



BREED

THE SERIES

WOLF'S HEART

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANNE MARSH

ONE

WOLF'S
PROPERTY



WARE

SOMETIMES IT'S THE DAY-TO-DAY THAT GETS YOU. I'VE SURVIVED A CHANGE IN pack leadership, and I've earned my top dog spot as the new Alpha's right-hand wolf, but nothing in my too many years has prepared me for the shit I see in this run-down, fucked-up bayou cabin. Jace pulls up hard, throttling his bike and killing the engine, and I don't realize yet that Fate's about to hand me my own ass followed by my heart.

I'm too old for this shit.

The hunting cabin is located deep inside the Louisiana bayou, the part that most locals don't get to, let alone the tourists. It's a rundown shack that stinks of damp. The porch sags and the yard is a mess of bike parts, beer cans, and whatever trash the cabin's owner wanted to get rid of but was too lazy to burn. The place begs for a burning, and I'm pretty sure Jace agrees with me because he blows through the front door and immediately goes alpha on the wolf inside the cabin.

B.D. "Big Dog" Martin doesn't stand a chance.

When Jace goes to work with his fists and his feet, I've got his back. That's my job and I'm gunning for *exceeds expectations* when he gets around to giving me my performance review. If you're a wolf, you either succeed or you fail. There's no middle ground, and the pink slip that comes with failure is the permanent kind.

As loser wolf is about to find out.

I could take Jace in a fight. I'm certain of it. I'm older, which means I'm more experienced. I fight dirty, too, and I give zero fucks about rules, expectations, or honor. I fight to win, pure and simple. After all, I've seen what happens to the losers. My first lesson came when I was a pup and my father, who was the Alpha of our pack, went head-to-head with a younger, stronger challenger. The throat bleeds out hard. Thirty-eight fucking years

and my knee feels like it's eighty and change. If I challenge Jace, someone else in the pack challenges me tomorrow. And the day after that. And the next day, too, until I'm too old, too broken, and I lose. Jace knows this, which is why he keeps me close at hand. I'm a useful weapon and the best fighter this pack has, but I'm also a threat.

Big Dog took a mate six months ago. He did it wolf-style—saw the girl, fucked the girl, kept the girl. He didn't ask her permission, didn't pop the question, and damned sure didn't treat her right. I saw her around once or twice before Big Dog got his paws on her, and she was a hot little thing. Made me look twice, that's for certain, and I don't bother with the ladies. When I've got an itch to scratch, I take care of it with the club whores. They're good girls, straightforward about what they want. In exchange for some cold, hard cash, they don't give me shit about emotions or *relationships*. They don't ask for more than I can give.

Big Dog's mate was way too young for my ancient ass, plus she had *relationship* tattooed across her face. She was a keeper female, a good woman—so no way I tapped her. Fuck, I hadn't even caught her name. It wasn't like I deserved a shot at her.

Part of me—the part that's a real bastard—can't help noting that I couldn't have been any worse than Big Dog. Big Dog likes fast bikes, guns, and serial pussy. He's not a relationship guy either, and I doubt he could spell the word *monogamy*, let alone act on it. And since the human inside the cabin deserves better than that, I followed Jace Jones out to Big Dog's cabin, prepared to kick some wolf ass.

It's not as if I'm Super Man hunting for Lois Lane, but some shit is flat-out wrong. The cabin stinking of feminine pain and terror? *Wrong*. If your ass is lucky enough to find a female of worth, you protect her. You never, ever fucking break her.

Jace drives his fist into Big Dog's stomach, the blow punctuating my thoughts. I'm itching to get in on the action, but Jace doesn't give me a shot.

"I'm gonna tell you about my problem." In case Big Dog has any ideas about bowing out on the conversation, Jace plants his boot hard in the middle of Big Dog's chest and leans down. I move closer, keeping half an eye on my Alpha. The rest of me is wondering where the hell the girl is and if she's okay.

Big Dog snarls a few obscenities and jackknives, trying to throw off Jace's hold. Resistance is futile because Jace simply shoves down harder, until something cracks in the vicinity of Big Dog's ribcage. This shuts the whining fucker up, and I'm tempted to applaud.

"I'm in charge of this pack," Jace growls. He waits until Big Dog whines out an agreement, presses down harder, and gets to the point of our visit. *Finally.* "And I told you boys that we've got a new rule. We don't rape our females. We don't put our dicks where they're not wanted—and if you're not man enough to get it right in bed, you don't force your way in there. Are we clear?"

The day's unexpected bonus comes when Big Dog grabs for Jace's boot—no clue what that stupid fuck hoped to accomplish with the maneuver—and Jace snaps both his arms. Big Dog lets go with a snarl of pain and unleashes a whining litany of complaints, whimpers, and pleading bitchery. Jace isn't into mercy—and neither am I. That's the number one reason I've given my loyalty to our new Alpha.

"Why don't you tell us where you put your mate? Think of this as a welfare check. We're practically fucking social services. If she's happy, you're happy, and we go on our way."

I back Jace's speech one hundred percent, and I'm pretty sure the death glare on my face announces this to Big Dog. The wolf's gaze skitters from Jace to me and then drops.

"Fuck—" Big Dog starts, and Jace kicks him in the jaw. Then he nods to me.

"Get her."

I follow my nose and make straight for the closed door on the other side of the room. Behind me, I hear the sounds of Jace redecorating with his fists. Big Dog's gonna look and feel like shit.

The bedroom door's locked. I could ask Big Dog for the key—bet that fucker's got it on him—but I'm impatient and we're not planning on leaving the cabin standing anyhow. One hard kick and the door splinters.

Turns out I wasn't prepared for this. Big Dog's got his female locked up in the bedroom, but he's gone one step further and tied her to the bed. *Naked.* Plus, he's into some kinky shit, because he's got her muzzled with one of those BDSM ball-gag things that makes a man think about replacing all that leather with his dick. Ordinarily, the visual would tick all my boxes

because it's one hell of a view and my imagination is filthy.

And I still get a boner that punches out the front of my jeans because there's no denying biology. She's naked, she's sexy, and she could be mine. If, you know, I were an asshole like Big Dog. She whimpers when I come busting through the door and tries to scoot backward on the mattress, her fingers flexing on the ropes tying her wrists to the bed frame. Her pretty, fragile skin is raw and red because that bastard went for the hurt.

This isn't a game.

This isn't okay.

Shit. I should say something.

Instead, I stand there and fucking stare, maybe because all the blood in my head has rushed straight to my dick. She's the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen. She's more pocket-sized than tall, all soft curves and sweet tits. Her belly is the prettiest curve of them all, a delicate invitation for my tongue. My teeth. I want to sink to my knees and go down on her. Eat her out, eat her up, make her *mine*.

And it's not just her body, although I could happily spend the next hundred years worshipping it. Her outer package is damned fine, but there's a feminine strength to the way she stills on the bed and then meets my gaze. She won't be shamed by Big Dog, and I'm fiercely glad. Breaking her, making her feel bad about what she does or doesn't enjoy when it comes to sex—those would be the real fucking crimes.

I drag my eyes away from her body (for which I deserve a fucking medal because she's spread-eagled and I have the best damned view of her pretty little pussy) and meet her gaze. She's not a wolf, but I am, so I'm curious to see what she does next. Will she match me glare for glare, or will she drop her gaze and acknowledge me as her Alpha?

Brown hair tumbles around her shoulders with a hint of a rebellious wave where the ends fall in loose curls that just beg you to wrap the stuff around your fingers. Pull her close. Get her all tangled up in you and you in her. For a moment—a long, fucking, hot moment—she does meet my gaze. She stares at me with those big, brown eyes, and I forget why I'm here. Who's in charge.

For just that one moment, she owns me.

I don't like it. I don't like *her*. The only soul who controls me is my Alpha—and she's not him. She's something... more. *Someone* more, and

that makes her dangerous. Remember what I said about relationship territory? That's *terra incognita* and I'm not going there. Her face is all angles and lines, more interesting than beautiful except she's fucking beautiful to me. I draw my finger down the straight bridge of her nose, drinking her in. Thick lashes brush the tender shadows beneath her eyes. She's not sleeping enough, and that makes me madder. Big Dog should have taken care of her. Should have appreciated her and fucking worshipped her.

"Hey," I growl, because I'm no white knight riding to her rescue. She mesmerizes me, and I need to nip that right in the bud.

And she drops her gaze.

Her eyes fall in sweet submission and my dick roars to life, my wolf howling for us to claim her *now*. She doesn't quite squeeze her eyes shut. Instead, she flicks these little glances up at me, then looks down, her breath catching.

Mine, my wolf insists.

Good thing the man is in charge.

I nudge her chin up with my hand, forcing her eyes to meet mine as I inhale her scent. The fear's still there, along with a healthy dose of anger, but there's another scent now. Arousal. My sweet little human is thinking about sex. With me.

Fuck me, but I'm lost.

"You need help?" Jace bellows his question from the other room, the sound of meaty thuds punctuating each word. Big Dog's getting a much-deserved ass-kicking. I take another look at the female. Okay. So fuck me, but I haven't *taken* my eyes off her. She's impossibly sexy all spread-eagled and tied to the bed. It's clear she's not so happy with the position, because she kinda whimper-glares at me before her lashes descend and she retreats from me as far as I'll let her go. Yeah. I agree with her one hundred percent. I'm a cock-sucking bastard.

"I got this," I yell back to Jace. I'm torn between wanting to untie her and haul her into my arms—and racing out into the other room so I can take over Big Dog's ass-kicking. Mother fucker. Who does this to his female?

I plant a knee on the bed and lean in, trying to figure out how the ball-gag works. She jerks backward as far as she can, leaving a few strands of brown hair in my hand. I release her, but I don't get off the bed. I know I'm

crowding her, that she can feel me pressed up against her side, but I'm keeping my hands off her tits and her pussy, so she's got to work with me.

"I'm gonna untie you." I'm not here to hurt her, but she's not in charge, either. The sooner she understands that, the better for both of us.

Finally, she nods, although it wasn't a question. Guess she's tired of lying around naked, or maybe she figures I can't possibly be worse than Big Dog. I'm kinda grateful she has no clue just how bad things can get. My body half cradles her, half pins her in place as I ease behind her so I can work.

"Hold still," I remind her, and she does. She doesn't so much as flinch as I move my hands over the ball-gag, unbuckling and undoing Big Dog's handiwork. Maybe I should feed him his balls before he dies, see how he likes choking on a mouthful like that. I concentrate on that visual, because God help me if I think about where my arm brushes her body or what's resting on my dick right now.

I didn't know you could buy this kind of shit in Baton Rouge. Didn't want to know. I take a more organic approach to dominating my women. I damned sure don't have to tie them up and gag them. As soon as I've got the ball-gag worked free, I hurl it across the room. She flinches at the sharp crack the leather makes when it hits the wall, but I feel better.

I should probably find a bottle of water. Clothes. *Something*.

"I said *no*," she says roughly. "I didn't want him to do this."

She doesn't want *me* to do it, either. That's clear.

"Uh-huh." I don't disagree with her. Instead I pull my hunting knife out of my boot and go to work on the ropes holding her to the bed. "I woulda be on the *no* train, too."

"Any chance you'll forget you saw me like this?" A bitter smile quirks her lips. A mouth that pretty should be doing a whole lot of smiling—or, if we're playing in my fantasy universe, sucking my dick or hollering my name as I eat her out. I'm not gonna lie to her, though, so I keep silent. She looks damned gorgeous, so there's no way I'll forget her sweet little body spread out. If I hurry up, I'll have time to go help Jace kick Big Dog's sorry ass.

And then I'm gonna kill him.

As soon as the ropes holding her arms to the bed snap, she shoots upright and wraps her arms around her middle. The bed doesn't even really

merit the name—it's a frame and a mattress, with not a sheet in sight.

I need to get her covered up. "You got clothes in here?"

She bites her lip and pronounces the other wolf's death sentence. "Big Dog said I hadn't earned them yet."

Yep. Fucker has to die now.

I shove off the mattress and do a quick inspection. The mattress is the only furniture, and the closet's empty except for a few spiders. I'm gonna have to be a gentleman after all. I haul my jacket off and drop it in her lap, and then I add my T-shirt for good measure. Keep my cut, though, because no one wears my club colors but me.

I cut her legs free, keeping a hand wrapped around her ankle. This is partly so she doesn't try to kick the crap out of me, but partly because I like the way her skin feels. She tugs. Hard.

Yeah. That's not working so well for her. When the second rope snaps, I carefully unwrap both ankles and inspect the visible bruises. I'm giving Big Dog a matching set—with interest. While I look her over, she yanks on my shirt. Don't blame her for not wanting to sit there naked.

My dick's an iron bar shoving at the front of my jeans. *It* knows what it wants.

"Come out when you're ready," I say gruffly, and she kinda freezes. Does she think we'd leave her here?

"Okay," she whispers back, face flushing with embarrassment. She tugs the hem of my shirt lower, like somehow the cotton is a suit of armor. Good luck with that. On my way out of the room, I kick the remnants of the door hard. In preparation for beating on Big Dog's head, you know?

"I'm gonna kill him," I announce to my Alpha as I stride toward Big Dog. I prefer actions to words, and Big Dog's mean, abusive ass needs more kicking. Now that I've seen firsthand what he did to my girl, I have no qualms about extracting a little eye-for-an-eye vengeance before planting him deep in the bayou.

Jace looks me over. "It's bad?"

I must have my answer written on my face, though, because he doesn't wait for anything English to come out of my mouth. Instead, he grabs one of Big Dog's arms, and I grab the other. Together we drag the sorry son-of-a-bitch outside and toward the water. If I'd had any remaining reservations about pledging my undying loyalty to this male, they've been answered.

He's got my back on this one.

"Bad enough," I grunt when he raises an eyebrow. Guess he wants an out loud, English answer after all.

Jace frowns. "Does she need a doctor?"

I specialize in hurting people—not putting them back together. "Not sure," I admit. "I'll get her back to Baton Rouge and see what she needs."

Jace drops his half of Big Dog by the water's edge. "Not your place. Whatever she needs, I'll make sure she gets. We clear on that?"

Fuck him and the horse he rode in on. I vent my frustration on Big Dog's ribs, hitting him hard with my boot. I don't mess around—I've got steel-toes and a whole lot of anger. After I crack the first rib, I work my way down like keys on a piano. He howls as bones snap, so it's just like playing chopsticks.

"Enough," Jace announces finally. Maybe he's bored or got other places to be, but I could beat on Big Dog all day. It's easier than heading back into that cabin and facing its occupant. Now that she's seen the wolf pack up close and personal, I'm betting all she wants is to get away—which is the one thing we can't let her do. She knows too much, and there's no guarantee she'll keep her yap shut.

I think about defying Jace, but this isn't the battle to pick so I draw back with a muttered curse.

"You broke pack law." Jace nudges Big Dog's chin up with the tip of his boot until he's staring the bastard in the eye. "Now I'm gonna have to kill you."

Jace doesn't shift all the way—just his head and his jaw re-form, his canines growing until he's able to tear out Big Dog's throat. It's way too quick for that bastard. I want to make him hurt for hours, for days. Fuck, a year might not be too short. Instead, one savage tear and he's bleeding out. Seconds later, he's dead.

It's downright anticlimactic when we roll the body into the bayou and watch it sink beneath the surface. That's one problem fixed—but there's still the female to deal with. She's an eyewitness, one hundred percent human, and a complication none of us need. If she talks, she outs the pack, so keeping her silent is priority number one—and unfortunately the easiest, most sure fire way of doing that involves hurting her. There's only one other option.

“I’m claiming her,” I announce. Words hang in the air between us where I can’t take them back. I never expected to take a mate, but for this female I’ll make a temporary exception.

Jace stares at me. “Big Dog’s female?”

Color him surprised.

“Yeah,” I growl and head back to the cabin. Jace falls in behind, riding my ass.



BIG DOG’S FEMALE STANDS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LIVING ROOM WHEN WE PUSH our way back inside. She looks ready to bolt, despite being barefoot and buck-ass naked except for my T-shirt and jacket. The bruises mottling her legs and arms make me want to drag Big Dog out of the bayou and resuscitate his ass just so I can kill him again. Slowly.

I don’t even know her name.

She squeaks when she spots us, but she also raises a two-by-four slat that must have come from the bed frame. I like her spirit, although the wolf she should be pounding on is now gator food.

“I’m leaving,” she whispers. Her eyes dart between us, through us, and I want to promise her that Big Dog is never, ever coming back. He’ll never hurt her again.

“We’ll give you a ride,” Jace says. “You can ride with Ware or with me. You pick.”

She hesitates, and I bite back another growl. Her hands shake, the two-by-four trembling as she fights to keep it up. She won’t meet Jace’s gaze, as if she instinctively recognizes the Pack Alpha. I don’t want her afraid, though. I want her to fight, to *choose*.

To choose me.

Fuck, but I need to get out of here.

“You got a name, honey?” I freeze by the wall, fisting my hands on my thighs. If she were wolf, she’d smell my anger and frustration.

“Marly.” Her voice gets stronger. *That’s my girl.*

“You got stuff you want to take with you, Marly?” Jace asks nice and casual as he reaches into his pocket and produces a lighter. Her eyes follow

his hand, focusing on the lighter. She sucks in a breath and freezes, but doesn't protest. Guess she's on board with today's arson plans. "If so, you might want to grab it."

She nods and vanishes back into the bedroom as if she's got a pack of wolves nipping at her ass. She doesn't like us, and I can't blame her for that.

"There another way out?" Jace asks, and I hear the unspoken question. If Marly runs, if she takes off in the bayou when she's barefoot and mostly naked, she'll end up hurt. And her hurting days are over.

So I shrug and think. "The windows in the bedroom are boarded up."

It's true. She's not gonna find an exit in the bedroom. Also? I already checked that room for stuff—and it was empty. So what's my girl doing in there?

"Not gonna fix that girl overnight," Jace warns me like he's fucking Doctor Phil. "If you're serious about claiming her, you're gonna have to wait. Some stuff takes time."

Fuck him. "You figure this out with Keelie Sue? Did you give her the time she needed?"

Jace growls, prowling closer. He's not gonna back down—or let me forget that he's the Alpha here. Not sure why I'm pushing him or why keeping Marly matters so much. But it does. She's something—someone—special. I don't have to admit it out loud to Jace, but part of me kinda thinks she really is my one and only. My mate. I'd never take her without a *yes* from her, but keeping her safe? Yeah. That's the only fucking option that's on the table, and if I need to get Jace on board, I will.

Marly slips back out into the living room, her hands fisted in the pockets of my jacket. I guess she did the 4-1-1 of the bedroom and realized it hadn't grown any exits since the last time she was there. She glances toward the door, then back at us. I can practically hear her weighing her chances of getting past us.

"You ready to ride?" Jace asks. "You pick which one of us you want to ride with, and we'll get you somewhere safe."

It's not like she has choices, but her nod still makes my wolf want to howl with pleasure. She's picked us. Picked *me*. Okay. That last is pure bullshit, but I still like thinking it. Jace holds out the lighter.

"You want to do the honors, honey?"



MARLY

WHEN I FLICK THE BIC AND THAT LITTLE ORANGE FLAME SHOOTS OUT, I FEEL *powerful*. I don't know where Big Dog's gone, but I know he's not coming back. The scraped and bloody knuckles of my rescuers make that perfectly clear. I hope he's dead. I hope it was long and painful and that he learned exactly what it feels like to be helpless and betrayed. To have your trust and your body turned against you until there's nothing you can do but hang on and wait for someone else to fix things. Setting Big Dog's house on fire is a felony, but it's also an action I'm choosing to take.

Something else I don't know and can add to my long, long list of WTF moments? I don't know who my rescuers are and that's actually not a point in their favor. If they were the boys in blue, their reasons for being here would be clear. They're not social services here to bust me out, and they're not friends or family. They're strangers. Big, tattooed, leather-wearing, bike-riding strangers. The odds of my hitting the jackpot in a Vegas casino are higher than the odds that they came all the way into the bayou just to rescue me. Since Big Dog's motorcycle club knew he was holding me, I suspect this visit is more *payback* than *rescue mission* anyhow. As soon as we're outside, I take a closer look. The patch on their cuts announces their membership in the Breed MC—so it's got to be club business that brought them here today. If I'm lucky, they won't care when I head on my way. If I'm strong enough, however, I won't care how they feel about my departure.

