierarchical diagram. Victor's name appeared midway down the structure, with question marks above him connected by dotted lines to other names I didn't recognize. He tapped his pencil against the topmost question mark with such force that the lead snapped.

Without missing a beat, I handed him another pencil from my pocket—I'd started carrying spares the day after he'd accepted the Security Advisor position. Our fingers brushed during the exchange, and I felt a slight tremor in his hand—not from fear, but from the intensity of focus radiating through him.

*"These communication patterns,"* he wrote, his handwriting growing even more erratic with urgency, *"suggest military-grade encryption. Victor doesn't have access to that level of tech without higher connections."*

I watched in amazement as he filled page after page, detailing surveillance blind spots the Council had missed, extraction routes that followed patterns dating back years before Victor's known involvement, funding sources that didn't match the operational scale we'd witnessed.

"Jesus," Gunner muttered, moving to look over Liam's shoulder. "How the hell did you put all this together?"

Liam didn't pause to answer, instead flipping to yet another page where he began drawing what looked like a map—not of physical locations, but of organizational relationships. Lines connected seemingly unrelated incidents across years and states, forming a pattern that was invisible unless you knew exactly what to look for.

And Liam did. He knew precisely what to look for because he'd been watching, cataloging, analyzing for fifteen years while the rest of us saw only what was directly in front of us.

"The Council is satisfied with Victor's capture because they don't see the whole picture," I summarized for the others, finding my voice. "They think they've cut off the head of the snake, but Liam's saying Victor was just a middle manager."

Liam's hand paused mid-stroke, and he glanced up at me with an expression of surprise—not that I'd understood, but that I'd articulated it so precisely. A flash of something like pride crossed his features before he returned to his work, adding more connections to his diagram.

*"Security measures at the Wyoming facility,"* he wrote, his pencil tip pressing hard enough to leave indentations in the pages beneath, *"identical*

*to government black site protocols. Who authorized that? Not Victor."*

I placed a hand on the back of Liam's chair, steadying myself as much as offering him support. This wasn't the feral, frightened creature I'd been carefully coaxing from the shadows for months. This wasn't even the brave but traumatized man who'd placed himself between me and Victor's knife.

This was something else entirely—a tactical analyst with skills honed through years of life-or-death observations, a mind that connected dots others couldn't even see existed.

*"The shipping manifests Crosby showed," Liam continued writing, "falsified. Real shipments go out Tuesdays and Fridays, not Mondays as records indicate. I watched the Nevada facility for three weeks before the raid. Eighteen trucks, not the twelve they documented."*

His golden eyes burned with an almost feverish light as he worked, the kind of focus that consumed everything around it. He wasn't writing for us anymore—he was in conversation with himself, externally processing years of observations that had previously existed only in his head.

*"Council is using standard playbook," he noted in the margin. "Predictable. They'll be anticipated. Next raids already compromised."*

"How can you be sure?" Butch asked, his voice carrying none of the skepticism it might have held weeks ago.

Liam looked up, his expression so certain that it sent a chill down my spine. He didn't write his answer this time, just held up five fingers, then spread his hands wide in a gesture that clearly meant: *I've seen this pattern before, five times over.*

"Shit," Bear muttered, running a hand over his face. "So Victor's capture is what—a distraction?"

Liam nodded, returning to his notebook where he sketched what appeared to be evacuation routes from the remaining facilities the Council had targeted. His notes indicated likely timeframes, security responses, even the probability of evidence destruction at each location.

I'd always known Liam was intelligent—you don't survive fifteen years alone without razor-sharp instincts—but this went beyond survival intelligence. This was methodical, strategic analysis that put most military intelligence officers I'd known to shame.

"The Council thinks they've crippled the operation," I said slowly, piecing together what Liam was showing us. "But what they've really done

is trigger a predetermined contingency plan. One that Victor's bosses expected and prepared for."

Liam tapped his pencil against my words, nodding vigorously. Then he wrote one final note, his handwriting steadying as he outlined the conclusion of his analysis: *"They're not just relocating. They're accelerating. Council raids provided perfect cover to move to next phase. Whatever they're planning happens soon."*

A heavy silence fell over the room as we all processed the implications. The victory celebration the Council had been planning suddenly felt hollow, premature.

"How long have you been tracking all this?" Gunner asked, gesturing to the pages of diagrams and connections.

Liam hesitated, then held up his hand with fingers and thumb spread—five years—then closed his fingers and spread them twice more. Fifteen years.

The entire time he'd been running, he'd also been watching. Documenting. Analyzing. While we'd been seeing him as someone to protect, he'd been developing a comprehensive understanding of the very threats we were now facing.

My bear rumbled inside me, but it wasn't the usual protective growl. It was something more like respect—deep, profound recognition of a strength I'd completely underestimated.

I'd been so focused on Liam's trauma, his fear, his silence, that I'd missed the strategic mind operating behind those golden eyes. I'd seen his survival skills as defensive, never considering that observation itself could be an offensive weapon.

"You've been ten steps ahead of all of us, haven't you, baby boy?" I murmured, softly enough that only he could hear.

He glanced up at me, a flicker of uncertainty crossing his face—as if he expected disappointment or disbelief. Instead, I let him see the pride and amazement I felt, my chest swelling with something that went beyond mere admiration.

Liam ducked his head, but not before I caught the ghost of a smile touching his lips. His pencil resumed its dance across the paper, but his posture remained tall, confident—a physical embodiment of the transformation taking place between us.

The feral kitten was revealing himself to be a strategic lynx. And as I watched him work, I realized I wasn't losing the vulnerable mate I'd sworn to protect—I was discovering new dimensions of him I'd never thought to look for.

My protective instincts didn't diminish, but they evolved in that moment, expanding to make room for a partnership more equal than I'd imagined possible. Not protector and protected, but two different kinds of strength, complementing and enhancing each other.

"So what do we do with this?" Butch asked, gesturing to Liam's extensive notes, pulling me from my reverie.

Liam looked up from his work, his golden eyes clear and focused as he wrote a single word: "*Prepare.*"

Butch studied Liam's notes for a long moment, his expression unreadable as his eyes tracked across the complex web of connections my mate had outlined. The silence in the room felt charged, heavy with the weight of what Liam had just revealed.

When Butch finally looked up, his decision was written in the set of his jaw before he spoke a word. He nodded once to himself, then pushed back from the table and crossed to the cabinet at the far end of the conference room.

I watched curiously as he entered a combination on the cabinet's digital lock. The door swung open to reveal not weapons or documents as I'd expected, but a stack of carefully folded leather. Butch reached in and withdrew what was unmistakably a club cut—the leather vest that marked full membership in the Soldiers of Fortune MC.