Remember that Vegas jackpot I mentioned? Yeah. I should totally hit that. I could be a multimillionaire by sunset.

I stroll closer to the porch. I've never set anything larger than a barbecue briquette on fire before, but I'm sure I'll figure it out. I squat down by the sagging steps, pretending that I'm not barefoot. Not naked except for a

stranger's T-shirt and jacket.

My stranger is a whole lot more naked now that I'm wearing his clothes. His leather cut hangs open over his chest, giving me a good view of the dark ink swirling over his skin and up his neck. It's like the universe branded him *trouble*. He's muscled, and the ridges of his abdomen are drool-worthy. A pair of worn jeans hangs low on his hips, but I'm not looking further. Okay. I may sneak a peek or two. The man's gorgeous and I'm not blind. Battle-scarred and sick to death of aggressive men, but not blind. He's just a really nice piece of scenery that I'm appreciating.

I poke the lighter and its teeny-tiny flame at the steps. The fire licks at the wood, leaving a black mark, but then it flickers out. Story of my life. I huff and try again. Like relationships and having a satisfyingly kinky sex life, this looks so much easier and more satisfying in books. The library has entire shelves of survivalist manuals that, clearly, I should have read.

My rescuer crouches down beside me. Part of me wants to flinch away, but I stay put. So what if he's big and reminds me way too much of Big Dog? I have to draw the line somewhere, have to get on with my life. He'll be my practice man. Of course, he's completely oblivious to my minor panic attack. He reaches out—toward the mess of sticks and leaves at the bottom of the step rather than toward my not-so-sexy self—and scrapes together a pile of crumbly, dry, brown bits.

"Gotta feed it," he rumbles. His voice is low and harsh, like chains pulling through metal. I nod. It's as good a day as any to learn the ins and outs of arson.

"Tinder." I nod and file my new knowledge under F for fire. Probably could go under F for fun. Or F for failure.

"Ware Evans," he grunts and pulls his own lighter out of his back pocket.

He's not much for conversation. I mean, I'm a librarian (or was—bet I've been fired as a no show thanks to Big Dog's forcible relocation of my person) and silence is supposed to be my thing, but I still like to have a conversation. Is Ware his name? It's not quite as ridiculous as *Big Dog*—and that man was definitely compensating for his deficiencies in other departments—but it's hardly normal.

"That's really your name? Ware?" Shoot. I need to grow a filter.

He turns his head and stares at me. He's a bad-ass biker. He outweighs

me by two to one (okay, not quite, but I'm entitled to cheat on my weight after the month I've had). He's felonious, murderous, and probably every inch of him is a lethal weapon, but I feel... safe?

He nods tersely. "That's me." He jerks a thumb toward his companion. "That's Jace Jones."

Okay. I have to wonder if Ware is the name on his birth certificate, or if it's some kind of road name. As in: *beware of danger*? Good to know.

Again I try—and fail—to set the porch step on fire. At this rate, I'm going to be celebrating my centennial before the place burns. A thought occurs to me.

"What's the date?" I blurt out the question, proving I truly am filter-less.

Behind us, the other big scary dude snorts. "Hot date?"

Not a chance. I hate Big Dog and right now I'm more than willing to extend that loathing to all penis-toting members of society, including present company. No more men, no more domination fantasies, no more sex. As if he can sense the hostility rolling off me, Ware fishes a phone out of his back pocket and turns it around so I can see the screen without touching it or him. He's definitely not big on wasting words.

But he's got ears, right? He can listen. "It's my birthday."

"Congratulations?" He growls the word like he can't believe I'm talking about birthdays. And honestly? He's not wrong. I can feel my brain shutting down, hanging onto the little, normal things.

"I'm Marly Silva." I transfer the lighter to my left hand and automatically shove my right in his direction. Warm, hard fingers close around mine. He's got tattoos on his knuckles, and I wonder if he'll ink a reminder of Big Dog there. He has scars, too, like he's lived hard in his body and hasn't been afraid to wade into a fight. I'm probably not supposed to find that reassuring.

I look down at the fire we're supposedly starting.

"Is this efficient?" Based on the small scorch marks I've succeeded in creating on the steps, Big Dog's cabin is more likely to rot than to burn. I mean, I already know the answer—but I want to hear him admit the truth.

Ware grunts, shoves to his feet, and goes over to the bikes. When he comes back, he's holding a gas can. Slowly I lift my gaze to his. "So that's a no."

He shrugs, clearly giving zero fucks. "Everything's better with an

accelerant.”

Good to know.

He starts dousing the place with gas, so I stand back. He soaks the perimeter with casual expertise, makes a trip inside the cabin to do some more splashing, and then comes back out. He’s satisfyingly thorough.

He nods at me. “Now try.”

Since I’m planning on keeping my eyebrows, I find a nice, leafy stick and light that up. Then I drop it on the gasoline-soaked strip. There’s a satisfying whoosh and then orange flames lick toward the cabin.

“Shoulda brought marshmallows,” Ware grunts.

That surprises a laugh out of me. I’m not sure if he’s just hungry, or if he’s actually trying to make a joke. He doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who delivers punch lines, though, so maybe I have my answer.

Holy smokes but the guy is hot. Nope. My brain (and my libido) can stop right there. See, I originally thought Big Dog was kinda hot, too. That didn’t work out so well for me. Instead of dating and a rocking sex life, I got six months of him grunting and taking and *hurting*. The first time he tied me up, I stupidly thought it was a game. I’m always willing to try new things, so I tried it. Turned out it was one game I didn’t like—but he backhanded me when I said so. Our relationship didn’t come with a safe word. That’s when I realized the only rules were his. I still didn’t know what I’d gotten myself into, though, until he shifted on me one night.

So I have to ask myself: if Jace and Ware knew Big Dog well enough to kill his ass in a highly personal and painful fashion, did they know about his furry side? Are *they* wolves? They ride, too. The bikes are parked outside the cabin. There’s got to be a way to ask, but nothing comes to mind. So for the next few minutes, I just stand there and stare. It’s satisfying, watching Big Dog’s shitty cabin go up in flames. It’s not like he cares—I’m 99 percent certain he’s floating somewhere in the bayou, hopefully being consumed alive by alligators—but I’ll take what I can get.

As the flames get bigger, the air around me grows hotter. While I stand there like I’m watching fireworks on the Fourth of July, Ware and Jace scratch a fire line into the dirt yard. Guess they draw the line at burning down the bayou. Safety first, and all that.

Big Dog has a propane tank around the side, which is probably why Jace steps toward me. Or maybe he just wants to ride, wants to put some road

between him and this place. I wouldn't care except clearly he intends for me to go with them. Although walking out of the bayou barefoot holds zero appeal, I've learned my lesson. No more strangers. No more men. Instinctively, I look around for Big Dog, preparing to dodge the fists. Followed by the belt.

I hate being afraid.

Jace stops, his eyes examining me. I'm certain he sees way more than I want, and I don't mean my naked legs.

"Who you riding with?" he asks.

This is one of those *between the devil and the deep blue sea* choices. He didn't ask if I was ready to ride. He didn't toss me a set of keys. Clearly, in the Jace-verse, I'm supposed to hop on the back of a bike and wrap my bare legs around a total stranger. I'd like to tell him to fuck off, but I'm back to being scared. I hate it, but Jace is big. He's take-charge, too, and today's been another long, bad day in a string of nightmarish days. Worse, I doubt anyone other than my boss and my landlord even noticed I'd disappeared. Except thinking about that now won't get me out of here—and I need to leave in the worst possible way.

"I'd rather leave on my own." The words come out less authoritatively than I'd like, a suggestion rather than a statement of intent. I try again. "I'm leaving on my own."

Jace grunts and I think he's... amused? "Only got bikes. You know how to ride?"

The answer to that is a resounding *no*. I scan the yard, but no working car or truck magically appears. It's the back of a bike or my feet.

My *bare* feet.

"Pick a bike," Jace invites, although those three words are all command. He's not asking what I want—but he *is* giving me a choice. He's not leaving me stranded here (although he hasn't indicated where he plans on taking me), and he hasn't just tossed me on the back of his bike. He'd do it, too. I know that instinctively. So I need to make a choice because at least then I'm *choosing* rather than letting life and another man run me over.

"Ware," I announce. Jace doesn't look surprised—I don't think he likes the idea of riding with me much, either.

Ware tosses me something. A pair of battered jeans and motorcycle boots. Since both he and Jace are still fully clothed...

“Big Dog’s,” he tells me.

Oh. Yuck.

I shouldn’t be such a baby about it, but did he pull these off Big Dog’s body? I’ve been tied up, naked, in a bedroom. I should be willing to wear anything, right? But I can’t. I just... *can’t*. These jeans might have been taken off a dead body. He’s probably asking me to wear a dead man’s boots, and I think I’d rather chance the road rash.

“They’re clean,” Jace says from behind us. “Enough.”

I didn’t realize Big Dog kept his spare shit in this cabin. It’s possible.

It’s also possible Jace is lying to make me feel better.

Honestly? I appreciate the effort.

“Get dressed,” Ware rumbles. He sounds impatient. The cabin is well on its way to being engulfed in flames. Maybe if I hang out here, I can hitch a ride back to civilization with the fire department.

I’m yanking the jeans up my legs before my brain even throws a flag on the play. Ware gave me an order. I followed it. Shit. *That’s* how I get myself in trouble. It doesn’t matter that he feels right. I have a bad habit of picking dominant men. Possessive men. They make me feel needed, wanted, *valuable*. I’m not happy with the kink in my head.

Maybe it’s because I’m newly divorced, fresh from five years of vanilla sex. Married Marly was boring, not new, the ball-and-chain. Becoming Marly 2.0 was therefore my plan when I hit Louisiana, and I’d promised myself I’d belong, be someone’s fantasy, be his first choice. Monty, my ex, and I sort of fell into marriage. We dated in high school. We attended the same college and dated there. Marriage was just the natural next step and we didn’t question it, tying the knot in a private ceremony at a local winery. The pictures were gorgeous. What came after, however, was less so. He was bored and nothing I tried seemed to spice up our married life, either in or out of bed.

Guys look at me and see *librarian* rather than *sex kitten*. I could tell them exactly where the erotica books are shelved under E for erotic romance (although I maintain they should live under F for Fantasy or D for Dreams, because nothing like that has ever happened to me in my life), or I could point them to the most-borrowed sex self-help books. I’ve got plenty of book knowledge—it’s just the real-life, hands-on stuff that I appear to suck at.

Big Dog is Exhibit A.

So I'm the quiet librarian who lives in her head or in a book, and most days I don't mind. It turns out, though, that real life is way too exciting for me. Big Dog seemed exciting. Different. I had no idea. I'm not sure what to do about the wolf thing, to be honest. It really seems like I should tell someone, but what I want is a month-long bath and to crawl into bed. I want to feel safe.

Ware throws a leg over his bike and slaps a palm on the seat behind him. The sound is short and sharp, as authoritative as the man. Guess that's my cue.

I shouldn't go to him. I *definitely* shouldn't cave, but I... do. I button the jeans and yank on the boots. And then, like the idiot of the century, I slog over to him and his bike. Somehow, he pulls me or lifts me, and I'm magically straddling the seat. He turns, zips up the jacket, and hands me a helmet.

Jace peels out of the yard, impatient to be gone. That leaves me and Ware.

"So," I say. I tighten my grip, but that puts me closer to Ware and makes it very clear that the man is packing. I can feel his gun against my stomach.

He grunts (I'm shocked) and turns the bike on. The engine's vibrations flood my body with sensation everywhere, but particularly between my legs. Or maybe that's because I'm sandwiched against Ware, my pussy all but glued to his butt. My legs hug his hips.

He adjusts something on the bike. "Hold on."

To what? The only option is him, so I carefully slide my arms around his waist. He's hard, his body without an inch of give. My fingers brush the buckle of his belt and my stomach comes into close contact with what is unmistakably the handle of a gun. Guess he's not worried about my shooting him in the back.

My heart slams into my chest, reminding me that my ride isn't my safest option. Behind us, the flames crackle as they devour Big Dog's cabin.

"Where are we going?" Honestly, I'm not sure I want to hear the answer. Going home tops my wish list, but I disappeared into the bayou five months ago. My landlord likely cleaned out my place and tossed or sold my stuff. I'm starting over and I'm all but naked.

"My place." Ware guides the bike away from the cabin and onto the

road. Or what passes for a road. The way to Big Dog's is definitely off the beaten path—and it's more dirt and rocks (a track?) than anything formalized in asphalt.

This is a bad idea. I know it, and I should put the brakes on his high-handed decision-making. But the thing is? I don't know where else to go. I'm likely jobless, homeless, *and* pant-less—and that's a trifecta of problems I'm not prepared to deal with right now.

Instead, the throb of the engine vibrating through my body makes me feel alive in a way I haven't for months. There's a beat and a rhythm to it, the roar of the pipes almost enough to drown out the panicked thoughts in my head. When Ware shifts to take a curve in the road, my body instinctively matches his, and I like the ease with which his body guides mine, too. I've always loved Harleys.

"What you'd do before?" He asks his question casually, as if he's not also announcing that my life is over. Changed. Forcibly rerouted in a new direction. I try reminding myself that I like new experiences, but this isn't so much new or an experience as it is flat-out catastrophe.

I rest my head against his shoulder, both hating and loving my weakness. *No more bikers*, I remind myself. He guides the bike down the road effortlessly, left, right, straight. Each decision is followed by a powerful flex of muscles. I'm wearing both his shirt and his jacket, so his shoulders are bare beneath the leather cut. His skin smells like that leather and something warmer, wilder, and more alive. I'd like to say I hate how out of control he makes me feel, but somehow this feels...right.

"I was a librarian," I tell him. Because we're on the bike and the noise of the pipes bounces off the trees and the bayou's still, dark waters, I have to put my mouth almost on his ear. I've got my legs wrapped around his and my hands tucked against his stomach, but somehow that new proximity feels almost too intimate.

He nods. "Books."

"And magazines and ebooks and DVDs. All sorts of stuff." I have no idea why I'm discussing collection development with him. It's not like he cares, and I have a hard time imagining that he's much of a reader. This is a man who rides a Harley and who just beat the crap out of another man. Who most likely *killed* that other guy, since Big Dog wouldn't have let me just walk away without some powerful persuasion. Plus, B.D. deserved to

die. I'm just sorry he didn't invite me to help the way he did with our arson.

I realize that I'm less concerned about his possible penchant for violence than I am about his knowing Big Dog. I mean, I doubt there's a rule that says he *has* to be a wolf, too, but if he knew Big Dog and they rode together in the same MC... what are the odds?

"Are you a wolf?" *Shit shit shit.* I've blurted the question out. Apparently, I left my sense of self-preservation behind in the bayou.

"Fuck." Ware doesn't toss me off the bike, although I'm not sure how to interpret his four-letter response. Fuck, as in let's stop and get it on by the side of the road (he's hot, but I've officially sworn off men). Fuck, as in "you have outed a secret wolfish conspiracy and now I must take steps"? Or just fuck, he doesn't know what to say to me because my question is so outlandish that now he fears for my sanity?

"Big Dog could change into a wolf." I know I sound crazy, and I'm sure I look even crazier. I mean, Ware just untied me from the bed where I was spread-eagled and naked, so clearly my judgment is questionable. But I can't help noticing that his body stays loose and relaxed. He doesn't tense or edge away or give any sign of distress—which means one thing.

He knows.

"Big Dog was a shifter," he agrees. "You know about that?"

We're out of the bayou now, driving through the outskirts of Baton Rouge. The surrounding area is rough, the buildings dilapidated and run-down. There's also a singular dearth of people and escape routes, so I kind of wish I'd waited to ask my question until we were somewhere more civilized. Someplace with visible *people*.

"He liked to play show and tell," I admit. The first time Big Dog shifted, I peed myself. I'm not ashamed to admit it. One minute he was holding me down, and then I blinked or closed my eyes, and a wolf was pinning me down. He scraped his teeth over my jaw and homed in on my shoulder. He bit me there, and I've woken up more than one night since then, screaming. "He bit."

I can't help but notice we're talking about Big Dog in the past tense. And that Ware doesn't seem to be actually headed back into the city. We're still riding through the outskirts, where the bayou meets industrial wasteland and undervalued properties. There's a strange kind of beauty to the way Mother Nature has reclaimed what the people had and left. It's all

warehouses and skeletons of abandoned buildings, their original purposes lost along with roofs and windows. Weeds grow up through the asphalt, emphasizing the wildness of the place.

Like Ware.

“Am I going to turn into a werewolf?” I’m not sure why this hasn’t occurred to me before—probably because my shit list was already overflowing, and my brain was smart enough not to add anything else. But now that I’m away from Big Dog’s cabin and he’s gotten what he had coming to him (I should probably feel bad about his death, but I just can’t), I have a little more bandwidth.

The corner of Ware’s mouth tugs up. Apparently, this is his version of a smile. “No,” he says. “We’re not contagious.”

“Oh. Good.” Wait. I peel back from him. He said *we*.

He curses again and shoves a hard arm around my waist. He’s probably just making sure I don’t fall off the bike—road rash wouldn’t improve my day any—but suddenly I can’t quite catch my breath as I mentally try to fit Ware under “W.” W for *wolf*. He’s a wolf. Too. Wait wait wait.

“Don’t freak out,” he growls as if it’s that simple. He orders. I obey. Is giving commands a Ware thing—or a wolf thing? He’s good at it. My stupid clit apparently still thinks dominant men could be fun in bed—it perks up—but I ignore it. From now on, I’m filing sex under T for Trouble. Or Terminal.

Ware turns sharply off the road and heads for another run-down, beat-up structure. It’s a warehouse. I think. It’s kind of hard to tell, to be honest. The building is one of those non-descript two-story industrial boxes with a small parking lot, tons of chain-link fencing topped with barbed wire, and a general sense of *fuck off, you don’t belong here*. Or maybe it’s *trespassers will be eaten*. I know one thing: letting Ware take me inside an abandoned building in the middle of nowhere is even stupider than dating Big Dog. I make a point of learning from my mistakes.

So when Ware parks the bike outside the warehouse, I’m off and sprinting for the street.



WARE

RUNNING FROM A WOLF IS A HUGE MISTAKE.

We *love* the hunt.

Marly bolts off the back of my bike and pounds for the street, bounding like a bunny—or prey. Her hair flies in a million different directions as she pumps her arms and legs trying to achieve maximum velocity. I pause to enjoy the show—it's not as if she's getting away from me—because it's kinda cute. Her boots are too big, as are the jeans, so she runs and grabs at the stuff that threatens to fly off. She's determined. I'll give her that. I also make a mental note to get her some clothes that fit.

She deserves nice things. So I'm feeling a little possessive. A little bit as if she's mine, and I want anyone who looks at her to know she's valued. Expensive clothes aren't the only way to do that, but all it takes is a black AmEx and some time. Clothes aren't much. You know she won't want a fucking thing from me, but when the choice is between wearing Big Dog's used crap or something pretty and new, I'm hoping she caves. Dunno. Marly hides a backbone of steel underneath her soft surface.

I've got a leg that only works part-time hours, and I'm not getting any younger. Jace is our new blood and the kind of male Marly should hook up with. Even wolves wear out, and I've been fighting a long time. I did my service for Uncle Sam, and that was a bitch because I had to watch when and where I shifted. Took a round from an AK-47 to that leg and had to come home. Big Red, the previous pack Alpha, collected vets. We're strong, we know how to fight, and we can take orders if we choose. It's the choosing that matters—that, and running free. Whether it's on the back of my bike or on four legs, I don't do cages, rules, or bars.

I plan on extending Marly the same courtesy.

With a stifled groan, I swing my leg over the bike and go after her.

Willpower can't force the stupid knee to work right, although I give it a shot daily—something just north of my kneecap shrieks an internal protest when I hit the pavement. I ignore it. Doesn't matter. My legs are longer than hers, and I haven't spent the last few months tied to a bed in the bayou. Even with my game leg, I catch her in six strides, and it only takes that long because I'm pacing myself. She doesn't stand a chance.

She shrieks when I scoop her up and tries to nail me in the balls with her elbow. I should probably take offense at that, but I'm cutting her some slack. She's had a shitty encounter with wolves so far, so she doesn't understand that I don't plan on hurting her. She flails again, so I toss her over my shoulder, anchoring her in place with my forearm. She's just a little thing. Doesn't weigh much at all.

"I'm leaving," she bellows into my back.

Uh-huh. I can see that.

"Not yet," I warn, and she slaps her palm against my ass, punctuating her demand with some one-on-one contact. That's what I get for trying to be a nice guy. You don't challenge a wolf, not unless you want a fight—and Marly's just fired the opening shot. I flip her around so quickly she doesn't have a chance to scream. Fist her hair with one hand and tug her head back until she meets my gaze.

She freezes like any smart woman would do when confronted by a pissed off werewolf. When she pulls at my grip, I feed her silky hair through my fingers, milking the moment. I'm not gonna hurt her, but I sure don't want to let go, either.

"I could tie you up." I growl the threat, certain it'll do the trick. She'll stop fighting, will let me get her inside where we can figure out this whole fucked up situation. She knows about the pack and she's seen a male shift—so now I have to come up with a way to keep her quiet that doesn't involve hurting or killing her.

Her breath hitches. Fuck. I freeze like a goddamned juvenile right there on the pavement. Wolves have an excellent sense of smell, and one thing becomes perfectly clear.

Marly *likes* the idea of me tying her up. The sweet, creamy scent of her arousal teases me, and I breathe in again. Maybe I should tell her how her body's betrayed her? Nah. Besides, I'm enjoying the moment. I'm also making a list of every dirty, filthy thing I want to do to her.

“Nothing to say?” I bounce her gently on my shoulder and stride toward the entrance to my place. There are advantages to being the big, bad wolf and this is definitely one of them. I’m a dominant by nature, and I’m starting to suspect that she’s a submissive.

And my mate. Kinda. Temporarily. I claimed her out there in the bayou because it was the only way Jace would let me ride off with her. Partly, I did it to show I had his back—he’s got mating woes, trying to deal with the former Alpha’s daughter. Or he’s got the worst case of blue balls ever. Either way, he doesn’t need the added challenge of Marly. And she interests me.

When she doesn’t answer, I tap her on the ass—way more gently than she handled me, but just sharp enough to make a sound—and she freezes.

“You can’t do this,” she blusters, and it’s cute, the way she still believes words can make a thing true. I’ve been a wolf a long time now, and I can tell her with absolute surety that being bigger and stronger means I can.

“Give me any more trouble, and you’ve earned yourself a spanking.”

I believe in warning—once. After that, I act.

My front door’s got about a dozen locks on it, because you can’t be too careful. Some of the wolves crash at the clubhouse, but others of us have our own lairs scattered around the bayou’s edges. I like having my space. Sure, I’ll ride when and where Jace needs me, but sometimes I prefer being on my own. Probably where the term *lone wolf* comes from.

“Ware—” Marly says my name, but she doesn’t move. See? She’s learning.

Good girl.

I carry her inside and lock up behind me. The warehouse was redone as a loft and spans a couple of stories. It’s not so fancy, but there’s open space and the sunlight pours in through the skylights. I’m not big on furniture, but the bottom floor holds a leather couch and the biggest TV I could fit through the door, which pretty much covers the basics. My kitchen’s even got a table, although it’s not as if I use it for much besides holding beer. Kinda like knowing it’s there, though. If I want to host a four-fucking-course dinner, I can.

I bypass the couch and the kitchen, though, and take the stairs two at a time. The bedroom’s on the middle level, where I can see any enemies coming. It’s also where the tub is. I’ve never brought a woman back here. In

fact, I never bring anyone here. This is my place, my space, and usually I prefer my solitude.

Marly makes another squeaking sound when I step inside the bedroom. Right. I don't need a PhD in communications to interpret that sound. I'm the big, bad wolf, I'm part of Big Dog's pack, and now she expects me to fall on her like some kind of ravaging beast. And honestly? If that was what she really needed, I'd be happy to oblige.

The fact is, though, that I'm ten years too old and my knee's fucked six ways to Sunday. Someday, a younger, faster wolf will take me down in a dominance fight, so I have no business claiming her for real. Not when I can't protect her. Not when I'd make her even more vulnerable than she already is. So I set her on her feet, sliding my hand down her arm until my fingers loosely bracelet her wrist. She ducks her head, staring at my boots like they're the most interesting things she's ever seen.

She's the sweetest little liar.

And I can *still* smell her arousal, which pisses me off.

"Sex is off the menu tonight," I tell her.

She sorta freezes, her breath hitching. Bet she didn't see that one coming. Turns out I have a chivalrous side after all. She doesn't need a too-old, beat up wolf in her bed, and I don't need her brand of trouble. While she's still trying to frame an answer, I tow her into my bathroom and turn the water on. Maybe I don't get to have her, maybe I can't fix her sex life, but I can do something for her.

"Sit." I point to the closed toilet seat. Yeah. That's just more proof that I'm no closet romantic. She hesitates but then sinks down. My wolf growls happily at the little act of submission. It wants to think that Marly recognizes her own personal Alpha, that there's a chance for an old wolf after all.

I need to stop thinking about her. Need to get her out of my place, out of my life. The fact that's gonna happen tomorrow doesn't make me—or my wolf—happy, but life's full of shit. I've got her here now, though, so I start the water. I don't have any of that bubble bath shit girls like, and that's an oversight on my part. I add it to my mental shopping list. I've got a well-used bar of Irish Spring and not much more to offer, but I do find a clean towel.

"I'll be right outside the door," I tell her and then I close the door and

retreat.



MARLY

KNOWING WARE'S ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT CLOSED DOOR MAKES ME FEEL better. The sense of security is stupid, or at least painfully thin. One thing's true, though. He's all that's standing between me and Big Dog's wolf pack. The problem is, all I can think about is those stories. You know the ones I mean. Where the big, bad wolf threatens to eat you up.

Don't go all Stockholm. I think that's what they call it when you start lusty after your kidnapper, start thinking the sun rises and sets around him and that he's really a good guy. Or at the very least, entirely misunderstood.

I'd like to pretend I argue with myself about getting into the tub. Or that I at least lock the door. But the thing is? I'm filthy and the door doesn't have a lock. Beggars. Choosers. When the tub finishes filling, I strip off my borrowed clothes, drop them on the floor, and get in. He doesn't even have to order me—he just leaves me here and I do it.

Bliss.

I float in the water, letting the heat soak into my bones and wash the grime of cabin-living and Big Dog away. When the water starts to cool, I add more because it's not my water bill. Unfortunately, while the water's plentiful, Ware's choice of bathroom toiletries is sadly lacking. I make use of his Irish Spring, and then I slip out of the tub to ransack his vanity. He's got spare toilet paper, a few cleaning supplies, a razor blade, and nothing else. I briefly consider arming myself, but one blade seems like poor odds against six-foot-two-inches of werewolf. Plus... I trust him.

For absolutely no good reason.

See? Stockholm Syndrome.

Dutifully, I get back in the tub and mentally review my options. Besides the door into the bedroom, the only exit from the bathroom appears to be through the skylights in the roof—twenty feet above me. Not only does the bathroom lack movable furniture, but I'm flat out too short to reach. Even if I got out, then I'd be on the roof. Naked.

So instead of escaping, I duck my head back into the water.

More Irish Spring it is. As I lather the coarse soap through my hair, I mentally review my life. Big Dog can be filed under “F.” “F” for Failure, Fuck Up, and Fantasy. I thought he could protect me, keep me safe from life’s bad shit. Instead I gave him a free pass to shit on me. And honestly, that embarrasses me. How does something that starts out as a sexy game end up in felony territory so fast?

The door inches open, and I sit up with an enormous splash. Water sloshes out of the tub and onto his the floor, the bathroom now as messed up as my personal life.

“You okay in there?” Ware’s rough voice rumbles through the opening, and I steel myself not to find those harsh tones attractive. I don’t know why he brought me out of the bayou, but it’s not because he *likes* me. He’s made that perfectly clear. Plus, the bathroom’s so steamy now from the hot water that I doubt a normal person could see much, but he’s not normal. He’s a wolf.

“Fine.” My voice sounds like I swallowed a frog.

He’s silent for a moment, but he doesn’t close the door. Do I even want him to? “Now what?”

“Guess that depends.” Leather rustles as he... settles in? I’ve heard stories about bikers, and I’ve got plenty of firsthand experience courtesy of Big Dog, but Ware isn’t what I expected at all. Sure, he’s big and he has more rough edges than not, but he hasn’t hurt me. In fact, if I’m being completely honest, he rescued me, gave me a ride back to the city, and now he’s letting me use his tub. That practically makes him white knight material, right? Except, the small voice of sanity in my head chimes in, he threatened to tie you up and spank you.

Yeah. Those aren’t chivalrous qualities. I’m soooo not interested in seeing if he’d make good on those threats. Lusting after my captor isn’t a good idea. Scratch that. It’s suicidal. Crazy.

“Are you listening to me, Marly?”

Nope. I’m too busy trying to imagine him naked. The image of the muscled chest bared by his leather cut is burned into my brain. I should have paid more attention to the patches on the vest, but all those delicious ridges distracted me. The patches proclaim his club loyalty and advertise the territory he claims. The Breed MC runs the gritty outskirts of Baton

Rouge, their reach extending deep into the bayou.

It's not like the MC comes with a rulebook (or Big Dog sure didn't leave it lying around where I could find it), but even though Ware never came out to Big Dog's cabin before today, I'm certain of one thing. Ware doesn't take orders. He's used to being the top dog, the man in charge.

"You're not." Rough amusement fills his voice. "Honey, you need to listen good."

Well my inner librarian pipes up. As if this man cares about grammar. The water's getting cold again, so I reach for the towel he left me.

"If you're going to try and give me orders, I need to tell you something." I've got soap in my eyes and the towel seems to have relocated to Siberia. My questing fingers find no cotton, nothing but the smooth edges of the tub and empty air. I consider swinging my legs over the side of the tub, but the man doesn't even own a bathmat and I've already created a mini-swamp on his floor. At some point, he'll run out of patience, and I definitely don't want to be naked for that.

"What's that?"

"I don't take orders well." If I had the towel, it would be easier to pretend that I'm not naked and that he's not just feet away. More soap runs into my eyes, and I bite back a whimper. I've survived so much worse. I'm not sure why a little sting is the final straw, but it is.

He grunts. "You sure about that?"

"Positive." *No, not really, but I'm going with a yes here.* This is *not* a man you let walk all over you. I'm not a relationship virgin—or any kind of virgin—but my previous boyfriends weren't wolves of any sort. I've experimented once or twice with letting my lovers tie me up. It always felt silly—and disappointing. It was kind of sad, really. They'd taken direction so well, but it wasn't *directions* I wanted. Giving up control didn't appeal—I wanted a man who was strong enough to take it, but who took it because he cared about me and giving me what I needed. Maybe there's something screwed up in my head, thinking that way, but it's the truth.

"How'd you and Big Dog meet up?"

"He came to the library," I admit.

"Not sure I'd have pegged him for a reader." I hear the smile in Ware's voice. See? He's not so big and scary.

"He wasn't." I splash a little water on my face to ease the soap sting. Big

Dog rode up outside the library on his bike, the pipes roaring loud enough to be heard pretty much everywhere inside the building. In retrospect, I'm pretty certain he came inside just to find a bathroom, because he never once mentioned books while we were together. It wasn't like he swept me up in his arms and hauled me off to his bike, but he came back after closing. He took me out for a drink. It would be so much easier if I could say that he'd forced me to go with him, but... he didn't. I just didn't know what I was getting into—and once I did, he wouldn't let me leave.

Ware goes right there, too. "You thought it was a good idea, riding off with a biker?"

I give up on trying to get the soap out of my hair. It's enough that now I'm peering bleary-eyed at the world. My borrowed clothes don't appeal, though. Yuck. "Do you have something else I can wear?"

"Come on out," he says wearily. I consider stepping out of the bathroom but then stop. Hello. Naked female plus werewolf? I haven't enjoyed that math so far.

"Hand them through," I counter.

He growls softly, but then I hear him stand up and stomp away. A minute later he returns and waves a stack of clothes through the cracked door. Pauses. Yeah. We've got a design flaw here—he can't reach me in the tub, and I'm paralyzed in place at the sight of that strong, tattooed arm in my space.

"I'm coming in," he announces at the same time he shoves the door open.

"No. Wait." Shit. Now I'm doing that stupid thing where you smack your boobs with one palm and your pussy with the other, like a human hand bikini can hide anything. My fingers aren't that big—and Ware's already seen it all.

He comes right inside the bathroom and drops the stack of clothes on the sink. His dark eyes rake over me, taking in my predicament in his tub. "For what, honey?"

Armageddon. The Apocalypse. Tomorrow. "For me to say yes," I snap, before I can bite back the words. I've learned firsthand that pissing off werewolves leads to bad outcomes.

But Ware just gives me a look, the one I think might be a smile. The corners of his mouth tug briefly upward, and there's a flash of something

hot and warm in his dark eyes.

“I’ll get the soap out of your hair,” he announces.

“Fuck off, Sherlock,” I grumble right back. If I press my legs any tighter to my chest, I might not come undone again. I wrap my arms around my knees like some kind of human rubber band and wait.

“Don’t scream,” he cautions.

As if any action preceded by that particular warning ends well.

“Why not?”

He gives me that not-quite smile. “Because it’s been a long day, honey, and I’m too old for that shit.”

He doesn’t look old to me. He yanks his shirt over his head in a smooth move. Given the frequency with which he undresses, I’m not sure why he bothered. And frankly? Half-naked is an amazing look for him. Heat and power radiates off his body, and my own completely naked state suddenly seems like a genius move on my part.

Stockholm. I so need to remember that.

But Ware has tattoos absolutely everywhere. He’s big and dark and covered with ink. He’s also surprisingly gentle when he cups the back of my head with one large hand and nudges me forward.

“Hold still,” he whispers roughly and I freeze. He separates the tangled, slick strands of my hair with careful fingers, rinsing the soap away. It’s that slow, unwavering patience that cracks me. When he finishes clearing away the soap and lifts me out of the tub, I should protest. I shouldn’t let him do this—but I do. I let him dry me off and pull the T-shirt over my head. If we’re being honest? I’m pretty sure I’d let him do whatever he wanted.

“Why are you doing this?” My entire day seems to catch up with me at once. It’s like a fifty-ton juggernaut bearing down on me, the out-of-control semi coming up fast in my rearview mirror.

He growls something under his breath, but the rhythm of the comb tugging gently through my hair is hypnotic and he’s just so fucking nice. Just for once, couldn’t my instincts be right about a guy?

“I mate-claimed you,” he snarls. “Okay? It was the only way Jace would let me take you away, and mates take care of mates.”

There’s only so much truth I can handle, so I make a deliberate decision not to ask what the alternative was. Jace and Ware killed Big Dog. They probably threw his body into the bayou—and I’m the only witness. I can

guess how Jace might take care of the Marly problem.

“I don’t want to be anyone’s mate,” I whisper as my head hits his chest. I sink into the reassuring breadth and heat of him, going boneless. *Stockholm*, I remind myself.

“Too late.” His words echo in my ear as his mouth... brushes my hair? He sounds rough and frustrated, and when I sneak a peek at his face, the look there matches his voice. Ware radiates hunger and anger, yet I have zero desire to move away. Bikers, badasses, and werewolves—they all go under N for Never Ever Again.

“Did you love him?” The expression on Ware’s face turns grumpy and pained. It’s cute. I guess male werewolves don’t like discussing emotions any more than human males do. It makes me want to take advantage of him in the worst way, dig a little to see if he’ll let me in or if he’ll freeze me out.

“Big Dog? No.” I’d spent my time in the bayou working that one out. I’d had plenty of curiosity, and Big Dog had ticked a few boxes on my sexual fantasy bucket list. That saying about *be careful what you wish for*? I’d gotten way more kink than I’d bargained for, and nowhere near enough orgasms. It’s safe to say that bondage is off my list for good. I’d had all sorts of plans for what I’d do as soon as I got free. Somehow, those plans didn’t include tub time with another werewolf, but apparently I’m flexible. Or easily persuaded.

Ware grunts, and for a long moment I think that’s going to be the extent of his contribution to the conversation.

“Then why were you with him?”

“He didn’t give me a choice.”

“Uh-huh.” He leans back, wrapping his arms around my middle and pulling me closer. “The wolf pack’s not gonna let you walk. That’s another choice you don’t have.”

His hand smoothing through my hair doesn’t stop. The tangles slowly vanish beneath his careful touch, and it’s unexpectedly sexy. I could curl into him, could rest myself against his heat and his strength. He tempts me. It’s been so long (forever, if I’m honest) since I met a guy who could be strong without needing me to be weak. But Big Dog seemed like a fantasy come true too, and then he turned out to be one hell of a mistake. I can’t afford to rush this.

Ware asked me a question. No. There was no question in his words. It

was a statement, and not even a threat. Just a fact he'd put out there like someone would read the weather forecast and comment on an incoming shit storm of rain. *The pack won't let me walk.*

"What does that even mean? You can't lock me up forever."

Can they?

"You know we're wolves." The comb slides easily through my hair now, but he doesn't stop. Is he leaning closer? Is he... sniffing me? You'd think I'd know by now that wolves are bad news, but nope. My traitorous body lights up for him. It wants to send him the green light.

"You know about the pack and the MC," he continues. The comb makes another downward pass through my hair. "Those aren't things we tell the world, and you're not one of us."

"I won't tell anyone," I say quickly. Too quickly. There's no reason for him to believe me. I hadn't thought about what I'd do next. It's not like I need to go to the police anymore about Big Dog—he's never hurting another woman again—but I hadn't thought past getting away from him.

He picks me up effortlessly and heads for the bed. *No sex.* That's what he's promised, and somehow I know Ware keeps his promises. So instead of squirming and demanding he put me *down now*, I rest my head against his chest and enjoy the ride. Plus, right now the distance to the bed appears to approximate the length and breadth of a small land mass—without Ware's arms, I'd be napping on the bathroom floor.

"I told you before. We're mated." He doesn't sound thrilled about it, which makes two of us. He kills the light in the bathroom and steps out into the bedroom. The sudden lack of wattage leaves me temporarily blind, but he doesn't seem to have that problem. Maybe it's because he's a wolf, but he moves with sure-footed confidence through the dark.

"That didn't work out so well for Big Dog and me. What makes you think you'd do any better?" Way to go blurting out a challenge.

He gives me a long look as he sets me down on the bed, and suddenly I feel completely naked. Doesn't matter that it's still dark as sin in here, or that I can barely make out the hard lines of his face. He's watching me, and he sees way more than he should. I've been through way too much these last few weeks to hook up with another dominant, pain-in-the-ass male.

"We're not having sex," he says as if he's read my mind. God. I hope not, even though I can't quite shut down the X-rated fantasies. "Not until

you ask me for it.”

Clearly, in the Ware-verse, my requesting sex will happen when hell freezes over—and I don’t disagree. It’s not that I think he’d be that bad at it (my hormones are pretty darn certain he’d be phenomenal), but I just got out of a bad relationship—a relationship so bad that it required a felony to end. I stare at his bare chest, and I don’t even have to pretend the ink and the muscles on display inches from my nose fascinate me. So what if he’s beautiful?

“I’m not even thinking about it,” I assure him and he snorts. “I don’t even like you.”

I think that’s true.

God, I sure like his bed, though. He’s got to have the best mattress ever. I sink in, rolling onto my stomach and burrowing my face into his pillow. I’ll figure out my life tomorrow. Maybe next week.

“Not sure liking’s required,” he says thoughtfully, smoothing his palm down my back.

“You have a magic penis?” That’s my voice, sounding sleepy and defenseless. Shit. I should shut up, pass out, and stop poking him. But he only laughs, a low, rough rumble of sound that makes my non-existent panties wet.

“You know that wolves can smell a lie, right?” He leans down. This puts his mouth right by my ear, so that each word shoots straight to my pussy as if there really is some kind of magic connection between us. *Stockholm*. That’s all this is. It can’t be something more, something special.

“Bull shit,” I mutter. There’s no way that’s true.

His hand makes another pass down my back and keeps on going until he’s cupping my ass. The T-shirt bunches up, and his fingertips graze the curve of my butt.