My heart rate kicked up as Butch returned to the table. This wasn't just any cut. The leather gleamed with newness, and as Butch unfolded it, I could see it had been sized precisely for Liam's slender frame. But what caught my eye—what made my breath catch—was the patch sewn onto the right chest: "Security Advisor" in bold lettering above our club insignia.

Liam had received the patch a week ago, but this was different. This was the full cut, the tangible symbol of belonging that each of us remembered receiving with perfect clarity. The day you got your cut wasn't just another day—it was a dividing line in your life, separating before from after.

Butch placed the cut on the table in front of Liam with ceremonial care. "The position isn't just official on paper anymore," he said, his voice

carrying the weight of club authority. "The club needs your eyes, Liam. Not just for Victor's operation, but for everything that comes our way."

Liam stared at the cut, his expression cycling through emotions so quickly I could barely track them—shock, disbelief, a flash of what might have been fear, and finally, something I'd seen only in the rarest moments: pure, unguarded joy. His fingers hovered above the leather, not quite touching, as if he feared it might vanish if he made contact.

"This isn't charity or gratitude," Butch continued, his tone softer but no less firm. "This is recognition of what you bring to this club. What you've always brought, even when we didn't know to look for it."

I'd known this was coming—had even helped Gunner measure Liam for the cut while he slept one night, neither of us wanting to ruin the surprise by asking for his sizes. But knowing hadn't prepared me for the impact of seeing it happen, of watching my mate face this moment of formal acceptance after fifteen years of existing on the margins.

Liam's hand finally descended to touch the leather, his fingers tracing the stitching of the patch with reverent precision. The same fingers that had sketched complex intelligence diagrams moments ago now moved with a trembling delicacy that made my chest tighten.

"It's yours," Butch said simply. "If you want it."

Liam's golden eyes lifted to meet Butch's, then shifted to find mine, a question in their depths I could read without words: Is this real? Is this happening?

I nodded, not trusting my voice. The lump in my throat had appeared without warning, catching me off guard with its intensity.

Liam returned his attention to the cut, then reached for his notepad one more time. His pencil moved with careful precision as he wrote a single line: *"I've never belonged anywhere before."*

"You belong here," Butch replied without hesitation. "You earned your place in this club long before any of us realized it."

A rare, genuine smile spread across Liam's face—not the ghost of a smile I'd grown accustomed to, but a full expression that transformed his features, softening the hard edges survival had carved into him. It reached his golden eyes, making them shine with an inner light I'd glimpsed only in our most private moments together.

Something profound shifted inside me as I watched him lift the cut from the table. This wasn't just about Liam joining our club—it was about me

seeing him, truly seeing him, perhaps for the first time.

For months, I'd thought of him as my feral kitten—someone to coax from the shadows, to protect, to heal. I'd defined our relationship through the lens of what I could offer him: safety, food, shelter, protection. My bear had claimed him as mate with all the possessive instincts that entailed, viewing his trauma as something I could shield him from.

But as I watched him slide his arms into the leather cut, adjusting it across his shoulders with growing confidence, a clarity washed over me so powerful that my breath caught audibly in my chest.

Liam had never been just surviving. He'd been studying. Analyzing. Preparing.

While I'd been leaving food on a picnic table thinking I was helping a stray, he'd been mapping our compound's vulnerabilities. While I'd been patting myself on the back for coaxing him inside, he'd been documenting threats most of us never saw coming. While I'd been protecting him from Victor's men, he'd been tracking their organization across five states for years.

My bear rumbled deep in my chest, not with the usual protective growl, but with profound approval—recognition of a strength that complemented our own. My hands unclenched at my sides, the perpetual readiness to defend easing into something more balanced, more equal.

Liam straightened his shoulders, the leather cut settling perfectly across his frame as if it had always belonged there. The transformation was stunning. The hunched, wary creature I'd first encountered seemed to belong to another lifetime. This Liam stood tall, his golden eyes clear and direct, his scarred face no longer hidden in shadow, but worn with quiet dignity.

In finding my mate, I hadn't just gained someone to protect. I'd found a fierce protector whose methods were different from mine but no less effective. Where I used physical strength and direct confrontation, he used observation, pattern recognition, and strategic analysis. Together, we created something neither of us could be alone.

"Looks good on you," Bear commented gruffly, the simple words carrying approval that meant more coming from him than flowery praise would from others.

Gunner nodded his agreement, a rare smile crossing his usually stern features. "Security Advisor suits you better than 'feral kitten' ever did."

Liam's eyes found mine again, seeking my reaction. The vulnerability was still there—fifteen years of trauma didn't disappear with a leather cut—but it was balanced now by something stronger, something I was only beginning to fully appreciate.

I stepped forward, placing my hand on his shoulder where it met the cut's collar. The leather was cool beneath my palm, the patch rough with embroidery. But what struck me most was how Liam leaned slightly into my touch rather than away from it—a subtle shift that spoke volumes about our evolving relationship.

"Partners," I said quietly, the word encompassing far more than I could articulate.

Liam's hand came up to cover mine, pressing it more firmly against his shoulder. He nodded once, decisive and clear.

The roles we'd started with—protector and protected, rescuer and rescued—hadn't disappeared, but they'd blurred into something richer, something that acknowledged the strength and vulnerability in both of us.

I would always be driven to shield him from harm, and he would always apply his analytical mind to identifying threats before they reached us.

Different methods, same goal. Perfect complementary balance.

As we stood there in the conference room, his hand over mine, the leather cut making official what had been true all along, I realized we'd both been finding our way to this moment since the first plate of food I'd left on that picnic table. Not to erase our differences or heal all our wounds, but to discover how perfectly they fit together—his scars and my strength, my protection and his perception.

My feral kitten had become our security advisor. And somehow, witnessing that transformation had changed me just as profoundly as it had changed him.

# Chapter Eighteen

~ Rooster ~

I watched Liam's face as I led him through the rebuilt compound, his golden eyes taking in every detail of our restored home. The sun hadn't fully risen yet, casting everything in that gentle light that made even the most ordinary things look like promises. My heart hammered against my ribs as we approached our bedroom door.

After weeks of planning, of sneaking contractors over to work on this section of the retrofit while Liam was busy with security rounds, of Bear and Gunner running interference to keep my mate from discovering my surprise, the moment had finally arrived.

"Almost there, baby boy," I murmured, squeezing his slender hand in mine.

The hallway still smelled of fresh paint and new drywall, a far cry from the gunpowder and blood that had saturated everything after Victor's attack.

We'd rebuilt stronger than before—reinforced walls that could withstand more than random gunfire, bulletproof windows and steel doors, hidden security features that Liam himself had designed, backup systems for every essential service.

The physical scars had healed, much like the ones that marked Liam's body—still visible but no longer raw.

Our footsteps echoed against the new hardwood flooring, the sound oddly intimate in the predawn quiet. Most of the club was still sleeping, giving us this rare moment of solitude. I'd planned it that way, wanting no distractions when I revealed what I'd created for him.

"Close your eyes," I said when we reached our bedroom door.

Liam hesitated, that instinctive wariness still surfacing occasionally despite the trust we'd built. Then his eyes fluttered closed, a small act of faith that still humbled me after all these months.

I moved behind him, covering his closed eyes with my large hands, feeling the warmth of his skin against my palms. "I've got you," I assured him, gently guiding him forward into our room. "Just a few more steps."

I navigated him carefully through the doorway, acutely aware of his smaller frame as I directed him across our bedroom. The standard furnishings were familiar—the king-sized bed where we'd spent countless

nights talking, the dresser that still held more of my clothes than his, the nightstand with Percy's notebook resting on top.

Nothing here would surprise him.

"Ready?" I asked, positioning him to face the far wall.

I felt him nod beneath my hands. Taking a deep breath, I lowered my palms from his eyes, letting them rest on his shoulders instead. "Open your eyes, baby boy."

I watched as his eyes opened, blinking as they adjusted to the soft morning light filtering through our bedroom blinds. His gaze swept the room, confusion flickering across his features as he noted nothing unusual. Then I turned him slightly, directing his attention to what had once been a solid wall.

"There," I said softly, pointing to the glass door that now stood where blank drywall had been before.

Liam's head tilted in that curious way that reminded me of his lynx nature, his eyes narrowing as he studied the new addition. I could feel the subtle tension in his shoulders beneath my hands, not fear, but intense curiosity.

"Go on," I encouraged, giving him a gentle nudge forward. "Open it."

He crossed the room with those silent, graceful steps that still amazed me, reaching for the handle with cautious fingers. The door slid open with a whisper of sound, revealing what lay beyond.

I held my breath as Liam froze in the doorway, his body going utterly still with shock.

Beyond the glass door stretched a space that couldn't possibly exist in the middle of a motorcycle club compound—a private open-air atrium connected directly to our bedroom.

Natural earth replaced concrete, covered in lush grass that would be soft under bare feet. Small trees grew from carefully placed mounds, their branches reaching toward a ceiling of reinforced glass panels that allowed sunlight to stream through while protecting from rain and snow. Flowering bushes created secluded corners, their blooms selected for year-round color and the butterflies they would attract in warmer months.

At the far end, a small waterfall trickled over carefully arranged stones into a clear pool, the gentle sound of flowing water filling the space with soothing white noise. The entire area was enclosed—secure, private, yet

open to the sky through the glass ceiling that would let Liam see the stars at night without leaving our room.

Liam took a hesitant step forward, then another, moving as if in a trance. I remained in the doorway, giving him space to explore what I'd created. His fingers trailed over a smooth river rock, touched the soft petal of a purple coneflower, dipped into the cool water of the pool. He moved with increasing confidence through the space, his golden eyes wide with wonder.

When he reached the center, he slipped off his shoes and socks, pressing his bare feet against the grass. I saw his eyes close, his head tilt back slightly as he connected with the earth beneath him.

I knew what he was doing—communing with the plants in that mysterious way he'd described, but I could never fully understand. The way that had kept him alive for fifteen years when everyone else around him died.

After a long moment, he opened his eyes and looked back at me. My breath caught at the sight of tears streaming freely down his scarred face—not tears of pain or fear, but something else entirely. Something I'd glimpsed only in our closest moments.

Joy. Pure, unguarded joy.

I crossed the threshold then, unable to stay away any longer. "Do you like it?" I asked, my voice rougher than I'd intended.

Liam moved toward me with purpose, closing the distance between us in three quick strides. Then his arms were around me, holding me with a fierceness that took me by surprise. His face pressed against my chest, his tears dampening my shirt as his body trembled against mine.

I wrapped my arms around him, one hand cradling the back of his head. "I wanted you to have a safe place," I murmured into his hair. "Somewhere you could shift without fear. Somewhere you could commune with nature, but still be safely inside our home. Somewhere that felt like freedom, but was still protected."

He nodded against my chest, his fingers gripping my shirt so tightly his knuckles turned white. When he finally pulled back, his golden eyes were red-rimmed, but blazing with emotion.

He reached for the notepad he always kept in his pocket, the one Percy had given him months ago. His hands were steady as he wrote, the pencil moving with confident strokes across the page.

When he turned it for me to see, the simple message made my heart stutter: *"I'm ready to cement our bond."*

I stared at the words, hardly daring to believe what I was reading. We'd discussed the mate bond, of course—the claiming bite that would link us forever, the permanent commitment it represented. I'd promised to wait until he was ready, never wanting to rush him into something so irrevocable.

"Are you certain?" I asked, searching his face. "Liam, this isn't something we can undo. Once we're bonded, it's forever."

Instead of reaching for his notepad again, Liam's throat worked visibly. His lips parted, and for a moment, I thought he was simply taking a deep breath. Then, in a voice rough from disuse, but unmistakably his, he spoke three words that changed everything:

"I'm sure, mate."

\* \* \* \*

~ Liam ~

My own voice surprised me as Rooster guided me back into our bedroom, his large hands gentle but possessive on my frame. The sound hung between us—rough from disuse, barely more than a whisper, but mine.

After fifteen years of mostly silence, those three words had scraped against my throat like gravel, yet speaking them had felt right in a way nothing else had since I was seven years old.

I watched Rooster's face, saw the wonder and desire darkening his eyes as he processed what had just happened—not just my agreement to the claiming, but the gift of my voice after so long.

"Liam," he breathed, my name a prayer on his lips. His fingers cupped my face with such reverence that I felt my chest tighten. "You don't have to speak again if you're not ready. That was enough."

I nodded, grateful for his understanding. The words had come naturally in that moment of decision, but I wasn't sure when—or if—more would follow. Instead of trying to force more speech, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his, letting my actions speak the volumes my voice couldn't yet manage.

Rooster responded immediately, his mouth claiming mine with hunger that matched my own. His kiss tasted of coffee and something uniquely him—warm and spicy and home.

I felt my body melting into his as his arms wrapped around me, one hand sliding up to cradle the back of my head while the other pressed against my lower back, drawing me closer until our bodies aligned from chest to thigh.

His tongue teased the seam of my lips until I opened for him, allowing him to deepen the kiss. I'd been so touch-starved before him, so defensive of my personal space that even accidental contact had sent me into panic.

Now I craved the heat of his skin against mine, the solid strength of his body anchoring me to the present instead of triggering memories of the past.

"I've waited so long for this," he murmured against my lips before trailing kisses along my jaw to the sensitive spot just below my ear. "For you to be ready. For you to choose this."