“You want this,” he whispers roughly. “You want my fingers stroking your hot little pussy, making you come, making you scream.”

He drags his fingers lower, and yes I hold my breath. My thighs prickle with damp, needy sweat. Muscles clenching, I wait and he rewards me. He draws the tips of his fingers over my swollen folds, his touch light and teasing when what I really need is his fingers screwing deep inside of me. Pushing deep until I scream for mercy and get an orgasm instead.

“You gotta ask.” His fingers move up and down, and I force myself to

hold still. I *won't* screw myself on his fingers.

“I won’t tonight,” I whisper over the screaming protest of my nerve endings.

“Good choice.” He licks his fingers, shoves upright, and walks away. The door closes behind him, sealing me into the darkness.

God, he’s dirty.

I’m so turned on that there’s only one thing left to do to cap off this craptastic day. It doesn’t take much, either. A few quick strokes of my hand and I’m coming in Ware’s bed, wondering if my wolf can hear me. If he’ll be coming back for me.

If, if, if.



WARE

MY BATHROOM’S ALWAYS BEEN PURELY FUNCTIONAL. PLACE TO TAKE A SHOWER, shit, and brush my teeth. Tonight, though, it’s something else. Fuck if I know what.

I force myself away from my bedroom.

Just because Marly let me have a taste of her pussy doesn’t mean anything. No secret that you can steal a lick of the frosting without owning the cake, right? I consider my options as I raid my fridge for another beer.

Marly and I, we’re a temporary thing. Marly needs muscle. Someone to protect her. Big Dog was a fucking idiot, treating her the way he did. Brother never had a good reputation, even with the club whores, but this time he’d crossed a line. Kinda regretted killing him earlier today, because the more I thought about what had happened to Marly, the more pissed off I got. He’d died too quick. Killing him a second, third, and fourth time topped my fantasy list.

When my phone rings, I don’t have to look to know it’s Jace. “You good?” he asks when I answer.

“Doing fine.” I pop the top on my beer and take a long swallow. No way alcohol doesn’t improve this conversation. Jace’s next question proves it.

“You got Marly at your place?”

“She’s my mate,” I said instead of answering straight up. “Where else would she be?”

Jace grunts something noncommittal. “Still need to discuss her with the pack.”

“I claimed her,” I remind him before we move on to routine club business and hang up. Not too happy about equivocating with my Alpha, but things are complicated. I’m not letting Marly get hurt anymore than she already has, but I’m too old to make my mate claim a permanent arrangement. I’m not doing to her what my old man did to my mother. The constant fights, the eventual fatal beat-down, and then the new wolf that’s more owner than mate? That’s a shitty set of circumstances right there, and Marly deserves better.

I’m gonna have to take care of her tomorrow.

Pack life is an endless series of bike rides, fights, and meetings. There’s not a whole lot of soft in my life. I’m not top dog, not the Alpha, and I’m good with that. As Jace’s right-hand man and lieutenant, I’m damned powerful. Problem is that the position’s not a permanent one—it’s only mine as long as I can hold it.

Big Dog was on the short end of that fucking stick earlier today. He turned out to be weaker and we kicked his ass. Now he’s dead and I have his mate. She’s this wolf’s property.

History. It fucking repeats itself.



WARE

THE MORNING AFTER I BRING HER HOME, I LEAVE THE DOOR UNLOCKED SO MARLY can leave. Fortunately, Jace failed to give me a direct order regarding Marly. Despite my claiming her, she hasn't made the choice to take me on and there's no way this attraction between us can work. Ergo, the least I can do is mark the exit for her and make sure she's got plenty of runway. I also make sure she's got clothes and cash in the purse I leave for her. Getting her some new stuff wasn't hard. After she fell asleep, I reached out, called in a few favors. The last Alpha kept an entire stable of club whores—females who cleaned, danced, and banged on demand. In exchange, the girls got cash and a roof—never seemed like enough to me, but I'd also kill the first mother fucker who shoved his dick into me uninvited. The girls mean well and I've helped more than one of them out, so they're happy to repay me by doing some shopping on my dime. Guess my ugly mug made them worry I'd ask for something more.

I told them to pick out pretty shit, and to go to the high-end places. When Tina arrives in front of the warehouse on the back of Fang's bike, I'm still surprised, though. It's not like my place is a secret, but no one from the pack has come out here. Figured I'd ride out to the clubhouse and grab the shit from her.

Tina's barely twenty. She's got blonde hair bleached even lighter that falls in a straight sheet over her shoulders, although I like the ponytail days better. Easier to fist, to pull her head back for a kiss. Hers is a deceptively fragile face that kinda makes a wolf want to protect her and keep her safe even when he's riding her deep and rough. I'm not used to seeing her fully dressed, but she rocks a pair of jeans and cowboy boots. A snug white T-shirt stretches across her tits beneath a leather vest that's a fashion statement of some fucking kind and not a cut.

Most of the women who hang around the club are whores and pass-arounds. I'm not judging, because it's their business why they're renting out pussy or hopping from brother to brother, and I've taken more than one ride myself. But once in a while, a brother meets a woman who's something more. She's special and he ends up feeling *and* fucking, which makes her keeper material. These are the old ladies, the women whose men give them a "Property of" patch that's better than any damned ring. It's sure as fuck not PC, but it's one more thing bikers and wolves have in common. We don't hold back when we claim a woman. Once she accepts your patch, you're responsible for her actions. Anything she does that reflects badly on or hurts the club comes out of your ass.

The wolf pack recognizes Marly as my mate (or they sure as fuck will when I'm done making things safe for her), but the rest of the club recognizes the old ladies. My brain derails, imagining Marly wearing my patch so the whole world, human and wolf, knows she's mine. Our relationship is only temporary, though.

Tina locks her arms around Fang's waist, her face turned into the back of his leather cut. Guess he's been roped into babysitting detail today. Fang is a big motherfucker and aggressive. He advertises trouble from the dark hair shaved closed to his skull to the ink on his arms and the confident swagger in his steps. He showed up in Baton Rouge about a year ago with some bullshit story about relocating from his pack. Since he could outfight most of the pack, our former Alpha welcomed him with open arms. He patched in about a month ago, so now he acts like he's the king-in-training and has the world's biggest dick. Jace watches his back around this one, and I'm not real fucking happy he's here. He wants my place as the pack's number two, and that means there's a fight brewing.

My knee's bothering me, the usual aching twist deep inside the bones and sinew. The damn thing makes sure I know it's there every fucking step of the day, and if I walk now, it'll be with a limp. There's no way I'll show Fang that kind of weakness—he'd challenge me in a heartbeat.

"Got your stuff," Tina calls, sliding off the bike and hefting two large plastic carriers. There's curiosity on her face, but mine reads *fuck off*. I can see the moment when she decides finding out why I need a woman's wardrobe isn't worth risking her life over. She slides off the bike and brings me the bags.

Fang just sits there watching, the bastard. He'll challenge me soon, and he's young and strong. The only thing I've got going for me is years of experience fighting dirty. Today, though, we've got a détente going. He watches and waits; I get what I need from Tina. She hands over the bags, takes the wad of cash I shove in her direction, and then flees back to the relative safety of Fang.

"Got a meeting in a couple of hours," he grunts in my general direction as Tina slides onto the bike behind him. "Gonna talk about your girl."

"My mate." I'd enjoy making him acknowledge Marly with my fists, but I'm a fucking saint this morning. I'll use my words first.

"Gotcha." His mouth curls up in a mocking grin as he palms Tina's thigh. Slides his grip higher. I don't care if he does Tina on the back of his bike—I just want him gone. "The club's not gonna like it."

Honestly? I don't care if the club likes Marly or not. They just have to leave her the fuck alone. Let her get on with her life. I drop the bags behind me and cross my arms over my chest. She doesn't get hurt, not on my watch.

"I'll be there." I'm not going back inside until he's gone and out of my territory—we both know that.

Fang waits a few minutes, and then he runs the engine and heads for the street. He's screwing with me, pushing to discover my limits. He's gonna discover that I have none where Marly's concerned. Her staying safe is nonnegotiable.

The pack I grew up in was small—the Alpha, my mother, myself, and a couple of young males. A few females joined us at some point, but the Alpha was our fucking Great Wall of China, holding off other aggressors who tried to move in on our territory. Strong was the only option. Fight and defend was a monthly occurrence. In the end, he was more like the pin in a grenade, because when he fell in a challenge fight, our whole pack blew to hell. The new Alpha moved in, took my mother as his mate, and ran me off. I could see the bruises, hear what happened when he mated her. At nine, I was too weak to challenge. Was working up to it when I came back one night and he wouldn't let me into the den. Just growled and lunged, snapping and biting, until I had to turn and disappear into the dark or let him kill me. I swore then that it would always be female's choice after that. Fang doesn't get to go after Marly—not on my watch.

After the sound of the bike's pipes fades away, I hoof it back up to my place. She can't wear my shirt forever, and it's not like she had shit she could take away from Big Dog's cabin. Since she's my temporary mate, it makes sense that I take care of her needs. Can't have her walking around naked, much as I'd enjoy the view.

I drop the bags on the island in the kitchen and rifle through them. Tina's picked out a couple pairs of jeans that are gonna hug Marly's ass, tank tops, sweaters, and a pair of come-fuck-me boots. Tina's got an eye for this shit, which is why I sent her. I take it all out of the bags, to check it out. I leave the tags, though, so Marly knows they're new. While she's mine, she gets nothing but the best.

I've had her under my roof for less than twelve hours. Still feels like a dream, so I plan to enjoy the moments I've got left. Pretty soon she'll be gone, and I'll be whacking off to the memories, which makes me a sorry-ass bastard. And because I'm feeling sorry for myself, I decide I deserve a little treat. Marly's pussy is off-limits, but her panties are fair game. I fist the pretty, silky scrap, pulling the soft fabric through my rough grasp. It's sick, but there's no one here but the two of us, and fuck but I want to wrap her new panties around my dick and tug until I come.

I slept with her last night. Bet she wouldn't believe me, but that's the first time I've ever slept with someone. She's my first, and she doesn't even know it. Fang's got a point, though. She's a problem and the pack will be gunning for her. Will she keep her mouth shut? How will she handle the wolf pack? I'm tired of the violence, the fighting. When I'm with Marly, I feel... peaceful.

So I'll protect her while she's here by my side, before she heads on out into the world and gets the hell away from Baton Rough, the pack, and the uncertainties of being wolf. Because she's... *mine*. I leave the bags on the bed beside her, and I don't look more than once or twice at her pretty, sleeping face. Then I get the hell out of there.



MARLY

I'M ALONE WHEN I WAKE UP.

This is a good thing, or so I tell myself.

Any day you're not tied naked and spread-eagled to a bed has to be a good one, right? I take a moment to stretch. No ropes, no restraints. In fact, there's absolutely nothing and no one keeping me here in this spot. No *Ware*.

Huh. I've lost my unwanted, unwilling mate already.

I bolt upright. I'm absolutely, one hundred percent alone in Ware's bed. He's not big on furniture. The bed is a big-ass mattress parked square in the middle of the floor. He's got some quality sheets, though, and a big, black duvet that's currently sliding south of my boobs. I'm still wearing his T-shirt and not a stitch more, but it's not as if I packed for a weekend getaway. I do a quick survey of the room, but no wolf. Ware's gone.

Honestly? I'm disappointed.

Clearly, I didn't learn anything from my bayou sojourn, because I barely restrain myself from belting out his name. Instead, I stagger out of the bed with a groan. I'm more than a little stiff from being tied up, but apparently Ware's thought of that. He's lined up a picnic by my side of the bed in a neat, soldierly row. Advil, bottled water, a package of Hostess cupcakes (the bachelor power breakfast?), a stack of clothes, and a set of car keys. It's hard to miss the hint there. I'm surprised he didn't draw me a map. *This way to the exit*.

I knock back the Advil and retreat to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror doesn't improve my mood any. My hair stands on end, and I've got a red pillow crease on my cheek. I haven't seen make up, moisturizer, or a decent shampoo in weeks, and apparently I'm more high maintenance than I thought. I look used up—and lonely.

I can't hide in his bathroom all day, so I go back to the bedroom and move on to steps three and four in Ware's master plan: cupcakes and clothing. I haven't known him for long. When I do a quick mental count, I come up with less than twenty-four hours. In that handful of hours, however, he's looked at my wide-open pussy, committed murder for me and buried the body, helped me commit arson, and then driven the getaway vehicle. He's given me a place to crash, loaned me the shirt off his back, and made zero sexual demands. If I'm being fair, he's also growled, snapped, threatened to spank me, and warned me that I'm a threat to the

local werewolf pack.

Which brings me back to the *rescued me* item on the Ware agenda. Who knew white knights rode Harleys? I wouldn't have pegged him for the sensitive, caring type, but he's taken care of me. He's kept me safe. And now he's given me space. Apparently, my girl parts believe those qualities are stellar and are voting to keep him. Huh.

The clothes are gorgeous—and they're new. I don't know where or how he got them, but everything is pretty and expensive. I unfold one pretty thing after another—designer jeans, cashmere T-shirts, a gauzy blue kimono. The La Perla underwear alone costs more than I make in a week because county librarians are sadly underpaid.

When I finish plundering my new wardrobe, I discover a stack of cash at the bottom of the second bag. Six hundred bucks. I'll bet the truck that goes with those keys is sitting out there in front of the warehouse, probably with a full tank of gas. He's setting me free, letting me slip out of the cage his wolf pack made for me. I could get in the truck and just drive. Probably, I could go far enough that they wouldn't find me.

He's telling me to run, and only an idiot would ignore that message. And yet...

You're my mate.

That's what he said yesterday, and I told him I wasn't in the market for another mate. I've experimented with werewolf domination games, and they're not to my taste. Six hundred bucks will definitely buy me some breathing room, and I should be halfway down the stairs now. Except... I'm not.

I inhale. Exhale. It's stupid to feel *hurt* because he's pushing me away. So what if Ware doesn't want to have sex with me? I don't want another captor, and I certainly don't have a bright future with the Breed MC. Big Dog filled me in on the culture, and at best, I'm a hang-around, a piece of communal pussy they'll share. At worst, I'm a threat that needs to be neutralized, because I've seen what they are and I don't have a keeper to muzzle me. That's why Ware mate-claimed me.

I should be grabbing the clothes, the money, and the keys. I should fly out Ware's front door and never look back. California's supposed to be beautiful, and moving to the other coast might put enough distance between me and the wolf pack. Or I could emigrate. I love a good beach, and

Mexico's conveniently nearby. Thailand. Dubai. There are dozens and dozens of places safer and better than where I currently am.

Noted. Guess I'm a sucker for punishment, though, because I can't help but think I won't be running into Ware in any of those exotic locations. He'll be here, riding his bike and fighting with his pack. He'll forget about me, but I'm not so sure I can forget *him*. I consider my options while I get dressed in the pretty things he bought me. He's definitely spent way too much time thinking about my underwear, because he's bought enough for days. Lacy, skimpy, sexy things that cost something ridiculous. If he spent all this money on me, does it mean I mean something to him?

When I go down the stairs, there's no sign of Ware. I shamelessly ransack his place, looking for clues, but he lives like a goddamned Spartan. He owns a big leather couch, a bed, and almost nothing else in the home furnishings department. His kitchen is almost equally empty. By the time I've been through every room, every drawer, I don't know much more than when I started. He buys Advil in bulk and only owns black T-shirts and apparently one pair of boots... because the boots are gone.

His garage holds considerably more stuff than his house, but the garage stuff is all of the machine parts ilk. Apparently, Ware rebuilds bikes in his spare time. Two Harleys wait for him in various stages of repair, and the workbench is neat and ordered. Yeah. That practically begs me to screw with him. I nudge a few tools out of order, creating little patterns of my own. By the time I wander back inside the loft, I've killed an hour.

I should be thinking about finding a phone, finding out if my apartment is still mine and if my landlord has sold off my stuff. I doubt Big Dog paid my rent, and even without checking, I can estimate the pitiful state of my checking account. When you don't work, you don't get paid. I should use the keys he left me and go to my apartment. Pick up my stuff or move back in. Call the library and see if I still have a job.

But I don't do any of that. Instead, when I finish the second cupcake, I head out the door after all, but not to drive toward California or some other safe place. I go to the store and stock up. After all, he's left me with that wad of cash and my inventory of his kitchen turned up *nada*. And as I push my cart through the aisles—with a long pause by the meat cases because he's a wolf and I doubt he's a vegetarian—I think about Ware. About me. About us being mates in a wolfish, possessive, deliciously erotic way.

And you know what? I don't *want* to leave.

There's no fairytale story, no magic in the way we met. He's not the Beast and I'm not Beauty—and he's definitely no Prince Charming. And yet he feels right. He's covered with ink and scars, he prefers snarling to talking, and he's actively trying to get rid of me. It's this last part that makes me pause. Why does he want me to go so badly? Why *wouldn't* he let the MC take care of their Marly-the-Eyewitness problem?

I can think of a couple of reasons.

I'm hoping it's one insane, sexy, delicious reason: he likes me.



WARE

THE BREED'S CLUBHOUSE IS A FORMER WAREHOUSE THE PACK PICKED UP FOR A song on the outskirts of Baton Rouge. The neighborhood's rough as fuck, so we fit right in. Nobody sticks a nose into anyone else's business here—it's all *might makes right*. From the outside, our place looks like standard industrial rundown chic, except for the parking lot full of bikes. Big Red, the last Alpha, ran guns, laundered money (for a cut that made the IRS look like a charity gig), and controlled the flow of illegal drugs. He made money—and he made plenty of enemies too.

Our new Alpha, Jace Jones, isn't interested in the dirty shit. He's taking our club more legit. He's about riding and power—the power to control our own lives, to ride free, fast, and far. Those last three? Yeah. I'm fucking on board. My new acquisition, however, is a potential threat. Most humans don't know about the wolves, and we like it that way.

When I hit the brakes in front of our clubhouse, a prospect bounds over to take the bike from me. Valet fucking parking. Awesome.

I head for the clubhouse. Jace called the meeting as soon as he got back from torching Big Dog's bayou cabin, and I don't need a PhD in rocket science to connect the dots in this puzzle. He's gonna bring up my Marly. A couple of club whores hang by the doors rocking the kind of club wear usually not seen in daylight. The girls look good, though, in their stilettos and leather mini-skirts. Tina's there, her tits almost popping out of the bright red bustier top. She gives me a hesitant smile, ready to fade back into the woodwork, but I nod. She did me a solid, and I appreciate it.

She's got a pretty smile—kinda lights up her face.

I shove past the human males guarding the doors and enter the clubhouse. Place is definitely cleaner now that Big Red's passed. Unlike his predecessor, Jace was willing to shell out the cash for a cleaning crew—and

he didn't threaten to eat them, either. Makes it way easier to retain the help that way. That's for sure. Otherwise, despite the recent change in leadership, the place still looks and smells the same. Lots of wide-open space, a back room full of pool tables, a bar serving cheap beer and cheaper whiskey, and a mismatched collection of sofas rimming the room. Pretty sure half the furniture came from the curb, but it gets the job done and none of us need it to be pretty. It's just gotta pull its weight.

It's not a party night, and things have definitely changed for the better since Jace challenged Big Red for pack leadership and won. That fight was beautiful, the stuff of legends.

We're still a bunch of rough bastards, and it's definitely no fucking beauty contest. Our uniform consists of boots, jeans, leather, and chains. Plenty of ink, too. We're bikers, not billionaires—there's no fucking tuxedo material here. The junior wolves give me a wide berth as I stride through the clubhouse, which is just the way I like it. I fight mean, I fight dirty, and I always fight to win. You let a wolf walk away from a fight, and he just comes after you again.

Forty wolves ride with the Breed MC, plus another forty humans who are full-patch members. Dozens of prospects hang around the edges of the room, waiting for a member to snap out an order. They fetch, carry, and kill on demand—perfect club minions. Because Fate's a grudge-carrying bitch, the first wolf I spot is Fang, the goddamned perpetual thorn in my side. He smacks the last remaining club whore on the ass, urging her to move along outside with the rest of the girls. The club's no place for females; not that women aren't smart enough, mean enough, or loyal enough—but we've always been a boys' club. Gotta have a dick to ride and to belong.