His hands moved to the hem of my shirt, pausing there in silent question. I nodded, lifting my arms to help him remove it. The cool air of the bedroom raised goosebumps across my skin, but they didn't last long as Rooster's warm palms smoothed over my chest, his thumbs brushing across my nipples until they hardened under his touch.

"Beautiful," he whispered, lowering his head to replace one thumb with his mouth. The hot, wet suction sent a jolt of pleasure straight to my groin, pulling a gasp from my throat.

I tugged at his shirt, suddenly desperate to feel his skin against mine. He straightened long enough to pull it over his head, revealing the expanse of his chest—broad and solid, dusted with red-gold hair that matched his beard.

The contrast between us was stark—his massive bear shifter physique making my leaner lynx form seem almost delicate in comparison.

But there was no inequality in our desire. His eyes reflected the same burning need I felt coursing through my veins.

His hands moved to my belt, those thick fingers displaying surprising dexterity as they unfastened my jeans and eased them down my hips along with my underwear.

I kicked them aside, standing naked before him without the shame or fear that had once ruled me. His gaze traveled over my body with open

appreciation, seeing past the scars that marked my skin to the man beneath.

"My turn," I whispered, reaching for his belt.

He groaned at the sound of my voice, standing perfectly still as I undressed him with trembling fingers. When he stepped out of his jeans, his erection jutted proudly between us—thick and heavy, intimidating in its size yet making my mouth water with anticipation.

Rooster led me to our bed, laying me down with careful hands before covering my body with his. The weight of him pressed me into the mattress, not crushing but grounding, making me feel protected rather than trapped. His mouth found mine again as his hand slid between us, wrapping around both our cocks and stroking slowly, the friction drawing a moan from deep in my chest.

"I need to prepare you," he murmured against my lips. "Don't want to hurt you."

I nodded, spreading my legs wider in invitation. Rooster reached for the lubricant in our nightstand, coating his fingers generously before returning to me. His eyes held mine as he circled my entrance with one thick finger, the cool gel warming quickly against my heated skin.

"Relax for me, baby boy," he crooned, easing the tip of his finger inside.

I forced my muscles to yield, breathing through the initial discomfort until it gave way to pleasure. By the time he added a second finger, I was pushing back against his hand, seeking more.

He worked me open with patient care, scissoring his fingers and crooking them until they found the spot that made me arch off the bed with a choked cry.

"That's it," he praised, adding a third finger. "So perfect for me. My beautiful mate."

His free hand caressed my chest, my sides, my thighs—touching me everywhere as if memorizing my body through his fingertips.

When he lowered his head to take my cock into his mouth while his fingers continued their careful stretching, I had to grip the sheets to anchor myself against the dual assault of sensation.

"Rooster," I gasped, one hand flying to tangle in his fiery hair. "Please. I'm ready."

He lifted his head, his eyes dark with need but still checking, still making sure. "You're certain?"

I nodded, beyond words again, but absolutely sure. This was what I wanted—what I'd been moving toward since that first plate of food left on a picnic table had shown me that not all humans were threats.

Rooster withdrew his fingers and positioned himself between my thighs, coating his length with lubricant. The blunt head of his cock pressed against my entrance, and I forced myself to relax as he pushed forward with careful restraint.

The stretch was intense, bordering on painful despite his thorough preparation, but I breathed through it, focusing on his face—on the love and concern etched into every line as he watched for any sign of discomfort.

"Still okay?" he whispered when he was fully seated inside me, his arms trembling with the effort of holding back.

I nodded, wrapping my legs around his waist to draw him even deeper. "Move," I managed to say, the word barely audible, but enough.

He began to withdraw and thrust back in, establishing a slow rhythm that gave my body time to adjust. Each stroke became easier than the last, discomfort fading entirely as pleasure built in its place.

I felt myself opening for him, not just physically, but something deeper, some part of myself I'd kept walled off for fifteen years of survival.

As our rhythm intensified, I became aware of something unexpected—a warmth spreading from where our bodies joined, different from physical pleasure. It was energy, distinctly Rooster's—protective, fierce, nurturing—flowing into me like honey, thick and sweet. My own energy rose to meet it, wilder and sharper, but no less powerful.

"Do you feel it?" Rooster gasped, his hips snapping forward with increasing urgency. "The bond forming."

I nodded, unable to find words for what was happening between us. Our shifter energies were intertwining—his bear heat merging with my lynx agility in waves that crested and receded with each thrust. It surrounded us like a visible aura, a golden-red glow that seemed to pulse with our shared heartbeat.

Rooster's movements became more forceful, his control slipping as our pleasure built toward its peak. I matched him thrust for thrust, my body singing with sensations I'd never imagined possible. His hand wrapped around my cock, stroking in time with his thrusts, pushing me closer to the edge.

"Liam," he groaned, his voice deeper, rougher—his bear nature rising to the surface. "I need to... the claiming bite..."

I tilted my head, exposing the juncture where my neck met my shoulder—the traditional place for a claiming mark. "Yes," I whispered, giving permission.

As our bodies drove toward completion, Rooster lowered his head, his breath hot against my skin. The moment his teeth broke through, sharp and decisive, pleasure exploded through me like a supernova.

My release hit with such force that my vision blacked out at the edges, my body arching beneath his as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed through me.

Rooster followed immediately, his cock pulsing deep inside me as he maintained the bite, sealing our bond with the ancient ritual of our kind. I felt something click into place between us—a connection that transcended the physical, binding our souls as surely as our bodies were joined.

When he finally released my neck, licking gently at the wound to encourage healing, some instinct I didn't know I had hit me and I struck fast, sinking my teeth into the soft flesh of Rooster's throat. His groan was more satisfaction than pained.

I could still feel him in my mind almost instantly—a warm, steady presence that hadn't been there before.

The mate-bond, complete and unbreakable.

He gathered me against his chest as we collapsed onto the bed, our bodies still joined, unwilling to separate just yet. Morning light streamed through both our bedroom window and the glass ceiling of the atrium he'd built for me, bathing us in golden warmth.

"I love you," he whispered against my temple, his fingers tracing gentle patterns on my skin.

I didn't need to speak for him to hear my response through our new bond—the emotion flowing freely between us, stronger than any words could express. But I gave him the gift of my voice anyway, one more time.

"I love you, too."

## Chapter Nineteen

~ Liam ~

The rumble of Rooster's motorcycle vibrated through my body as we pulled into the riverside pavilion. Three months ago, the noise and the crowd would have sent me retreating into the shadows. Now I tightened my arms around my mate's waist, breathing in his familiar scent of spices and leather as the engine quieted beneath us.

The Soldiers of Fortune's annual summer gathering spread before us, transformed for our official mating ceremony with wildflowers and hanging lights that caught the late afternoon sun.

I wasn't hiding anymore.

Rooster turned his head, his fiery beard brushing against my cheek. "Ready, baby boy?"

I nodded, then remembered that words came easier now. "Ready," I replied, my voice still rough from years of disuse, but stronger than it had been even a week ago.

I dismounted first, my boots landing with deliberate weight on the ground rather than the silent, cautious steps I'd once taken. The air carried the scent of cooking meat, beer, and the sweet fragrance of wildflowers that had been woven into intricate arrangements throughout the pavilion.

MC colors—black and gold—had been incorporated into everything, from the streamers hanging between wooden posts to the tablecloths covering the long tables arranged for the feast that would follow the ceremony.

My golden eyes scanned the crowd, still automatically cataloging exits and potential threats before I consciously reminded myself that these people were family now. Not threats. Family.

Butch approached us first, his imposing frame softened somewhat by the genuine smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. He extended his hand to me first—a gesture of respect that didn't escape my notice.

"Liam," he said, clasping my hand firmly. "Good to see you without a security report in hand for once."

I managed a small smile, remembering the stacks of surveillance logs and perimeter assessments I'd been producing as the club's Security Advisor. "Day off," I replied.

He laughed, the sound warming something inside me that had once been cold and wary. "Damn right it is. Today's about celebration, not work."

Bear materialized beside him, clapping Rooster on the back hard enough to make a lesser man stumble. "About damn time we made this official," he rumbled, his massive form blocking out the sun momentarily. "Thought I'd have to lock you two in a room until you set a date."

Rooster grinned, his arm sliding around my waist in a gesture that once would have made me flinch. Now I leaned into it, drawing strength from his touch. "Had to make sure the kitchen was fully rebuilt first," he joked. "Priorities."

Percy appeared at my side, moving with that peculiar mix of caution and purpose that I recognized in myself. Of everyone here, he understood me best—another damaged soul who'd found healing within the MC.

He offered a gentle hug that I returned without hesitation, another measure of how far I'd come. "Happy for you," Percy said simply, pulling back to meet my eyes. "For both of you."

"Thank you," I replied, holding his gaze longer than I once could have managed.

All around us, other MC members were gathering, their laughter mingling with the deeper rumble of motorcycle engines as late arrivals pulled in. Some faces I knew well from daily security briefings and patrols.

Others were more peripheral—extended family and allies from neighboring territories coming to witness the official mating ceremony of the MC's cook and their feral lynx security advisor.

Sammy and Joey, the fox shifter prospects, waved enthusiastically from where they were helping arrange chairs in a semi-circle near the water's edge.

Bug and Bear stood arm in arm near a massive grill where steaks sizzled, their matching leather wristbands catching the light—a reminder of their own mating ceremony ages ago.

"It's time," Butch announced, his voice carrying over the crowd with natural authority. "Soldiers of Fortune, front and center!"

Rooster's hand found mine, his thick fingers intertwining with my slender ones. "Last chance to run for the hills," he whispered, but the love shining in his eyes belied the teasing words.

I squeezed his hand. "Not running anymore."

We moved together to the center of the gathering, where Butch stood waiting. The crowd formed a circle around us, creating a living boundary of protection and witness. The sky above had begun to shift toward evening, painting everything in soft golden light that reminded me of the atrium Rooster had built for me—our private piece of wilderness inside the MC compound.

"Three months ago," Butch began, his voice carrying across the suddenly quiet gathering, "these two completed their mate bond in private. Today, they stand before their family to publicly affirm that commitment and receive the official recognition of the Soldiers of Fortune MC."

He turned to face us directly, his expression solemn despite the joy of the occasion. "Rooster, Liam—you've both found something rare in each other. Something worth protecting. Today we ask you to reaffirm your commitment not just to each other, but to this family that stands with you."

Rooster cleared his throat, his eyes never leaving mine as he began to speak. "Fifteen years ago, Liam lost everything. Then he survived alone in a world that had forgotten he existed." His voice roughened with emotion. "Three months ago, he chose me. Not because fate demanded it, not because some mystical mate bond forced his hand, but because he decided I was worth the risk after fifteen years of trusting no one."

I felt heat build behind my eyes as he continued.

"I promise to be worthy of that trust every day. To protect without smothering. To love without demanding. To create a home where my feral kitten never needs to run again—unless he's running toward me."

A tear escaped, trailing down my scarred cheek. Rooster reached up and brushed it away with his thumb, his touch infinitely gentle despite his massive hands.

Butch turned to me. "Liam?"

Three months ago, I'd managed just a few words during our private bonding. Now, with dozens of eyes on me, I took a deep breath and found my voice.

"I survived fifteen years by watching," I began, the words coming slowly but steadily. "Never participating. Just observing from shadows." I swallowed hard, forcing myself to continue despite the weight of so many gazes. "Rooster saw me when I didn't want to be seen. Fed me when I was hungry. Waited when I needed time."

I heard a few surprised murmurs from those who had never heard me speak more than a word or two. Bear's eyebrows had nearly disappeared into his hairline. Bug was beaming with undisguised pride.

"I choose you," I continued, echoing the first words I'd written to Rooster months ago. "Today. Tomorrow. Every day. My voice is yours. My heart is yours. My life is yours."

By the time I finished, several of the toughest bikers were discretely wiping their eyes, and Rooster looked like he might crush me in his embrace. The mate bond between us hummed with emotion too powerful for words, sending waves of love and pride back and forth between our connected souls.

Butch cleared his throat, visibly affected but maintaining his dignified role. "The Soldiers of Fortune recognize this mating bond and welcome you both as formal, acknowledged mates within our family."

He gestured to Bear, who stepped forward carrying a small wooden box. Inside lay two leather wristbands, black with the MC insignia tooled into the leather in gold. Below the club symbol, our names had been carefully worked into the design—"Rooster & Liam" encircled by a pattern of flame and vine that represented our individual natures perfectly intertwined.

Rooster fastened mine around my wrist first, his fingers lingering on my pulse point. I returned the gesture, securing his band with hands that no longer trembled when all eyes were upon me.

"What has been claimed in private is now acknowledged by all," Butch declared. "Let no one challenge this bond."

A cheer erupted from the gathered crowd, the sound washing over me like a physical wave. Three months ago, such noise would have sent me bolting for cover. Now I stood steady, Rooster's arm around my shoulders, feeling for the first time since I was seven years old that I truly belonged.

Food and drinks flowed freely after the ceremony ended. I sat at a table near the edge of the pavilion, watching the celebration unfold through golden lynx eyes that missed nothing. The familiar weight of Rooster's leather wristband against my skin felt right, like it had always belonged there.

Three months ago, I would have been hidden in the shadows, tracking movements and cataloging potential threats. Now I sipped a beer and let the warmth of belonging wash over me as club members stopped by to offer congratulations.