Jace is standing at the front of the room, bristling with aggression and weapons. He's a big, ink-covered bastard who doesn't take shit from anyone. His old lady is Keelie Sue, the daughter of our pack's former alpha. Mating with her was a smart move on Jace's part, but thinking didn't come into it much, not as far I can see. Jace thinks with his dick and his heart—but not his head—when he's got that girl around. If someone went after her, it'd be like a sucker punch to the gut. She makes him vulnerable.

She's not here today, though, because this is club business and she's not a member. Jace mounts the steps to the banquette at the back of the room. It's high ground, and he can see anyone coming for him. The bar's not

open, indicating this meeting is serious shit, because my brothers like nothing more than getting down and dirty with a beer and a girl.

Jace lounges in Big Red's chair at the head of the table, the Alpha. The top wolf. I meet his gaze for a long moment, but the funny thing is? I don't want his spot.

I'm too fucking old, for one thing.

Jace is the new blood. Even wolves wear out, and I've been fighting a long fucking time. First my service for Uncle Sam, and then my years under Big Red. Enough time to know that setting Marly free isn't as simple as killing one big, bad wolf.

I stroll casually up to Jace's throne, taking the steps two at a time. Gotta play it cool even if my head's working overtime trying to figure out all the angles. I greet Jace with the barest tilt of my head, flashing him the ink on my throat. He growls, a low, harsh rumble, but fuck him. That's what he gets from me—my loyalty and a token nod. I don't roll and show my belly to anyone.

So naturally he goes for the conversational jugular. "How's Marly?"

Fucking land mine right there. She's not my prisoner, but I mate-claimed her. When she drives away from my place, I'm gonna lose face. Gonna need to kick more ass to make sure my wolves don't think I'm weak. Starting with Fang seems like a good idea—business and pleasure.

"She's doing fine," I tell him. Hope it's true too. Bet she could be fifty, sixty miles from Baton Rouge by now. "Didn't know you cared."

Jace bares his teeth. "She's a problem."

"She's my problem," I counter. Of course, her bugging out is gonna be a whole different problem. Things are gonna get a lot worse when her bunk is discovered.

"We'll discuss it," he growls, and that's as good as I'm getting for now. He turns to the waiting wolves and calls the meeting to order. The first thirty minutes are devoted to regular club business. I sprawl in my chair, comment when called on, and keep an eye on the wolves in the crowd. Most of them are listening more or less respectfully, but there's always the possibility some hot head decides to challenge Jace.

Next item of business is all Blade's. The club enforcer updates us about the drug trade. That's messy shit. The market's all human, and there's always collateral damage. Jace is winding down the club's participation,

taking us legit, but there are loose ends. Looking at Blade, you might not realize his lanky build hides a downright scary talent with knives. If the local dealers refuse to move from our territory, he'll be the one problem-solving their refusal, and he'll do it at knifepoint.

Jace shoves to his feet and steps toward the brothers. "We've been cleaning house. Over the last few years, Big Red took us in a bad direction. Guns, drugs, bad shit that's cost us good brothers and run the risk of exposing the pack. I'm fixing that, and I'm glad to have you all behind me, but we've got to talk business. Yesterday, Ware and I went for a ride to Big Dog's."

Heads nod here and there in the ranks. My brother wolves sense what's coming next.

"Big Dog took a mate," Jace rumbles, "And he didn't do any asking. We couldn't leave a female locked up out there against her will. We sprang her, but now we've got another problem. Big Dog not only failed to keep his dick to himself, but he shifted in front of her. She knows about the pack."

"So we take care of her. We're not the fucking tooth fairy or Santa Claus," Fang growls. He's pushing his luck, and Blade moves toward him. Pretty sure Fang's about to get a beat down. Fucker's lucky it's not me, because I'm not feeling gentle.

A wolf steps forward from the crowd. "She gonna talk?"

That's the million dollar question right there. I stare at the wolf doing the asking, trying to figure out if he's just putting a legitimate question out there, or if he's Jace's plant. Eli is another Jones brother who seems to have come along for the ride when Jace broke away from the Jones pack. I'm okay if he hangs with us, but he hasn't patched in. Hasn't asked to prospect, and damned sure hasn't broken it off with the Jones pack. So you'd think the other wolves wouldn't trust his loyalties, but no one stops him from attending our meetings or voicing his opinions.

I don't give a shit if Eli and Jace share DNA. Plus, Eli's almost as much of a pain in my ass as Fang is, but since it's clearly my turn to speak up, I shove to my feet, ignoring the painful twinge in my knee, and cross my arms over my chest. I just have one thing to say.

"Doesn't matter what she saw, what she knows. She's mine now." I stare down the other wolves in the room. Most of them are indifferent about what happens to Marly, but a few look more concerned. Those are the faces I

need to remember.

Gator crosses his arms over his chest, rocking back on his heels. As always, he's watching the meeting from the edge of the room, his back to the wall. "Didn't get my wedding invite."

"Boo-fucking-hoo." I flip him the bird. "Kept it short and simple and claimed her in front of Jace. You got a problem with that?"

A werewolf claim isn't PC. We're not big on poetry, vows, or words of more than one syllable. *Mine* works just fine, and a good female will answer that with *hers*. I may have claimed Marly, but she hasn't claimed me. She's been abused by werewolves, though, and no way she's gonna want the likes of me hanging around her. Doesn't matter how good my intentions are—she'll want the space and that's why I've left her the means to run.

Gator rolls his shoulders, like he's actually considering his answer. Gator was one of Big Red's right-hand wolves, and he's made it clear he plans on being the same to Jace. Not sure how Jace feels about promoting the bastard, but he'll answer to me if he tries any shit. An old scar bisects his left cheek, and I'd be happy to give him a matching mark on his right. Balancing him out would be a fucking public service.

"You shoulda claimed her here," he says eventually. He looks dead serious too, but not much makes Gator smile. I've seen him grin ear-to-ear in the middle of a fight, but he's not the kind of wolf who greets you at the door with a smile and a cold one. It's obvious to me why the alligator that chewed up his face spat him back out. He's one tough son-of-a-bitch.

Blade sides with Gator. "She's club business."

Not anymore. "She's *my* business."

Temporarily and until she runs far enough to get away, but I'm not sharing that piece of intel with my brothers—they'll learn soon enough. My loyalty to the club has never been called into question before and I respect the hell out of Jace and my brothers. In letting Marly go, I've put my personal shit over the club's, and it doesn't sit well—but I'd do it again. She deserves a second chance.

"How much does she know about the club?"

Her werewolf know-how is bad enough. I lift a shoulder. "Don't know yet."

It's not like Marly and I have had much in the way of fucking

conversation. I busted her out of Big Dog's place, gave her a ride and a bath, and then got my fingers in her pussy. While I enjoyed the hell out of my night, we didn't do a whole lot of talking.

While I'm going back and forth in my head, a whole lot of conversation breaks out, the wolves arguing back and forth about Marly. Sure, I'd like to keep her naked and on her knees, sucking my dick before I return the favor and go down on her pussy, but right now I need to keep her alive and that means letting her go. Breathing trumps orgasming, although I've got way too much interest in learning the way she sounds when she's about to come.

"We'll vote on it." Jace puts an end to the discussion before I seriously consider murdering my brothers. We're going straight majority vote here, so it doesn't take long. Most of my brothers vote with me on keeping Marly, and I take note of the ones who vote against her. Bottom line? She's now officially my responsibility. If she steps out of line, I pay the price—so her road trip out of Baton Rouge will cost me.

Keeping the wolf pack on the down low has been rule number one for the last decade. We're not the only wolf club in the country, and Jace has been making noise about reaching out to some of the non-local brothers. Seems smart to expand our base some and build relationships.

After working through a couple more items, the meeting breaks up. Some of the brothers grab a cold one and mill around the room. Might shoot some pool or talk some—they can be a bunch of fucking gossips. Others sprawl on the couches or head out toward the parking lot and the bikes. I join the crowd making for the door.

Jace falls into step beside. "I'm thinking about cutting in the humans. Letting them know we're here."

That's a bad situation waiting to happen right there. "We're tough, but the numbers don't work in our favor. If the governor called in the National Guard or we got Washington's eyes on us, things could head south fast."

Jace nods. "True, but we're also gonna be outed at some point thanks to i-this and i-that. The Internet is not our friend."

"Got a point." Wish I could disagree with him, but he's not wrong. As soon as we step outside, Jace peels off and makes for his bike. Bet he's heading back to his mate.

Tina's waiting for me. She kinda smiles when I get close, but then she takes a step back. Guess I look pissed off, and she's not stupid. Still, she

sucks in a breath, licks her lip, and puts her question out there.

“You want to ride?” How the fuck does she manage to sound hopeful and scared at the same time?

I look at her, and she drops her gaze somewhere south of my belt buckle. Couple of days ago, maybe I’d have taken her up on that unspoken offer. Today, though, it doesn’t sit right. I’m temporarily mated and I don’t want the company anyhow, so I shake my head.

“Gonna take off alone,” I tell her.

She nods, her gaze tracking someone over my shoulders. Bet Fang’s moving in. He always wants what’s mine, but that’s not tonight’s problem. I throw my leg over my bike and gun the engine. The throaty roar of the pipe bounces off the buildings, filling the air with my fuck-you to the world. I need the road, the wide-open space, and nothing between me and my future but empty air and speed. I wanna fly, just for a moment, and leave all this shit behind me.



WARE

IT’S WAY PAST DARK WHEN I PULL INTO THE WAREHOUSE. IT FEELS LIKE I’VE covered the better part of Louisiana, and I need a beer. Fuck. I need more than that, but I’m in no real hurry to be done with the day even if I’m not in the mood for the club’s social shit. Marly’s not gonna be here, and I have to admit I liked thinking about her in my bed. Fantasizing about her waiting for me to come home and take her for a different kind of ride.

Except she’s not gone.

My truck’s still in the parking lot. It’s not exactly where I left it, however, as if she took it out for a spin and then came back. The back bumper practically touches the wall and one tire points right. She can’t park worth shit. That’s the first thought that I manage to process, followed by a WTF of colossal proportions.

Marly is the cutest little submissive ever. She’s not a wolf, but she’s no challenger and she’s not stupid, either. She’s gotta understand that the longer she hangs around the pack, the more likely it is someone takes her

out just as insurance. She's a liability, and we both know it. I as good as ordered her to go, giving her the means to make her exit, so her disobeying makes about as much sense as teaching nuclear physics in a kindergarten.

I head in. Before I've gone more than a few feet, I know she's not trying to hide. More like advertise. She's belting out some off-key hum-along version of Justin Bieber, proving her taste in music is as shit as her parking skills.

The interior door pops open easily in my hand—she hasn't locked it, barred it, or dragged the couch in front of it. She's vulnerable alone, especially now, so she should have fucking locked it. I'll be explaining that to her. Might have to do that explaining with my palm on her ass, but that's one point we're gonna be clear on. She stays safe—or she doesn't sit comfortably for the rest of the week.

It's not like it's hard to find her once I'm inside—hello, open floor plan. She stands in my kitchen, leaning over the stove I never use. My mouth waters, and not just because I smell steak. She's wearing another one of my T-shirts, and her legs and feet are bare. Somewhere, she found nail polish because her nails are a girly hot pink. She's scooped her hair up on top of her head and anchored it with a pair of chopsticks. She looks sexy and rumped—downright delicious, in fact.

She looks over her shoulder as I prowl closer. “Hey.”

And then she smiles and my brain fucking short-circuits, because she looks genuinely happy to see me. The smile gets bigger before it dims when I don't respond. Yep. I'm the leading candidate for asshole of the year.

“Why are you here?” And with four words and a question, I clinch that award. Instead of answering, however, she hums and turns her attention back to the stove.

I. Don't. Think. So.



MARLY

MY GENIUS PLANS FOR SEDUCING—AND KEEPING—WARE FLY OUT OF MY HEAD the minute he stalks inside. He's big, he's pissed, and he's so hot that I

seriously contemplate melting into a puddle of needy goo on his kitchen floor. And this is why I'm no seductress extraordinaire.

"I cooked dinner," I chirp way too brightly. He's a wolf—not one of the three blind mice. He can see perfectly well what I'm doing with his brand-new grill pan.

"You're supposed to be gone," he half-snarls. The lock on the door clicks into place, shutting me in with him. This is what I want. Sure, the sensations streaking through my belly—and lower—are part trepidation, but they're hot, squirmy, delicious sensations and I want more.

"I decided to stay," I say with a shrug that sends his pilfered T-shirt sliding down my arm. "You want to make me leave?"

I have no idea how he moves so stealthily, but one minute he's by the door and the next he's in the kitchen. There's not so much as a scrape of his boot against the floor. Too bad he's not a cat and I can't bell him.

"What are you doing here?" He growls the question, flattening his palms on the kitchen island.

"Cooking." Mentally I measure the distance between us. Is five feet of butcher block enough to keep him from pouncing on me? That island is practically the only piece of furniture in the room. The man's place is almost entirely empty. Even the kitchen cupboards are a sea of empty space. He must eat straight out of take-out cartons or something, because he owns a mismatched but extensive collection of disposable plastic silverware and nothing else in the way of dishes.

"You need to stop fucking with the pack and leave." He certainly sounds unhappy. His knuckles tighten on the counter, and I'm pretty sure he's imagining strangling me. Funny, then, that I still feel so very safe. It's been a long time since I felt this way, so I'm not ready to give it up just because he says so.

"I don't want anything to do with the pack," I admit. "The hospitality sucks."

"So why are you *here*?" He prowls around the island, headed for me. I can't stop the tide of heat that washes through me, so I focus on the steaks in the grill pan on top of the stove. He ignores that little cue, though, not stopping until his front is pressed against my ass. I can feel every hard inch of him through the shirt, my shorts and the decadent, wicked underwear he'd bought. Wash worn denim rasps against the sensitive skin of my thighs

—why am I cooking when I could be pushing him to the floor? Taking advantage of his glorious body? *He* was the one who said I had to ask—and I’m almost ready to do so.

“I decided to stay,” I say cheerfully and flip the steaks. Yes, color me crazy. The black sear pattern and juicy scent of meat are good things on the dinner front, but my body thinks we should be going all *carpe diem* on Ware’s ass. Or his front. We’re not picky and he’s all-around gorgeous.

Ware makes a rough sound. “The fuck?”

Maybe he’s wondering about my evident stupidity in staying put when he practically handed me an engraved invitation to leave. He left me cash and the keys to his truck—it’s clear he wanted me gone, and he’s certainly not wrong about the dangers presented by his pack. If there was an eyewitness protection plan for werewolf victims, I should be the next to enroll.

“I don’t have anywhere to go. Job. Apartment. My stuff. Gone.” I tick my personal catastrophes off on my fingers. “All thanks to Big Dog.”

Fat sizzles and pops in the pan, and a bright sting of pain blossoms on my hand. Damn it. I blink back angry tears, because this wasn’t how I’d planned tonight. I was going to wine and dine my wolf, try to get to know him better.

I reach for the sink and cold water, but Ware is already moving. He kills the heat and pulls me away from the stove, lifting me up onto the counter in a smooth, powerful move. My hand stings where the fat burned me, and my eyes burn harder. I don’t want Ware to see me just as someone who needs protecting, as someone fragile.

He’s not waiting for me to decide what I *do* want, though, because he lifts my hand and examines it. Oh. God. The coolness of the granite beneath my butt sinks through the thin cotton shorts, and I squeeze my legs together, slapping my good hand down on the countertop for balance. Why is this sexy-pose-on-random-kitchen-surfaces thing always so much easier and more fun in books?

He’s not even looking at me.

Instead, Ware’s focused on my hand and the angry patch of pink skin on the back. The island is the kind that has a built-in sink, so it’s easy enough for him to flick on the water and hold my hand underneath the cold stream. The burn’s not so bad—in fact, on a scale of one to ten, it’s a decimal point

and not even a one. But from the intense look on his face, you'd think I had third-degree burns and needed a skin graft stat. He doesn't let go of my hand, either, as he angles me beneath the water.

It's kind of cute.

When my hand passes the iceberg stage and I lose all feeling, I try to tug free. He looks up, and then he licks the pink skin. Do I taste... good?

"A kiss to make it better?" I suggest, and he growls. Not one of those cute man-sounds, but a full-on, aggressive, belongs-in-the-wild snarl. He's pissed off about something, and I'll bet I'm the cause. "Am I in trouble?"

"Honey, you have no idea."

"So tell me." I tug again, and this time he lets me pull my hand away.

"The only humans who know about the pack are club members. You have no idea what they'd do to keep that secret." His fingers flex on my thigh, the rough pads of his fingers tracing a secret pattern over my bare skin.

"I won't tell anyone," I promise quickly, and I mean it. "Who would believe me anyhow? They'd lock me up in the loony bin."

He fists my hair gently, tugging my head back. "Promises aren't enough. No one knows about us because it's not a secret we share."

"Is everyone in the Breed MC a wolf?" I ask, because holy cow... how is that possible? How can there be almost a hundred werewolves riding Harleys through the streets of Baton Rouge and no one knows?

"Don't ask questions." He circles his fingers higher on my thigh.

"Because you can't tell me the answers?" Shoot. I'm playing with fire here, and yet... I can't imagine him hurting me. Not on purpose.

"The less you know, the less you get hurt."

"Then tell me what you can. For instance, you claimed I was your mate. Since we didn't trot down to the registrar's office and I never agreed, how does that work?"

He lifts me down from the counter. He must not be in any hurry for my feet to hit the floor, because every inch of me contacts with every inch of him—and Ware has *plenty* of inches. Made his dick plenty happy, too, because I can feel him through his jeans. We're supposedly mates and I still haven't seen him naked—but the scenery promises to be spectacular. I'm reaching for the buttons on his jeans when a short, sharp slap on my ass jolts me forward and out of my fantasy world. The sting in my rear is

followed by a slow heat in places that I shouldn't admit to. Maybe I do have a taste for kink.

"Let's eat," he says, grabbing a plate from the stack on the counter as if he doesn't have a monster erection in his pants. Then he pauses and looks down at what he's holding. "I own plates?"

He does now—that's what happens when you leave me alone with a stack of cash. He loads up on meat and potatoes, snagging a beer from the fridge before heading to the couch. I'd made a green salad too, along with mashed potatoes and gravy, but Ware avoids the leafy stuff entirely. Guess it's too much to expect a wolf to eat vegetables. I follow him over to the couch, as that's the only place to sit besides on the floor, the chair-less table, or the bed in the other room. I'm not sure how I imagined dinner going, but he actually takes a stab at making conversation in between bites of his steak.

I ask questions about his bike and being in a motorcycle club, and he reciprocates by asking about LBBB—Life Before Big Dog. I tell him about the library and my apartment. It's kind of like being on the world's most awkward first date, but he's trying and I appreciate it. I've forgotten what normal feels like, and it's nice. Ware may be a big, scary bastard, but right now he's *my* big, scary bastard.

"So," he says eventually, when I've explained my previous life to his satisfaction, "now we gotta figure out what's next."

"I don't need another wolf in my life," I tell him, trying to hold back a little shiver when his leg brushes mine. *Liar*. It's hard to forget who and what he is. He's so damned big and sexy.

"Gotcha." He takes a swig of his beer, completely unoffended. "But we're temporary mates until the pack calms down enough to realize you're not a threat."

Unfortunately, Big Dog had spent a not inconsiderable amount of time explaining to me *exactly* how werewolf pairing works. Their mate claim makes feudal lords sound downright feminist. Their females are property, claimed, taken. And if the sexy times part appealed to my inner bad girl, my head was smart enough to recognize trouble when it's sprawled on the couch beside me. The pack's not the only threat to me.

I have to know. "So what does *temporary* mean?"

Divorce is not a word I've heard used in conjunction with the pack.

Ever. They're more the until-death-do-us-part type, according to Big Dog, and they don't mean death by natural causes.

Ware sets his beer down and leans back. With his arms stretched along the back of the couch, he looks more big cat than wolf. "Nothing," he says.

"Just this morning you were all get out of Dodge. Now we're temporary mates? What is this, the nineteenth century? And a marriage of convenience?"

His jaw tenses. Go, me. I hit a nerve there.

"This morning," he grits out, "I didn't know the pack was gonna want to come after you so hard. I didn't *know* you'd ignore your invitation to drive out of my life and not come back."