Rooster had been pulled away to hear Bear's latest bawdy joke, his booming laughter carrying across the pavilion to where I sat. I didn't mind the brief separation. The mate bond hummed between us even at a distance, a constant reassurance that I was never truly alone anymore.

My attention caught on Sammy, the young fox shifter prospect, who was watching me from across the gathering. Unlike the casual glances others threw my way, his stare carried a focused intensity that reminded me of myself—the watchfulness of someone who had learned to observe before engaging.

I'd spoken more words during the ceremony than I typically did in a week. My throat felt raw from the unaccustomed use, but not painfully so. Progress, like Rooster always said. Small steps forward.

Sammy approached my table with careful movements, his red-gold hair catching the last rays of sunlight. Despite being part of the MC for months now, he still carried himself with the wariness of someone who expected to be sent away at any moment. I recognized that look.

Had worn it myself not so long ago.

"Can I sit?" he asked, gesturing to the empty chair beside me.

I nodded, then added, "Yes," because words were gifts I could now give, even when they weren't strictly necessary.

He settled into the chair, fidgeting slightly with the prospect patch on his cut. "That thing you do," he began, his voice dropping lower, "with the plants. Bug told me about it. He said you..." he trailed off, as if unsure how to phrase his question without sounding offensive.

"Talk to them," I finished for him.

"Yeah." His eyes widened slightly, perhaps surprised by my direct acknowledgment. "Is that... can you teach someone?"

The request caught me off guard. No one had ever asked me to share this ability—this connection that had kept me alive when everyone else had died. It had been my secret, my advantage, my private comfort in fifteen years of isolation.

But that was before Rooster. Before the MC. Before I'd discovered that sharing didn't always mean losing.

I set my beer down and stood. "Come with me."

I led Sammy away from the pavilion, toward a quieter corner of the riverside property where herb gardens and native plants grew in carefully

tended beds. The landscaping had been my project, suggested by Butch after I'd redesigned our security systems.

"Might as well make it beautiful as well as functional," he'd said when I'd proposed incorporating plants that would serve as both early warning system and food source.

We reached a quiet spot where rosemary, basil, and thyme grew alongside native wildflowers. I stopped, kicking off my boots and socks without explanation. Sammy watched curiously, but followed my example when I motioned for him to do the same.

"Skin contact helps," I explained, feeling the cool earth beneath my bare feet. "Plants respond to touch, vibration. Energy."

I knelt beside a flourishing basil plant, its aromatic leaves full and vibrant in the evening air. Sammy joined me, his movements carrying the natural grace of his fox nature.

"Give me your hands," I instructed.

He extended his hands, palm up. I took them and placed them gently around the basil plant's stem, making sure his skin made contact with both the plant and the soil surrounding it.

"Close your eyes," I said. "Feel first. Listening comes later."

Sammy obediently closed his eyes, his expression shifting from curiosity to concentration. I watched his face, recognizing the initial confusion I'd seen in Rooster when I'd first tried to explain this connection.

"What am I supposed to feel?" Sammy asked after a moment, his eyes still closed.

"Pulse," I replied. "Plants have heartbeats. Different rhythm than ours. Slower. Steady."

I placed my own hands beside his, establishing my connection with the plant. The familiar sensation flowed through me—the gentle, persistent life force that existed in all growing things. Not thoughts like humans had, not emotions as we understood them, but patterns. Rhythms. Information coded in ways that had taken me years to interpret.

"I don't feel anything," Sammy admitted, frustration edging his voice.

"Try this," I suggested, moving his hands to a different position. "Don't try so hard. Plants aren't loud like people. They whisper."

I demonstrated by closing my own eyes, letting my shoulders relax as I sank into the familiar connection. "Feel that vibration? That's water moving through stem. Reaching leaves. Sun converted to energy."

Sammy's eyes remained closed, his brow furrowed in concentration. Then, gradually, his expression shifted—surprise flickering across his features. "There's... something. Like a humming?"

I nodded, though he couldn't see it. "Yes. That's it."

I let him feel the sensation for another minute, watching as wonder replaced concentration on his face. Then I decided to show him something more—something I rarely revealed to anyone.

"Watch," I said, withdrawing my hands from the plant.

I held my palm about six inches from the basil plant, focusing my energy and intent. Slowly, deliberately, the plant's stem bent toward my hand, leaves reaching as if drawn by an invisible force. Not touching, not physically manipulated, but responding to my call.

Sammy gasped, his eyes wide. "Holy shit! You're not even touching it!"

I smiled slightly, letting the plant return to its natural position.

"Communication goes both ways. I listen. They respond."

"Can I learn to do that?" he asked, excitement replacing his usual caution.

"Maybe," I answered honestly. "Starts with listening. Feeling. Fox shifters have good instincts. Might take time."

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Rooster watching us from a distance, his massive frame outlined against the sunset. Bug stood beside him, their heads bent in conversation. I didn't need to hear them to know they were talking about me—about how different I was now from the feral creature who had once hidden in these same bushes rather than face a single question.

I felt a strange pride in that observation—in being seen without fear filling my chest. In being witnessed teaching rather than hiding.

"Plants saved my life," I told Sammy, the words coming more easily than they would have even a month ago. "When everyone left. When I was alone. They warned me of dangers. Showed me safe paths. Guided me to food and water."

Sammy's expression sobered as he absorbed this glimpse into my past—the fifteen years of solitary survival I rarely discussed. "That's why you're so good at security stuff," he said with sudden understanding. "You've got extra eyes everywhere."

I nodded. "Extra ears too."

Bug had moved away from Rooster now, heading toward the food tables, but Rooster remained—watching me with such naked pride that I could feel it through our bond even at this distance.

Three months ago, his observation would have made me uncomfortable, would have triggered the instinct to disappear.

Now I met his gaze directly, letting my own pride flow back to him through the bond. Look at me, I thought. Look at what I can do now. Look at who I'm becoming because you believed I could.

"So, can we try again?" Sammy asked, drawing my attention back to him. "I want to learn how you do that thing with your hand."

I settled more comfortably on the ground, appreciating his enthusiasm. "Start smaller," I advised, guiding his hand back to the plant. "First conversation is always 'hello.'"

As the evening light faded around us, I continued my careful instruction, finding joy in sharing something that had once been my most closely guarded secret. The words came more easily with each explanation, my voice growing stronger rather than weaker with use.

Behind us, the celebration continued—music and laughter spilling from the pavilion. But here in this quiet corner, with soil beneath my feet and plants responding to my touch, I was building a different kind of connection. Not just to the natural world that had saved me, but to the human one that had finally welcomed me home.

As twilight settled over the gathering, I felt a gentle tug in my awareness—like fingers plucking at invisible strings connected to my consciousness. The plants along the riverbank were trying to tell me something.