Wow. I didn't expect his rejection to bother me. I mean, I'm supposed to be celebrating his hands-off policy, right? So I hate that his lack of interest hurts so much.

"You really thought I'd steal your truck and drive off with no particular destination in mind?"

Yeah, that sounds like an awesome idea.

I have no idea why I didn't take him up on the invite.

"Instead you decided to stick around a town with a bunch of wolves who think killing your ass might solve more than one problem?"

Okay. So there's something worse than Ware's indifference. I just don't have the bandwidth or the desire to deal with a murderous pack of werewolves today—or tomorrow, for that matter. I'd like the whole problem to just go away, starting with the man lounging next to me. Could he *look* any less concerned? I resist the urge to lob a forkful of mashed potatoes in his direction.

"I decided to stick around with *you*."

Ware's thigh bumps mine. He's definitely in my space now, which makes me wonder just how indifferent he really is. Like, say, if I straddled him and rode him like a cowgirl, how hard would he object?

He curves one big palm around my thigh. I bite back an undignified squeak. Wolfish fantasies are one thing; reality is much more intimate.

He stares at me, as if my words simply don't compute. "Thought you were done with werewolves?"

So did I.

Since I don't have an easy answer for his question, I go for the

conversation redirect. “Was Big Dog’s medieval attitude typical? Do all werewolf matings end up—”

I wave my beer in the air, not entirely sure how to finish that sentence.

“Spread-eagled, naked, and tied to the bed?” He finishes dryly, and, yeah, that about sums up my relationship with Big Dog if you add *mayhem*, *murder*, and *arson* to the mental list, too.

“How do werewolf pairings work?” Ware and I may be a temporary hook-up because apparently he’s a nice guy who won’t leave me at the mercy of his pack, but it would help if I knew the rules. He’s clearly not jonesing for a long-term relationship, and I’m certainly in no position for one either. I need to get my head on straight after Big Dog’s what-the-fuckery, but I’m sort of crushing on Ware. I can admit that to myself. It’s like when I know my kitchen is out of all things chocolate, but then I find one leftover Godiva hiding out in the back of the pantry. Who knows where it’s been, but it’s here. I’m here. And God, I want to lick him. Consume him.

It’s not like I want to be attracted to him, but I am and I don’t believe in lying about my sexual responses.

“Werewolves are possessive,” he bites out, and I go liquid. I wouldn’t mind being possessed by Ware. Temporarily, of course. “We’re moody motherfuckers, we don’t share our toys, and we like to dominate. We’re also protective of our mates and our territory, which is why Big Dog should never have been allowed to take you in the first place.”

I wonder if he knows that he’s stroking my thigh with his fingers? Or how tempted I am to wriggle a little closer and a little lower? I can’t believe I’m even having this conversation with a big, bad, tattooed biker while he eats dinner and knocks back a beer. Just one. Despite the riot of ink on his skin, he’s just as disciplined and restrained when he drinks as he always is. God. What would it take to make him lose control?

Now I just have one question. “Don’t I get a say?”

He shakes his head. “Not really. One of the local packs believes in fated mates, but the rest of us don’t go for that.”

“Finders, fuckers and all that?” I say lightly, but now I definitely think my beer bottle needs to make intimate contact with his skull.

The slow grin on his face as he leans forward and pries the bottle away with his free hand says he knows what I’m thinking, and he finds it

downright amusing.

“There are a couple other criteria,” he drawls. Shit. His finger’s moving north, skirting some seriously dangerous territory. “I gotta keep you happy and safe, gotta make you want to be mine. If I can’t do that, I deserve to lose you. As long as you’re my mate, though, I fight for you. I give you whatever you need. You come first.”

Wow. That’s so much better than the *to have and to hold* line. I stare at Ware, not sure what to say. His eyes burn in his dark face, and there’s no missing the heat. So he’s not indifferent to me after all.

“So what? We have a marriage of convenience until your pack gets their collective heads out of their asses?”

He sort of snarls when he answers. “There’s nothing *convenient* about this, sweetheart.”

“Well fuck you very much.” Oops. As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wish I could call them back. Ware’s not the kind of man you challenge.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he growls, and then he sweeps me off my feet and comes down over me. My back hits the couch, his hips holding my legs apart.

Oh. My. God.

Ware definitely wins this round.



WARE

MARLY MAY BE SHORT, BUT HER LEGS SEEM TO GO ON FOR FUCKING MILES, AND tracing each sweet inch with my tongue rockets straight to the top of my to do list. Might have to do it twice to satisfy my sweet tooth. She shifts nervously, and my dick proves it can get harder. It strains against my zipper, determined to get inside her.

Fucking her would be a mistake.

I told her she had to ask—and no words are coming out of her pretty mouth now.

Instead, she stares at me with those big brown eyes that make me feel

like the center of the universe, but she's also nervous. Might have something to do with the fact that she's got another wolf between her legs and she's sensing history repeating itself.

And sure I want to drive myself into every hole she's got, want to love her, make her howl my name with pleasure—but I'm not *that* much of a bastard. She's gotta be sore and hurting from her stay in the bayou, and killing Big Dog was only a down payment on fixing things.

But if screwing myself deep inside her body isn't on tonight's agenda, I can still make her feel good. I catch her thighs with my hands and push them wider. Her sleep shorts aren't made for that kind of movement, the cotton gaping so I can see the teasing edges of her panties. Some kind of soft blue fabric with lace.

I approve.

“Ware?” She sounds nervous as fuck.

“I'm not gonna hurt you,” I promise us both. The bed would be better, but I'm not in the mood to wait. Not sure she is either, since I can smell the sweet scent of her arousal. Catching her legs, I draw her shorts down and yank her legs over my shoulders. Time to reenact a few fantasies.

She squeals my name, stiffening.

“Nothing but pleasure,” I promise, and I always keep my promises.

She comes up on her elbows, and I step back for a second, yanking my cut and my shirt off. I fold it all up and tuck it underneath her head as she watches. She's not trying to get away. She's not saying *no*.

“These are real pretty.” I drag my knuckle down her center and she bucks. Groans.

“Don't move,” I add, giving her pussy a little squeeze.

I slide her panties off and tuck them into my back pocket. They're gonna smell like her, and I want a trophy. Then I slide my hands beneath her ass, yank her to the edge, and spread her open with my thumbs. She squeals again, clearly not sure about her position. That's okay. I'm good at convincing.

She's fucking gorgeous.

I got a good look at her in Big Dog's cabin, but this is even better, because this is for me. For *us*. She has the sweetest little pussy I've ever seen.

I lick her from bottom to top, swirling my tongue around her clit because

it's the cherry on a really awesome Marly sundae and I can't get enough. She squirms and gasps like holding still is just not in her vocabulary. That's fine by me. She's so wet, she's soaked. I love the way she can't hold back as she rides my mouth, little mewls and dirty demands spilling from her pretty lips. I lick and suck, nipping carefully when I sense she's getting closer. She rewards me with another rough moan, her hands grabbing at my shoulders and head.

She comes when I suck her clit into my mouth and tongue the hard nub with ruthless strokes. She's gonna give me everything she has, gonna take the pleasure I have for her. She's greedy, and I love it, her hips shoving off the sofa, her pussy grinding against my face as she angles herself, telling me what she needs without words. I give it to her, shoving three fingers inside her as I work her clit, and her pussy shivers toward an orgasm.

She collapses on the sofa as I pet her down.

My dick's painfully hard beneath my jeans, and the only thought left in my head is shoving myself inside Marly and taking what I shouldn't. When I tear my gaze away from the erotic spread on my sofa, there's a fucking wet spot on the denim where pre-cum leaked through. I could roll on a condom and be deep inside her in seconds. For just a moment, I let myself enjoy that fantasy, and then my knee twinges, protesting, and that's the wake up call I need. Marly needs to stay safe—and I'm not the best wolf for the job.

I swing her up into my arms, take the stairs, and head for the bedroom. When I drop her onto the mattress, she rolls, making room, her arms reaching for me.

"Go to sleep," I tell her, turning away. I'm gonna make sure everything is locked up tight and do a quick check of my lair for any trouble. I don't trust Fang not to come sniffing around, and he's not the only pack member who might think there's a better way to solve the Marly issue than voting.

"God, you're confusing." Stuff rustles as she settles in, though.

"I'm not safe for you," I growl and finish my scan of the room. Her pile of abandoned clothes on my floor catches my eye—another pair of tiny, silky panties, jeans, more lace. Yeah. I need to go.

When I get to the door, she fires her parting shot. "Is this like Princess Bride?"

Do I look like I watch movies with the word *princess* in the title?

“Explain or go to sleep.” I should keep on walking right out the door, but I can’t help savoring this moment. She’s sleepy and flushed and feeling good—thanks to *me*.

“Good night, sleep tight, I’ll most likely kill you in the morning.” The words come out throaty, almost flirtatious. Maybe I should watch the fucking movie.

“Is it the princess or the bride doing the killing?”

I hear her shake her head. “Her pirate prince.”

Uh-huh. I can’t hold back the slow smile. These kinds of standards may explain why she hasn’t run screaming from me. “Some fucking hero.”

“Yeah,” she says, way too happily. “He kills ginormous monster rats and comes back from the dead for the princess.”

“Go to sleep,” I repeat, hoping the third time’s the charm. I’m no fucking hero, although I’d definitely kill for her.



WARE

OUR DAYS FALL INTO A KINDA HOLDING PATTERN. I DON'T NEED MY BOYS TO TELL me it's fucked up as hell to think I can make a temporary mate claim work. I ride, I take care of club business—and each night, when I come home, Marly's waiting for me. I'm still holding to my “no sex” rule, because she deserves both time to heal and better than a too-old, broken-down wolf. Don't paint me as some kind of saint, though—because I cheat every time she so much as looks at me. My dick's hard enough to snap, my balls permanently blue, but I make damned sure Marly comes each night for me.

You'd think she'd be tired of me by now, but she gets this little look on her face that makes my dick shoot north and then I've just got to get inside her. Tempt her into riding my fingers and grinding her clit against my palm. I know her tells now, from the catch her breath gets when she's close, to the way her thighs tense and quiver like every inch of her is focused on me driving her higher, faster, harder. She drives me crazy, she's so slick and focused on taking what I give her, and that's gotta be why I'm pulling my bike to the curb right now.

The library's not my scene and books aren't my thing. It's not like I'm fucking illiterate, but if it's a choice between the pen and the sword? No fucking contest. As soon as I step inside and the door closes behind me, my skin itches. It's so fucking quiet—and clean, but this is where Marly's working now. It took her less than a week to find a new job, and that's a minor miracle given the state of the economy. More than one patron looks up as I prowl toward the heart of the library. They sure don't think I belong here.

They're not wrong. I'm not civilized, and I'm not even human. My boots hammer the floor, the sound echoing off the shelves of books. Not sure how anyone could read that many books, but Marly seems to think it's

important to try and she hauls home stacks of books. The history shit's not bad, actually. Not like I'm planning on starting a book club, but it's not a bad way to spend the night. Plus, some of the shit she reads has some damn sexy parts, and I'm always up for more inspiration.

The main path leads straight to a big, semi-circular bank of desks. And Marly.

I take up my usual station against the far wall. My brothers aren't sure about Marly, and it's true that killing her would be simpler. It's just that I can't bring myself to do it. She survived Big Dog, and I won't let anyone else hurt her. The pack enforcer, Blade, keeps an eye on her. Not sure how he thinks he's gonna stop her from talking short of slitting her throat, but he sure as fuck looks like a wolf with a plan. He's also developed a new library habit that I don't like. When he first introduced himself to her, he declared he loved reading, and Marly bought his bullshit hook, line, and sinker.

Tonight, the bastard comes strolling in like he owns the place. He's no more a reader than I am. He's got a book tucked under his arm, though, and Marly spots him right away and lights up. As if he's really interested in all the *Art of War* shit, when I'm betting the bastard just enjoys the scenery.

Really fucking sexy scenery.

Marly's wearing a tight gray skirt and a silky pink blouse with a ridiculous bow tied over her tits. She looks downright sweet, which isn't a look that usually works for me. But the fabric slides over her pretty skin, and when she bends over to retrieve something, I can see straight down her shirt. She looks beautiful, and my body about goes nuclear. She's wearing a bra I bought, a wicked, dirty girl scrap of hot pink lace that scoops her tits up like they're just begging for my mouth. My lips. My teeth. Gonna fuck her like that too, sliding my dick between the soft mounds because I'll take what I can get before she moves on.

Blade prowls right up to the desk and greets Marly. She's nervous, but maybe that's because he's a wolf. Or could be because he's a big, burly biker and he radiates danger. I've noticed the library tends to empty out when he makes an appearance. Marly checks out his book—and then takes him to task for a late book. Kinda cute really. Blade hands over seventy-five cents rather than protest, and fuck... Do his fingers brush Marly's? I think about Blade getting close to her, and I don't like it. Blade's not gonna love her—he's more likely to slit her throat. And yeah, I'm a jealous, too-

possessive motherfucker because now I'm thinking about beating the crap out of Blade. He doesn't go near her, doesn't touch her.

Mind made up, I head for the desk. Blade hears me coming, naturally, and turns to face me. There's no good reason for him to be here talking to my woman, and we both know it. We've always gotten along though, not least because we respect the fuck out of each other, so we keep it polite. Mostly.

He flicks me a mocking salute, shoulder-checking me as he passes. "You have a good night now."

Just as soon as he gets the hell out of my library.

Marly watches me come, a Mona Lisa smile playing about lips slick with gloss. She's got a whole drawer of that crap back at my place, and it's a game guessing what she'll taste like when I kiss her goodnight. I'm betting cherry. Something sweet, something lickable.

And then she smiles, her tongue darting over her lips. Tasting the skin I'm gonna explore. "How can I help you?"

I've got some ideas about that.

And then fuck—I realize I didn't just *think* the words. I *said* them. They hang in the air between us, and my sexy librarian's eyes widen. And in the next breath, her body betrays her. Her panties dampen, her pussy slick with her arousal.

My baby girl definitely wants to *help* me. Can't let all those dirty intentions go to waste, can I?



MARLY

WARE'S IMAGINATION IS FILTHY. IT'S ONE OF THE MANY REASONS I CAN'T MAKE myself move away from him. Can't leave him alone. He's an addictive drug and I'm hopelessly lost. And he's got *ideas* about how I can help him?

Shit.

He vaults over the desk, his big body coming at me impossibly fast in a rustle of denim and leather. Not an easy man. Not a pushover at all. I've played at dominance games, but Ware isn't playing. He takes, he pushes, he

demands. *What have I started?* He drops lightly to the floor before me, I try to roll my chair back instinctively, and then there's no desk between us, no safety space at all. His legs brush my shoulder, my knees. He's right *there*.

"We're in public," I say quickly. There's need and hot intent written on his face. His gaze moves deliberately down my body, and there's no forgetting what I've let him do when we're alone at night. What I've *begged* him to do. I'm not sure why he's here now, but he doesn't look happy to see me.

He looks determined.

I inch backward nervously on my seat. There are people—patrons—staring at us. Ware gives them a look, and they retreat back to their books. I should retreat too, I should... He drops onto the seat beside me and scoops me onto his lap. Hard thighs cradle my butt, and there's no missing the dick pressed against the seam of my ass, either. *I can't allow this*. Except he's not giving me a choice. And I like his orders. They make me feel safe—and sexy.

I should say something. "Ware—"

"Be quiet," he growls against my ear. The chair rolls toward the lip of the desk, our legs disappearing beneath it as his rough command hangs in the air between us.

Oh God.

And his hand... I can't *see* his hand, but I can feel it.

If I were cataloging those fingers, I'd shelve them under E. Erotic. *Ecstasy*. There should be more words, but my brain shuts down with a whimper of delight.

Ware wraps one arm around my waist, dragging his thumb slowly over my stomach. The muscles there jump and quiver obediently, wanting to urge him on. If I shifted I could force his hand lower, show him exactly where I need him. *Not in public*, I remind myself. It's almost closing time, but there are still a few patrons left in the library, and putting on a peep show is a good way to get my butt fired.

Not that it would do me much good. The man holding me has refused to actually *fuck* me. He passes out orgasms like the Good Time Guy, but his penis remains off-limits. Not sure what kind of kink he's got in his head about us actually doing the deed, but I'm sure it's some convoluted man logic that he's certain makes sense. His fingers stroke higher, driving all

logic out of my head.

Am I really going to let him do this in public?

Why would I even consider it?

Because he's got the world's most-talented fingers and you want him bad. My body needs to stop making decisions for my brain, because I'm seriously considering knocking Ware to the floor and riding him cowgirl-style. If he were a book, he'd be burning up the shelves. Erotic, yes, but also P for Pleasure, Paradise... one wicked knuckle drags slowly down over my hot, wet core and all thoughts of cataloging fly out of my head.

He's driving me crazy, teasing me. Pleasing me. He's a bad news, bad boy biker and he won't be mine. Ever. He's made that perfectly clear, yet I still want whatever he's willing to give me. I like my men hot and dominant, and Ware's my best fantasy come to life.

He cups my pussy with one big hand, his thumb pressing against my entrance through my panties while he finds my clit with his other fingers. If he weren't holding me up, I'd melt to the floor in a puddle of happy librarian. Oh my God, but this man knows how to touch me.

"You wanna help Blade like this?" He catches my ear with his teeth, bites just hard enough to make me combust and stifle a moan that has no business being made in a library. "You like my brother wolf? Does he make you feel like this, *mate*?"



W A R E

NOT SURE HOW MARLY CAN STIFFEN AND WRIGGLE AT THE SAME TIME, BUT SHE does. My dick decides that's all the invitation we need.

"Blade's a decent guy," she grits out as if I don't have my fingers on her pussy and she's not wet for one of us. Better be me. I've been holding back, but if she grinds her clit against me one more time, all bets are off. Plus, she's read Blade all wrong.

"He's the pack enforcer. He's more interested in killing you than kissing you."

Heads turn in our direction again.

“Closing time,” I announce to the room at large. I haven’t lost my touch, because the place starts emptying out fast.

“It’s six minutes to five,” Marly protests, trying to shove off my lap. Nuh-uh. Not happening. She and I, we’ve got shit to discuss.

“Keep your ass where it is,” I growl. “We’re not done talking.”

She reaches under the desk and pries at my hand. Yeah. As if she could budge me. Still I kinda wish she’d do something else, something like welcome me.

“I want more,” she hisses at me. “You think he’d give it to me?”

I’ve given her everything I’ve got.

“I’m not the kind of guy who does forever. You’ve spent enough time with wolves to know that’s not what you want, sweetheart. When we have sex, I’m gonna be the one in charge. I’m gonna do what I want to your body, when I want.”

Same thing goes for the *forever* option, but I’m not telling her that.

She twists her head so she can glare at me. Good to know she’s no longer scared shitless of me. Don’t need her running scared. “You don’t put out.”

“Is that a complaint? Or are you trying to give me the orders now?”

Because I know how I feel about that. I may not want her scared, but I’m the dominant wolf in this relationship. I hook a finger in the side of her panties and yank them to the side. When I dip my finger into her pussy, she’s soaked.

“I’m not leaving,” she insists, as if I’m not fingering her. “I want to give us a shot.”

Uh-huh. She doesn’t have to. I’m the one whose boots are hitting the road, ready to ride. I push my finger inside her hard and deep, her pussy clenching around me like this can keep me here. Keep me with her.

Not a chance in hell.

“If you come back to my place tonight, I’m paddling your ass good and then I’m taking you hard. You want to be mine, you got it—all of it.”

As if that’s not enough to scare her off, I pull my fingers free and lick them, because the taste of her is a goddamned drug and I’m an addict. Not sure how I’m walking out of here, but I know where I’m headed. Home. To bed.

Shit.

She likes dirty talk.

Fuck me, she likes *me*.

I pretty much break the fucking library door slamming out of there.



MARLY

I CLOSE UP THE LIBRARY, MY PUSSY HUMMING AND ACHING. I'M NOT SURE WHY I'm into big and bossy—guess my pussy's stupid or just totally fucked up. Except I'm tired of making excuses for what I enjoy and, unlike Big Dog, Ware's not going to hurt me. At least, not in the same way. I just can't get him out of my head, and I definitely want to follow him home and demand he fuck me hard.