I slipped away from the celebration, moving silently through the deepening shadows toward the water's edge. No one noticed my departure except Rooster, whose eyes I felt on my back as I walked away. Through our bond, I sent reassurance—not running, just listening.

The music and laughter faded behind me as I reached the riverbank. Without hesitation, I kicked off my boots and socks again, letting my bare feet sink into the cool soil. The earth here was rich and damp, alive with information that flowed into me through skin contact.

I closed my eyes, focusing on the messages coming from the reeds that swayed at the water's edge, from the ancient willows whose roots drank

deeply from the river, from the night-blooming flowers just beginning to open their petals to the evening air.

Something was different tonight. Something was crossing.

I stood perfectly still, head tilted slightly as I sifted through the plant whispers. Fifteen years of survival had honed this ability to a razor's edge. Plants didn't communicate in words or pictures, but in sensations, vibrations, patterns of growth and movement that I'd learned to interpret as clearly as spoken language. And tonight, they were telling me about visitors.

Not human. Not bear, like most of the MC members. Something else.

I heard Rooster's approach long before his arms wrapped around me from behind—his heavy footsteps, his familiar scent carried on the evening breeze, the way nearby plants bent slightly in response to his passing.

Three months ago, even expected contact would have made me flinch. Now I leaned back against his solid chest, drawing strength from his warmth.

"Trees talking again?" he murmured against my ear, his breath stirring my hair.

I nodded, keeping my eyes closed to maintain the delicate connection. The information was becoming clearer now, filtering through my consciousness as the plants continued their silent reports.

"Lynx shifters," I said softly, opening my golden eyes to stare across the water where twilight shadows deepened among the trees. I raised my hand, pointing to the far shore. "Passing through. Maybe... my family."

Rooster's arms tightened slightly around me, surprise and concern flowing through our bond. "Your family?" he repeated, voice careful, but not dismissive. He had never questioned my abilities, not since the day I'd led the MC straight to Victor's surveillance devices.

"Three of them," I continued, the information becoming clearer as I focused. "Female. Male. Young one. Moving north. Following game trails."

I felt the moment Rooster processed what this might mean—what I might have just discovered after fifteen years of believing I was the only lynx shifter to survive wherever I had come from.

His large hand came up to rest against my heart, a grounding touch we'd established months ago. "Do you want to find them?" he asked, no hesitation in his voice despite what it might mean for us. "We could cross the river, track them. Tonight, if you want."

I turned in his arms, looking up at his face illuminated by the rising moon. His fiery beard caught the silver light, his eyes steady on mine, filled with nothing but support.

I reached up to touch his cheek, marveling at how far we'd come—from the cook who left food on a picnic table to the mate who would cross rivers in the night if I asked it of him.

"Tomorrow," I decided. "Tonight is ours."

Relief and love pulsed through our bond, but Rooster was careful not to let it show too clearly on his face. Always balancing his needs with mine, never wanting me to feel pressured by his emotions.

"Whatever you want, baby boy," he said. "Whatever you decide, I'm with you. If they're your blood family, if you want to meet them—"

"Even if they are," I interrupted, the words coming more easily than I would have thought possible months ago, "this is my home now. You are my family."

His eyes softened, the love there so naked and raw that three months ago I would have looked away, unable to bear the intensity. Now I held his gaze, letting him see that I meant every word.

I took his hand and led him away from the riverbank to the center of a small clearing ringed by ancient oak trees. The grass here was soft beneath our feet, illuminated by patches of moonlight filtering through the canopy above.

As we stood together in the clearing, I felt the plants around us responding to my presence—leaves turning toward me despite the lack of sunlight, grass blades bending slightly in our direction, wildflowers releasing extra perfume into the night air.

"They know you," Rooster observed, watching the subtle movements of vegetation around us.

I nodded. "I've been working with them. Since the security redesign."

The plants hadn't just been warning systems or food sources in my design. They had been communication networks, living sensors that could tell me more about potential threats than any camera system.

What I hadn't told Butch when proposing the design was how deeply personal the connection was—how each plant I'd helped place and nurture had become an extension of myself, a thread in the protective web I'd woven around my new family.

"Whatever you find across that river," Rooster said quietly, "whatever part of your past might be waiting there—remember that you'll never have to face it alone again."

The evening breeze picked up slightly, rustling through the surrounding trees in what almost sounded like whispered agreement. I stood perfectly still, absorbing both Rooster's promise and nature's response.

For fifteen years, I'd survived by listening when others didn't, by noticing what others overlooked. Now that same ability had possibly located my blood relatives, offering answers to questions I'd long ago stopped asking.

I felt no panic at the prospect, no urge to run either toward or away from this discovery. Instead, I felt something I'd never expected to feel again after being abandoned at that bus station fifteen years ago: curiosity unmarred by fear.

Rooster's arms encircled me from behind again, his chin resting on top of my head. I turned within the circle of his embrace, meeting his gaze directly. The moonlight caught in his fiery beard, turning the copper strands to silver and gold. His eyes were steady on mine, patient and loving and completely present.

Three months ago, I had written those words to him: I choose you. Then, they had been a milestone—the first real connection I'd allowed myself in fifteen years of isolation. Now, I had words to match those feelings, words that had been buried beneath trauma and fear for too long.

"I love you," I said clearly, the declaration falling from my lips without hesitation or roughness. Three simple words, spoken completely and confidently for the first time.

Rooster's breath caught, his eyes widening slightly. He'd heard variations of this—had felt it through our bond, had seen it in my actions, had read it in my written notes. But hearing it spoken, declared aloud without prompting or hesitation, was something different entirely.

"I love you too, Liam," he replied, his voice thick with emotion. "More than I ever thought possible."

We stood together in that clearing as true night settled around us, our silhouettes merging into one shape against the backdrop of the rising moon.

Behind us, the celebration continued at the pavilion. Across the river, potential answers waited to be discovered. But here, in this moment, was

everything that mattered—the security I'd found, the voice I'd reclaimed, and the mate who had waited patiently through it all.

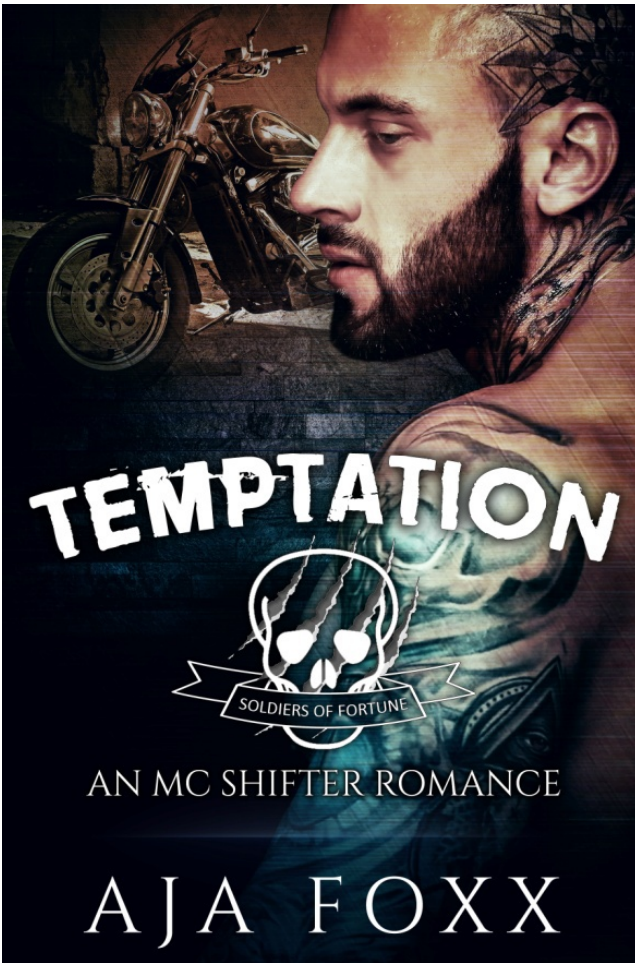
The plants whispered around us in their ancient language, bearing witness to what had grown between us—something as natural and unstoppable as their own reaching toward the light.

I had spent fifteen years communing with the natural world while avoiding the human one. Now, finally, I had found my place in both.

~ The End ~

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# Temptation



*Soldiers of Fortune 4*

~ Gearhead ~

Kidnapping your mate was perfectly acceptable, especially if his life was in danger. I had no idea where that danger was coming from, but I knew my MC brothers could help me keep Percy safe until I eliminated the threat. If I could convince him to let me claim him along the way, even better.

~ Percy ~

I had spent a large portion of my life hiding from the world to keep myself safe. When I was suddenly kidnapped by the sexiest man I had ever seen, I couldn't bring myself to protest. Life for me was never this exciting. Not only that, he swore we were mates. As a fox shifter, I knew about mates, but I wasn't sure what it all entailed. I was willing to stick around to find out, if I didn't die first.

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## Story Excerpt

"Marry me."

My eyes widened as I slowly glanced over my shoulder. I kind of expected to see some guy down on his knee as he proposed to his girl. I didn't expect to see a bearded biker standing behind me.

A very large bearded biker with a massive amount of tattoos running from his head, down his neck, and then to his arms. Made me wonder just how far under his white tank top they went.

I quickly turned back around when his brown eyes met mine and then took a step closer to the coffee counter. My heart seemed to be trying to climb right out of my chest. I clutched my cell phone tightly in my hand, wishing the baristas would work a little faster.

"Is that a no?"

The voice was close and I was pretty sure it was coming from the man behind me, but I couldn't be positive. I did know he wasn't talking to me. No one ever spoke to me like that. I just couldn't figure out who he was talking to. The line was long, going back almost to the door.

It could be anyone.

"You smell delicious. I could eat you up." I heard a slow rumbling chuckle that made me want to stretch and then curl up next to whoever made it. "Or lick you from head to toe. I know which one I prefer."

Oh. My. God.

This guy was good, although I wasn't sure telling his girl he wanted to lick her all over was a good choice when proposing marriage. Unless they were in a very intimate relationship, it seemed kind of rude.

It worked for me, however. My cock began to thicken behind the zipper of my slacks as I fantasized about some sexy bear of a man, maybe the one with tattoos on his head, licking me all over.

Unfortunately, it would only ever be a fantasy. Guys like him were not interested in guys like me. Not even in romance novels.

I pulled the neckline of my light blue polo shirt away from my neck and then cleared my throat. I really needed to get my tea and get out of there before I turned around and accepted the marriage proposal meant for someone else.

"Are you sure you don't want to marry me?"

Someone was turning this guy down?

Seriously?

They had to be an idiot.

I got it that some people might be thrown off by all those tattoos. I wasn't. If anything, I found them sexy. I had always wanted to get one, but had never been brave enough. The mere mention of a needle could send me into a panic attack.

There was a story there, but I didn't want to think about it at the moment so I pushed the memory to the back of my mind and locked it away behind a mental steel door.

I had other things to think about. Like how to get my tea and get out of there without making a fool of myself.

"Are you ignoring me?"

The words were almost growled into my ear, sending shivers down my spine strong enough to make my knees grow weak.

"I don't like being ignored. I may have to punish you."

I sucked in my bottom lip and chewed on the corner of it as I turned and glanced—Holy shit! I gulped when I found those deep brown eyes staring back at me with an intensity that almost sent me to my knees.

Was he talking to me?

"Would you like me to punish you?"

Oh, god, yes.

Wait.

My brow wrinkled. "Are you talking to me?"

One dark brown eyebrow arched on his tattooed head. "I'm not talking to anyone else, beautiful."

Oh, now I was even more confused.

"But you..."

I didn't think I could say it. The smirk that crossed the man's lips said it for me. He knew exactly what I was talking about. A cold chill took a hold of me when I saw the amusement twinkling in his eyes.

He was laughing at me.

It wouldn't be the first time someone laughed at me. In fact, it was pretty normal in my life. I had learned to live with it over the years. I had also learned how to avoid it.

I pressed my lips thin and then turned and faced the other direction. I was starting to debate whether I really needed my cup of tea or not. I should

just leave and get away from this guy before he started making fun of me.

It would happen. It always did.

I felt a heavy presence behind me as the guy leaned into me to whisper, "Would it help if I told you that you are the sexiest thing I have seen in years? Maybe ever?"

See?

I had tried ignoring him because no one liked to be made fun of, not even me, but apparently that wasn't good enough. I narrowed my eyes as I turned to glare at the man who thought it was amusing to bully me.

"Look—"

Whatever I was going to say was lost in a scream as something outside the coffee shop blew up and glass was sent flying as the window and the front part of the coffee shop exploded.

I cried out as I was tossed to the floor and something heavy came down on top of me. Hands the size of dinner plates covered my head as debris rained down on us. The noise was deafening, the screams of the other patrons and windows breaking shattering my ability to not panic.

I clutched at the man hovering over the top of me, my fingers digging into his white tank top. My heart raced so fast, I thought it might race right out of my chest. I started shaking.

I was terrified.

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MM ROMANCE WITH FIERY PASSION

The vicious bite of an enemy, a shout, a cry in the dark. A lover's touch, the whisper of a kiss. A sigh, a groan, heart beating faster, desire surging through a body. Love words spoken in the shadows. The yearning for a soft caress. I'm a writer of fiery passion in all its glorious forms. Paranormal, Contemporary, Sci-Fi, Fantasy, MM Romance books. There is no limit to my imagination.

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