Except no one makes demands of Ware.

He'll make me ask nicely, and then he'll tell me exactly what to do... and I'll enjoy it. I could pretend I didn't, but there's some part of me that definitely gets off on taking his commands.

Somehow I'm not surprised when Blade materializes out of nowhere when I step out of the library and lock up.

He steps in close, too, his shoulder almost brushing mine. "You need a hand?"

I know how to lock a door. I've been doing it for years now, so I don't think that's what he means. "I've got this."

Blade's silent while I finish securing the library door. It's not like there's so much there to steal, but we've had problems with vandals before. Mostly too stupid kids who think spray-painting a few books makes them cool or is funny, but this is my place. I won't let anyone shit on it, which I guess makes me more wolf-like than I thought.

"I meant you and Ware," he says finally, when I shove the keys into my bag and turn toward the parking lot. "Know he mate-claimed you and all, but I've never been sure you're good with the claim."

"We're working on building emotional intimacy." I read that line in a book and I only wish it were true. When I head for my car, Blade falls into step beside me, his long legs covering twice the distance as my shorter

ones. What is it with bikers always being oversized guys?

Blade never takes his eyes off our surroundings. “He claimed you. What else is there?”

“You guys are downright medieval. Maybe you should try the twenty-first century for a change. There’s more to a relationship than a he-man declaration of *mine* and hot sex.”

He shrugs and scans the parking lot, subtly angling his body between mine and the street. I’m tired of being the weak one, the little woman. I may like taking orders in bed, but that doesn’t mean I’m missing a spine—or a brain.

I stop walking. Better to have this out now. “You think I’m in danger? In a *parking* lot, Blade?”

He growls something under his breath. “You don’t know what kind of danger’s out there, baby girl. The wolves might be the least of your problems.”

“Then you tell me and *I* decide what I do. What, exactly, do you think’s going to happen here? Rabid Chihuahua attack? Ghouls? Hostile werewolf pack takeover? Vampires?”

He sighs and rests his hand against the small of my back, hustling me toward my car. “One of four, baby girl.”

I think about that for a moment, then decide I really don’t want to know which option Blade believes is a possibility.

“Ware and I are working on taking our relationship to the next level,” I tell him. *To bed.*

Blade snorts. “Spare me the details. I can smell him all over you.”

“That’s just sex.” I think.

Blade plucks my purse out of my hand, opens it, and retrieves my keys. When I open my mouth to protest, he just gives me a look. He has my car unlocked and the door open before I can work up the nerve to protest. And then he tosses my purse onto the front seat and gestures for me to get in. Since it seems like the only way I’m getting my keys back, I comply. He steps into the open space between the seat and the door, flattening a palm on the roof of the car as he leans in.

“Ware claimed you in front of the pack. He doesn’t want me or anyone else around you. You smell like sex. There’s something between the two of you. And since he’s a wolf and not a white knight, you need to figure it out

fast because his definition of *relationship* and yours don't match. I guarantee it."

I hold out my hand for my keys. "You think he'd hurt me?"

And why does the pack enforcer care?

Blade curses again. "Baby girl, he wouldn't do it on purpose, but he's an old wolf. He's been around a long time, and there are younger, hungrier wolves jonesing for his position in the pack. Some asshole challenged him every month under the last Alpha, and there's no problem as long as he wins. You're another way to hurt and bring him down, though, kinda like a bull's-eye right on his heart."

I like the last half of that image, but liking doesn't mean true. "We're not about hearts and flowers."

Blade drops my keys into my palm. "Baby girl, I'll say it again. there's *something* between the two of you, and it's more than just sex. Don't know if you're getting that poetry shit you seem to want, though."

He brushes his mouth over my cheek, one hand cupping the back of my neck and holding me in place. All sorts of emotions—fear, comfort, curiosity—roll through me. Jesus. Why am I so fucked up?

My eyes drop before his and he chuckles roughly. "You're wolf bait, baby girl. You like submitting and taking orders, and there's nothing wrong with that. We like that just fine, in fact. I'd come after you myself," he says, and I tighten my fingers on the wheel. "But we'd be just sex," he continues, "and I like you. You go after your wolf, but you be careful and I'll be watching."



W A R E

I'M WAITING FOR MARLY WHEN SHE COMES HOME FROM WORK. *HOME*. THE WORD fits. She comes in cautiously—good to know she's got some common sense. She also smells ever so faintly of Blade, which pisses me off. Gonna mark her right. Her eyes shoot right to my face, then drop. I'm sprawled out on my sofa, legs apart. I pat my thigh.

"Time to pay up."

The sweet, sweet scent of her arousal fills the air, and she needs this even more than I do. She loves being dominated and there's nothing shameful about knowing what she needs. Fact is, I'm fucking honored to give it to her. Serves two purposes—she'll get the orgasm and the spanking she deserves.

When she reaches me, I clamp my hand down on her ass and turn her so she's facedown over my knee. She doesn't try to get away. Guess that means she knows she's got it coming to her—or she wants it. I pull her skirt up to her waist. The panties are real pretty—a pink thong that disappears between her ass cheeks. Not like I even have to take them down to make my point, but I drag them just below her butt cheeks and stroke the soft, vulnerable curve.

She makes a noise.

“Who's in charge here?” I ask.

“You can't drive me away,” she counters.

“Not the question I asked,” I tell her and smooth my palm over her right cheek. “But you're gonna look really pretty wearing my hand print.”

I bring my hand down on her ass, the sound sharp and familiar and so goddamned right that I do it again. Over and over, turning her butt a pretty pink until she's riding my knee, her pussy wet and juicy. She's gotta surrender to me—plus, she makes me mad. Gotta admit that.

“I'm too old and used up.” That's the last warning she gets.

She makes a noise, part whimper, part feminine demand. Okay. Doesn't sound like she minds my age or my bum knee or any one of the dozen other character flaws I'm sporting.

I undo my belt buckle and rip down my zipper. I know what she likes, and I'm going to give it to her. It's that simple. I won't make apologies for wanting to fuck her. She's gorgeous, sexy, beautiful. I could empty the dictionary of adjectives, and they'd all be true. So why wouldn't I want to take her?

I bend her over the couch so her sexy ass is in the air, rip off her thong, and notch my dick against her opening. It's like fucking hide and go seek, except I've found her and she's not going anywhere.

I drive home.

All the way fucking home inside Marly.



MARLY

BEING BENT OVER THE ARM OF WARE'S COUCH IS ALMOST INDESCRIBABLE. MY butt stings in a pleasurable way, the burn echoing deep inside my body. Ware pins my hands in front of me with one hand, his fingers braceleting my wrists and stretching me out. It's wicked. It's so wrong. And I love, love, love how he dominates me.

He pins me down so effortlessly, his large body stretching mine almost to the point of pain. Awkward. Exciting. I don't know which I'm feeling.

He taps my butt cheek. "Lift your ass."

The words aren't a request, but I do it. I want to give him everything.

A big hand pressing on the small of my back is all the warning I get. He pulls back, almost coming out of me, then drives forward until all I can feel is the thick burn of his dick pushing inside me, rough and raw, the most intense sensation of my life. *Good* isn't the word to describe this.

He fucks me, pushing deep inside me where even Big Dog couldn't reach, stretching me wide open and filling me up. The rhythm he sets is almost brutal, his hips pounding against my ass, his dick shoving me into the couch. With each hard thrust, I slide against the slick leather, held in place only by his grip and his dick.

God, it's good.

I'm so fucked up, but I love the way he takes control. I don't have to worry about getting things right, about being sexy or exotic or the best he's ever had. All I have to do is hang on and let him in. Enjoy the ride. Trust he'll give me my orgasm and that he knows what he's doing. I let go of everything, losing myself in the rhythm of the big body covering mine.

Ware's next stroke hits some sweet spot deep inside my body. Might be my G-spot. Might be my heart. My brain shuts down, way too busy feeling everything Ware's doing to me. My clit rasps against the leather with each new stroke, and I'm so close to coming it hurts. I want more.

"Ware." I gasp his name, digging my nails into the leather couch, and he lets go suddenly, palming my ass and tipping me forward. My feet leave the floor, trapped between his legs, and he drives deeper into my body. I can

feel the tension and need vibrating through him, every inch of him as desperate for release as I am. The heat and desire builds between us, barreling us both toward the goal line. I scream when I come, my body shaking and clenching down on his, and he picks up his pace, hammering himself into me. Tomorrow, I'll be sore. Tomorrow, I'll have regrets.

Right now, Ware's perfect.

"Mine," he growls, hitting that spot deep inside me once again. I collapse beneath him, and he comes, too, with a hard jerk. I can barely think, barely move. But right now? There's only one thing that matters. Ware's *mine*.



MARLY

I'M PRACTICING MY PEOPLE SKILLS. AFTER ALL, SURELY MY INTERACTIONS WITH Ware's pack haven't been *typical*, right? They can't all be abusive assholes with sadistic sexual tastes. Some of them are probably decent guys who like to BBQ and watch the game on TV. Ware's been introducing them to me, taking me by the clubhouse on the weekend to let them get to know me and vice-versa. This is apparently supposed to ease things over about my knowing the Great Werewolf Secret, although all of us are skeptical. So when Fang (a name that definitely qualifies as most ridiculous ever) stops by the library, I'm proud of myself for not pressing the mental panic button.

Behind me, Tara sucks in her breath. She's nineteen and has only been volunteering at the library for a few months now. "I don't know if I should call the cops or throw myself at him."

"He's not a nice guy." It's a public library. It's not like I can kick him out for breathing or being a bad ass.

"You know him?" From the sound of Tara's voice, she's now veering into Option B territory. There's no way I'm letting a teenager get involved with the pack.

"He's trouble." Filed under T for Trouble, Terrible, and... if I were a nineteen-year-old girl... Tempting. Since Tara really doesn't need to make the same sort of mistakes I made, I nod toward the back room where we sort and catalog the books. She takes the hint and retreats, but not without a backward glance at Fang, whose face darkens. Right. Super wolfy hearing at work, probably.

I wait for him to finish his approach. We're closing up now, so the library is nearly empty. The high school volunteer has finished emptying the drop boxes, and I'm counting down the minutes until five o'clock. When I think about who's waiting for me, I can't help smiling. Ware drives

me crazy sometimes. He's no fan of talking, and I think hell would freeze over before he'd discuss an emotion, but... I think he could really be mine. I'm still not sure how I feel about his mate claim—because it's definitely bull shit that he gets to slap a *property of* patch on my ass and my heart without my say-so—but it's growing on me.

He's growing on me.

Fang, however, grows on people like a wart or a fungus. Something unpleasant. It's not that he's an ugly bastard, because, objectively speaking, he's good-looking in a rough, edgy way. But when I look at him, there's something in his eyes, and it's not a happy something. He's the kind of guy I file under B for Broken and Bastard. He saunters into my library, his boots overloud. He hums as he strolls toward my desk. The last two female patrons stare.

He stops in front of the circulation desk and leans toward me, flattening his palms on the surface. His eyes drill into mine, and Ware's taught me well. I know Fang's challenging me, pushing to make me drop my gaze and submit to him. Probably wants me to drop my panties too, the bastard. I suck in a breath and glare back at him.

Anger doesn't faze Fang, because he just chuckles. "Aren't you supposed to ask how you can help me?"

In his dreams. Which I *do* not want to know about, thank you very much. "We're closed."

He shrugs, effectively letting me know he doesn't care. "Door's unlocked."

I point to the clock. "When the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand is on the five, you're officially trespassing and trespassers will be shot."

He parks his ass on the edge of my desk and starts rifling through the stack of Interlibrary Loan books. "I came to pick you up."

That's a first. "I'm covered."

My car didn't start this morning, so Ware dropped me off. I have to admit I got a big thrill out of riding up on the back of his bike. Maybe I'll learn to ride, too. Get me a bike and hit the road with him.

For now, though, I stretch the truth. "I've got a ride."

My car's in the shop, but Tara volunteered to drop me at Ware's.

"You sure?" He nods toward the door—and the parking lot. Shoot. Sure

enough, when I go look, Tara is driving away. So I'll walk. Or call Ware.

"I'm not gonna eat you." Now Fang sounds amused. "Jace sent me to cover for Ware. Your boy's gonna be late tonight."

Ware's not answering, so I'm not sure what to do. I send a quick text—*Catching a ride home with Fang. He says you sent him?* I don't have anyone else's number. Ware's kept me on the fringes of the pack—we've gone to a couple of parties, but mostly I've worked and hung out with Ware. Fang waits patiently, a mocking grin curling his mouth.

Eventually, he stands up. "I'll be right outside."

Ten minutes later, as I lock the library's front door behind me, I'm still undecided. Fang, however, clearly has a plan. He pats the seat behind him. "Saddle up."

Yeah. Definitely a bad idea. He's not overly concerned with helmets and safety laws either, because there's not a helmet in sight. It's four miles to Ware's, and the neighborhood's not the best. Accepting a ride would likely be the smartest thing to do. Fang pats the seat again, and I give up the fight.

Surprisingly, Fang doesn't say anything as I straddle his bike. I'd kind of figured him for a gloater. Not sure where to put my hands, I settle for hanging onto his shoulders. He grunts and opens up the engine. For the first ten feet of our journey, he's blissfully silent. As soon as he's steered the bike out onto the main road, however, he starts talking.

"You sure about Ware?"

"Excuse me?" Damn it. I sound like a nineteenth-century heroine.

"He's not mate material." Fang tightens his grip on the handles and we pick up speed. It's not as if the bike makes for easy conversation, but he's clearly up for giving it a shot anyhow.

I scowl at his back. For once Fang and Ware are in agreement. Ware says the same thing—even though *he's* the one who made the mate claim in the first place. And although Mr. I-Run-Hot-And-Cold is driving me crazy, I certainly don't want to discuss our relationship with Fang.

I counterattack. "You usually give dating advice to women you don't know?"

The bike picks up speed. "If you're looking for a mate, I could be your wolf."

Ewww. My hands fly off his shoulders, and I almost slide off the back of the bike. "No thank you."

Fang snakes an arm behind him, yanking me closer. It's probably just a public service gesture because he doesn't want to drop me off with a severe case of road rash, but... I don't want to be that close to him.

"Think about it. Ware's an older wolf, he's got a fucked up leg, and you deserve the best."

"Which is you?" I shouldn't laugh at him or flip him off while he's driving, but I'm definitely killing Jace for assigning Fang pick up duty because Fang's taken it way, way too far.

He shrugs nonchalantly and turns onto the road leading to our place. "Jace is off the market, so yeah. You may think I'm not your type, but I could be. I'm gonna go places in the pack, and I can take care of you, make sure you don't get hurt."

Um. No. Just no. I'm still trying to figure out how to shoot him down permanently when we pull into the final straightaway to the warehouse. Ware comes shooting down the road from the other direction, and I don't need to look too hard to tell he's pissed. Of course, that seems to be a natural state for him, but still.

Fang guns the bike, coaxing more speed out of the Harley, and tears toward the entrance to Ware's place at record speed. I shriek something profane that carries even over the roar of the pipes, and I'll bet Fang's grin gets wider. And then, just when I think we're all going to die in a fiery collision, Ware backs off. Not by much, but Fang's still able to rocket past him into the parking lot.

Fang's laughing his ass off when Ware tears into the parking lot and hits the brakes. I slide off the seat with no grace or finesse, but screw that. The more distance I put between myself and this wolf, the better. I should have walked. Should have taken my chances with the human criminals.

I jab a finger in his direction. "You're crazy."

Fang flicks me a two-fingered salute. "All yours, little girl."

My mouth drops open, trying to make sense of what he's just said. How can anyone be that crazy? Does he seriously think I'd trade Ware for his sorry ass? Apparently, because he winks as Ware vaults off his bike and flies toward us.

"Get inside," he growls, pulling me behind him.

Neanderthal Wolf has come out to play. Since I'm not stupid, I head for the door, pulling my keys out of my purse. I can yell at Ware for ordering

me around when we're inside.

He verifies I'm doing as commanded (payback's going to be a bitch, wolf man) and then strides over to Fang. Fang just sits there, so relaxed he could be asleep, watching him come. They have one of those eye-to-eye pissing contests that guys—and wolves—are so good at.

As soon as Ware heads back my way, I speed up the unlocking process and shove the door open. Arms come down on either side of me, caging me in place. The hard body behind me moves closer. Pipes roar as Fang gets moving, but he must have seen this. How much of this is for him—and how much for me?

"I missed you," Ware says roughly against my ear and flips me around.

His mouth comes down over mine. He kisses me hard, claiming me with his tongue, his lips, his teeth. He gives me everything he has, as if he could eat me up right here, right now, and fuck Fang and the rest of the world. That works for me, because I kiss him back with interest. We're still figuring out this mate claim business, but the sex? Yeah. Ware has that part nailed. When he finally tears his mouth from mine, I lean up and nip his bottom lip. Hard.

"Figured that out, big guy," I whisper right back, and then I drag him closer still. "Take me upstairs and show me."



WARE

FANG HAS ALWAYS WANTED WHAT'S MINE. TAKING MY PLACE IN THE PACK AND MY mate in a single fight must seem like a no-brainer to him. Ever since he brought Marly home from the library last week, he's been eyeing me, sizing me up. He'll make his move, and I'll have to fight him. Challenges happen all the time in the pack.

The last big challenge our pack faced, however, was when Jace fought for the pack leadership. Our former Alpha had handpicked Jace as his successor, and to seal the deal he'd pushed his daughter at Jace. Not that Jace had been opposed to getting to know Keelie Sue better, but he hadn't been down with the forcible mating approach. Bastard had wanted to woo

and win Keelie Sue on his own merits. Pissed off, he'd challenged Big Red and he'd won the fight, the pack, and Keelie Sue's heart.

Today's fight is different.

The growl hits my ear first—my deep-shit radar going off—and then the weight hits my back. Fuck me, but Fang weighs a ton. The bad news is that most of that weight is muscle and not fat. I fly forward, already rolling. My bad knee gives out beneath me. I hear the pop but don't feel it yet. Good. If I go down now, I don't come up. I've taken a hard hit to my shoulder and I'm gonna be stiff tomorrow, but the blood's minimal and I aim to keep it that way.

I come up in a crouch and assess my situation. My palm's bleeding from where I slapped the floor to avoid face-planting and my knee's gonna lock up just as soon as it gets the message to my brain. I knew this was coming—just hoped it wasn't soon. Yeah. Hope's not a fucking strategy. Fang's an ambitious bastard, and that's only partly due to his being a wolf.

The Breed wolves pull away, forming a circle. Lips peeled back, snarling, they roar their encouragement. Fuckers love blood.

"I challenge." Fang spits in my direction, already moving toward me. "Your ass is mine."

I flip him the bird and shove to my feet. Jesus. My knee isn't gonna last long at all. "Only in your very best dreams."

The wolves around us howl, and Fang stalks toward me. I'll make him come to me, just to minimize the wear and tear on my knee. "Gonna mess that pretty face up some," I taunt, and he picks up speed, heading my way like an out-of-control freight train. I need to time this right. I need to...

Jace shoves his way to the front, knocking heads together and kicking ass. His eyes meet mine, and I can read the truth there. He's not sure I'm gonna win. He slaps a hand against Fang's chest, halting the other man in his tracks.

"Rules," he growls. "No weapons. No outside assists. No leaving the fucking circle. You tap out, the fight's over—and the winner backs off."

Right. No killing Fang today. That sucks, but now's not the time to push Jace. Blade tips his beer onto the floor and draws a wet circle, and that's fucking good enough for me. I can serve up an ass-kicking before the brew's dry.

"Waste of a good beer," I growl, and Fang lunges.

Guess that's my *go* right there.

For the first ten minutes, we fight in human form. We trade blows, and I land a couple of solid ones to Fang's kidneys. He staggers, but doesn't go down. Returns my shit with interest too, his fists hammering my ribs and my jaw.

It's almost a surprise when Fang shifts. I've gotten in more than a few good hits, and he's bleeding and limping almost as badly as I am. I'm happy to shed the human skin for my wolf form. Shifting isn't a magic cure-all—the only advantage my wolf has is that it has three good knees instead of just the one. I shrug out of my cut and toss it in Jace's direction. Everything else is gonna get sacrificed. Shifting feels goddamned natural to me. Some wolves talk about the pain of changing, but for me it's a simple letting go. The wolf explodes out of me, charging to meet Fang.

In the end, I owe my salvation to two things. Fang is impatient. Instead of continuing to wear me down, he goes for my throat. At first he tries to fuck with me, kinda like taking a swing at a piñata—he doesn't connect full-on and my ribs don't fucking shatter, but each blow rattles me. But when he finally gives in to the impatience and comes charging at me, he's vulnerable, and I take full advantage. I've been fighting longer than his sorry ass has been alive, and I don't plan on dying today.

Second thing? I told Marly I'd be home. I don't make many promises, but I always aim to keep them.

I close my jaws over Fang's throat. I bite hard, too, because I hurt fucking everywhere, and he's cost me. Now that the other wolves have seen that it's not impossible to beat me, he's just gonna be the first in a long line of challengers. The pack doesn't tolerate the weak.

I should kill the bastard.

“Ware—” Jace growls my name. Funny how four letters can spell out *back the hell off*. Guess he doesn't want me killing my opponent. It's not easy filling pack vacancies, after all. This is what happens when a wolf goes upper management—he starts worrying about fucking head count.

Fang shifts and taps out, twisting his neck and relaxing in my grip. I drop him onto the ground. He tastes like shit, too. There's not enough beer in the world to erase the aftertaste from my mouth.

I shift and stand there. Bleeding. Fucking naked. But I've won. “Touch Marly again and I'm gonna kill you. We clear?”

Fang grunts out an agreement and rolls onto his side, spitting blood. He's not such a pretty bastard now—I've marked him good.

Jace ambles over and slaps me on the back. "You okay?"

"Fuck you," I snarl. "I shoulda killed him."

Jace lifts a shoulder. "I've got uses for him. Thanks for reining it in."

As the other wolves surround me, slapping me on the back and shoulders, Fang disappears, presumably to lick his wounds or screw the hell out of a club whore. He'll be back. He'll either kill me and take my place in the pack, or he'll leave and start his own pack. Guys like him don't know how to compromise. He can't bend, not for long.

The road's calling my name and I need to ride. "Gotta go," I tell Jace, and he nods like he's in my head and feels where I'm coming from. He doesn't like sitting still either, and we've spent hours tearing up the road and exploring the bayou. He's a good man and brother. I'm fucking lucky he has my back.

Turns out, I'm not free and clear when I get outside, though. Fang is in the parking lot. His lips peel back from his teeth when he scents me, his fingers stilling on his saddlebags. Yeah. Fucker's not rolling out the welcome wagon for me anytime soon.

"She's a liability," he snarls, and I don't have to ask who he means. He's got my Marly on his brain, and I don't like it. Not one bit.

Gotta make that clear. So far Fang's failed to learn his lesson—but he'll shut the fuck up about Marly if he knows what's good for him.

"You go near her again and you die," I counter.

One corner of Fang's mouth lifts. He's not so pretty now, with blood streaking his cheek. "Maybe next time I'll win, but she's not wolf, and she's not an old lady. You gonna make her your property?"

You don't own a woman as fine as Marly—if you're really fucking lucky, she owns you. She's like the road or the wind in your hair when you push your bike flat out on the road. You don't control that shit, just enjoy where it takes you, how it pushes you.

I shrug as if it's no big deal that the wolf I just beat down is already plotting his next challenge. This is the problem with letting the loser live—he always comes back after you. "Next time, I'll kill you."

Fang grins, and he's no charmer. "You want to bet on that? I'm younger, stronger, and faster. You're broke to hell, and I screwed up today. Next

time, I won't."

I have to remind myself that Jace wants this bastard alive.

"Happy to bet on it." I throw my leg over my bike, and agony flares through my knee. I force it into the proper position, because no way will I let Fang see the damage he's done. Then I start my bike and peel out of the lot. Not sure where I'm going, but it feels good to leave Fang behind.



MARLY

WHEN I HEAR THE ROAR OF A BIKE APPROACHING, I POP UP FROM THE COUCH like a trained dog. This isn't my proudest moment. Big Dog kept me tied to the bed, so it wasn't as if I could walk away from him. What keeps me tied to Ware is something altogether different.

I blame my girl parts for my sticking around—Ware is hot, he knows exactly what gets me off, and he makes sure I get it, too. He may claim he's a mean, nasty bastard, but he's never been anything but careful with me. He blows my mind in bed, but it's not just about the sex. I have feelings for him that go beyond the simply sexual. Wish it weren't true, but... somewhere along the line, I started loving my wolf.

The noise outside stops when someone kills the engine, and there's silence for a few counts. Then I hear the slam of the door followed by the sound of boots. Funny how I recognize Ware's step. I move to the door. The loft has considerably more furniture than before, which is totally my fault.

I'd picked up my stuff from my old landlord last week. Fortunately, the guy had been decent about my sudden disappearance—he'd shoved everything into an empty storage unit "for a while," banking on my coming back. He hadn't asked too many questions about where I'd been either, but maybe that had been because of Ware. Ware had gone with me, and he'd waited outside, straddling his bike, while I'd paid up the back rent and negotiated for the return of my stuff. He claimed he didn't mind if I dumped it all in his place while I figured out what I wanted (which was him, but we weren't talking about that), so I had. Cheaper than a storage unit, and paying off my back rent had emptied my checking account.

The door slams open before I can get to it. I jump back as Ware sort of staggers in. Holy. Shit. I'm not sure where he's been, but he looks rough. He's got an enormous bruise on his right cheek and bloody knuckles on

both hands. He lands heavily on his left leg with each step. I'm no expert on fighting, but either he got jumped or the Breed went looking for trouble and found it.

"What happened?" I sort of fly toward him, but he throws up a hand.

"Fang challenged." He heads for the couch, yanking off his club colors and tossing them onto the leather. His shirt follows. God. His ribs look worse than his face.

"You need a doctor. There's an urgent care place over on Fourth Street—I can drive you."

I'm still wearing my work clothes—a blouse and skirt—that's more than enough clothes for an E.R. run. All I need are my shoes and my purse. I could have him there in under five minutes.

He shakes his head. "No doctors."

"You're hurt," I tell him. "Don't be stupid about this."

"You gonna ask who won?" He sprawls on the couch with a rough sound of pain. Crap. Did he lose? I hesitate a moment too long, because he kind of snarls at me and says, "I won."

"You look like shit."

Not the smartest thing I've ever said, but it's the truth. Even half-lying down on the couch, he's swaying in place.

"Fang fights to win," he says.

"You need a doctor," I repeat. "We can take you somewhere to get you fixed up."

"Only thing that's gonna help now is shifting," he continues.

"So do it." It's not like I haven't seen a wolf before. Big Dog was plenty scary, but I can handle this.

He reaches for the buttons on his jeans and then stops. "You sure?"

"If it makes you feel better, why not? Since a doctor appears to be out of the question, I'm voting *go furry* if it fixes any of the damage Fang did. Shift."

"You gonna freak out on me?"

I shrug. "You're dirty, bloody, and pissed off. How much worse can fur and fangs be?"

He nods, like he's coming to some conclusion, and then stands up. He pulls off his boots with a grunt and shoves down his pants. His dick punches up in the air. Looks hard enough to hurt, too.

And then he shifts. One minute I'm staring at the man, wondering why my heart hurts and my body burns so bad for him, and the next minute he's gone. It happens so fast that I almost miss the way the air shimmers around him, his form blurring as he changes. It's funny, but I think I'd recognize him anywhere. Ware is a huge wolf. He's a grizzled gray with white markings on his face and chest. Bet that thick coat of fur is soft, too, and I itch to run my fingers through it, except he's nobody's pet. He stands there for a moment, head up, ears back, watching me through those familiar gold-brown eyes.

Does he understand me? Do wolves speak English? I should have asked more questions, but there's no mistaking the intelligence in his eyes. He pads toward me, and I tell myself I won't retreat, but hello... there's two hundred pounds of animal stalking me. I take a step backward. And then another. With a short, sharp bark, he herds me where he wants me to go and I forget all about his injuries.

I think the shift did heal him. At any rate, I can't see any visible wounds when I scan his wolf. He bumps my leg with his shoulder, and I dart away from him and up the stairs. I'm really hoping he's playing, because when I launch myself toward the bedroom, he's right on my heels. A bump from behind sends me tumbling onto the bed.

And you know what? Ware is scary as fuck in this form, but he's also beautiful. He comes down over me on the mattress, his wolf a heavy weight pinning me to the bed. He's in my face, and I can't stop myself from running my fingers through his fur. He's every bit as silky soft as I'd imagined.

"You're beautiful," I tell my wolf, and he whines low in his throat. I slide my hands over his ruff and down his side, checking for injuries. He growls once but doesn't stop me. Maybe he's better. Maybe he's over the fight.

Ware makes another rough sound and eases down onto the bed beside me. His head rests on my thigh, his tongue darting out to explore me. It's hot today, so I skipped the nylons and went barelegged.

"We should discuss boundaries." Shoot. I sound breathless.

Wolf-Ware laps my bare skin with his tongue, the rough stroke shooting straight to my pussy. *Uh, no.* I'm not afraid of him, but this is way out of my league. I want human Ware, biker Ware in my arms—not the wolf. And

yet I can't stop petting his fur, sifting the short strands through my fingers.

As if he scents my pleasure, my wolf snarls softly and nips gently at the bare skin of my thigh. His teeth cause an erotic sting, my flesh reddening as I tense. He bathes the red mark, his tongue inching higher toward my panties.

"Change back." I can't do this with a wolf, not like this.

Even if part of me is curious, the rest of me is nervous—or scared shitless. Big Dog did this out in the bayou, and I'd rather not think about the biting—or worse. My head's apparently still fucked-up, not sure whether to scream or moan, because I just lie there.

Proving he's nothing like Big Dog, Ware backs off. The wolf blurs, the fur retreats, and I'm lying beneath two hundred pounds of pissed off biker.

"You want to go? Go." He growls his warning as he stares down at me. God. He's so hot.

I lick my lips and hold my ground. He doesn't get to run me off. He sets the pace in bed, calls the shots when we're naked, but outside of the bedroom? He's not the boss of me. It's time my wolf learned that. "You don't scare me."

"I should. I'm not nice. The only thing I want from you is sex, and I want it dirty."

I can't believe that.

I *won't*.

So I'm waving the red flag tonight, pushing for everything I really want.

"Still not scared," I whisper up at him.



W A R E

MARLY'S CHALLENGE IS ALL THE GREEN LIGHT I NEED. I DON'T HOLD BACK tonight. She wants this? She gets all of it, all of me. I flip her over and come down on her. She digs her fingers into the sheets, bucking beneath me.

I nip her ear, reminding her who she's in bed with. I'm as much wolf as I am man. "You wanna be all mine?"

She moans something that's gotta pass as a *yes*. I drag her hands wide,

planting her palms against the bed as I give her my full weight. Fuck, she's soft. She yields sweetly beneath me, and I shove up her skirt and tear off her thong. Toss the pink scrap somewhere behind me. I'm not playing nice tonight.

I shove her hand beneath her. "Play with your clit."

I don't wait for her to follow my directions. I thread my fingers through hers and draw her hand down, finding the hard nub. She moans when we make contact, bucking back into me again. Yeah. Not like there's anywhere she can go. The move rams her gorgeous ass against my dick, and I'm so getting in there. Tonight I'm marking her inside and out.

"Yes," she gasps, followed by sexy little whimpers mixed with a needy *more*.

Yeah. I'll give her whatever she wants.

Best. Feeling. Ever.

I touch her, tease her, and her fingers follow mine, letting me set the pace. Her trust is so fucking awesome. She's soaked, too. Wish I could see her, but she's tight and swollen. I've never had anyone like Marly. She fists the sheets, tilting her neck. Her gorgeous hair slides forward, baring the soft, sweet expanse of skin. No way I don't run my mouth down that curve. I nip and suck as she bucks beneath me. She smells like Marly and flowers, which is so fucking perfect that I have to taste her. Lick her. Eat her up. I could do this all night, which isn't like me. My women come hard, but I'm not the guy for snuggling and gentle touches and all that emotional crap. Those are tiny one-bite appetizers on a silver tray, and I'm a main course guy. I like my sex fast and dirty, giving it to my girl good. I don't hold back, and if they don't like it, they avoid me at the clubhouse afterward. Works for me.

Marly likes it dirty, but she's different, too. She wants the four-course meal, and I don't know how to be that. Right now, though, she's okay with what I am. She moans as I drive inside her, getting lost in the sexy sounds she's making. Wish I could record those and play them back when I'm alone and jerking myself off to the memories, because she's better than a fucking symphony. Christ, she's tight. She's heaven wrapped around me, and I could stay here all night. Probably all week and the rest of my life too, if reality would stay the fuck away.

I push in, pull back, and her pussy clings to me, as if she's trying to hold

on. Pull out until my dick's rimming her opening, then slam back in. It's a rough, wild ride better than any place my bike's taken me. Our fingers work her clit together until she's convulsing and tightening around me. Feels good, but I'm not done with her yet.

I pull out and grip her hips with my hands.

"Ware." She whimpers my name, reaching for me.

She's got a gorgeous ass, curvy and round. Love looking at her when she's wearing her sexy librarian skirts, the way the fabric clings to her and I imagine what she's wearing—or not wearing—underneath the skirt. Imagine shoving her skirt to her waist and running my hands up her thighs, exploring what she's kept hidden from me.

When I pull her ass cheeks apart, she tenses. I don't want to hurt her, not like this. I get my fingers wet in her juices and ease them over the small hole. Not enough, though, so I grab her lotion from beside the bed. Stuff smells like flowers, but it gets the job done. I lube up, fisting my dick with a handful of lotion, and then I press myself against her ass.

"Ware—" She moans my name, but that's not a *no*.

"Brace yourself." I grab her hands and drag them wide. She clutches at the sheets, but she also pushes her ass out toward me. She's so gorgeous. I'm a sick bastard for wanting this, but I do. I cover her, pressing my dick against her rear hole. Christ, the heat of her burns me up.

"Let me in." Supposed to be an order—because nothing gets Marly hotter, faster—but I'm pretty sure the words sound fucking desperate. I need this part of her, too. The part she's never shared with anyone else, the dark part that just might have room for me.

She relaxes a fraction and I make my move, pushing into her body. I can't be gentle, not with the adrenaline rush of the fight pumping through my veins. I need to take her, conquer her, make sure I leave my mark on her body. She's so fucking tight. I screw my way into her ass, and it's unbelievable. Gets even better when she moans, low and sexy. Her hands claw at the sheets, and I reach beneath her to find her clit.

"You're gonna think of me when you sit tomorrow and the rest of the week." I drive back inside her, imagining the burn, me stretching her, making a place for myself deep inside her body. And I have to have that, have to take what she'll give me. I pound her with slow, hard strokes. I'm not nice about it either. I drill her deep and fast.

She shrieks and pushes back, taking what she needs. Fucking glorious. She's amazing, and I work her clit, stroking and moving because I can't go slow, can't wait, and I need her with me. I won't leave her behind. So it's not until she's gasping my name and I feel the first hard shudders beneath my fingers that I let go. Give her everything I've got as she wraps me tight and holds on.

And afterward? Guess I'm not done then, either, because I want to brush my lips over her hair, want to whisper all that stupid shit bottled up in my heart. Instead, I roll away and slap her on the ass. "You gotta go."

I'd make the move to leave, but my knee's on fucking fire and I'm not sure I can stand up. Fucking appropriate that she put me on my knees, though.

She turns her head to look at me. "You don't have anything to say to me?"

She deserves so much better. "You want to do that again? Then get your pretty ass over here."

I fist my dick. She needs to go. *Now*. Before I get too comfortable with being on my knees. Before I go soft and tell her all these feelings stirring shit up in my heart. This is sex—nothing more. Some day, probably sooner rather than later, I'm gonna have a challenger I can't take come after me. If she's my mate, she goes down with me.

"Ware?" She whispers my name, her gaze dropping straight to my dick. I don't want to let her get away, but it's that or hurt her.

And Marly doesn't get hurt on my watch.

"Sex, pretty girl. That's what this is."

She sits up, wincing a little. Not sure if it's because I took her ass or because of what I said. I'm a nasty bastard, because I didn't even bother to strip her down. Just fucking fisted her skirt, yanked it up, and shoved inside her. Okay, she came plenty hard, so she can't have complaints there, but she wants *more* and that's all I've got.

"I love you," she says. Doesn't whisper it—she shouts the words loud enough to be heard down on the street, but it doesn't matter. Those words detonate in my head, my heart, and she's gotta go *now*. The words are part of the *more* I don't have.

"And I love fucking you," I growl. "So come back over here and I'll give you that. *Love* isn't something I do—I'm not that kind of wolf and we

both know it. My pack has my loyalty and I fight for them. They're my brothers and my family. Don't have room for more."

She keeps staring at me as if she can make me be someone different. My dick's throbbing, my balls gotta be turning blue, and she has to go now before I get stupid ideas about keeping her.

"Sex is all I've got for you." I drag my hand up my dick. "Take it or leave it. You want to walk, you know where the door is."

"Asshole," she snarls, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. It takes a fucking act of God not to drag her beneath me and show her exactly what she means to me. She's not wrong, however, about the asshole bit. I'm the blue ribbon prizewinner. She watches me drag my fist up and then down my dick like she's not quite sure about her exit strategy, though.

"Asshole," I prompt, because we gotta get this over with.

She snarls and shoves off the bed. Shoves her skirt down.

"I want you to fight for me," she says from the door, and then she's gone.



WARE

I'M FUCKED.

Or more accurately: I'm unfucked, fucking lonely, and really, really fucking stupid. That's a whole lot of *fucks*.

Two days after I drive Marly away, I'm almost certain I've made a colossal mistake. After a week without her, I'm certain. My loft is empty. I haven't changed the sheets because they smell like her. I'm also still wearing the T-shirt she borrowed from me because the cotton holds her scent. It fades a little more each day, though, my scent erasing hers. I could Ziploc it, but that would just be sad.

I don't do relationships.

I don't have feelings.

You think Karma's laughing at me? You wouldn't be wrong. I'm the badass biker who tears up the roads on the back of his Harley, raining down pack justice on Baton Rouge's paranormal residents. I ride fast, I hit hard, and I never, ever flinch.

When I first brought Marly home, my place echoed. I could inventory my shit on my fingers and have a spare middle finger to flip you off with. A couch, a TV, a bed, and a table. Who needs more than that? Then Marly showed up. She, apparently, collects stuff. When Big Dog dragged her off into the bayou, her landlord had shoved that stuff into a storage unit. Paying off the back rent and a little extra had liberated her crap, and she'd brought it over to my loft. Seeing as how I had the extra space. Suddenly I had pictures, books, and coffee mugs with ridiculous words on the side. My leather couch sprouted about a million teeny-tiny, completely useless pillows with tassels, and I could host the entire pack with the number of chairs Marly owned. Couldn't move without hitting something. Now it's all gone, just like her.

I can buy shit of my own.

If I wanted to.

Furnishing a place is just a matter of time and wielding my AmEx. Eventually, it'll surface to the top of my to do list and I'll get the job down. Will fill in the holes she left behind when she moved her stuff out. I'm just busy. That's all.

Today, for example, I have to kick a drug dealer's ass. Ordinarily, this would be the cherry on my sundae, but I haven't smiled once since Jace, Blade, and I pulled up outside our target's apartment building. My adrenaline rush has gone missing. I don't care that Jace has handed me the perfect outlet for my... *feelings* in the form of the too-human piece of scum he drags outside and drops on the sidewalk. The dealer was warned not to sell in our territory—this is payback time. Even better, for shits and giggles, we decide to let the dealer run. Count to five and then go after him. Makes more of a point to the audience watching us from inside the building, too. None of *them* will fuck with us after today.

Blade prowls along by my side and Jace is out in front of us watching the dealer run. We're a posse of bad news. I don't know why I don't see his question coming.

"You talk to Marly?" he asks.

It's a simple yes or no question (and the answer is *no*)

"You don't go after her," I growl. Think I give a fuck that's the pack enforcer I'm bitching to? You're right. I'm all out of give-a-fucks. "She's not going to out us. She's not going to hurt a goddamned wolf."

I deserve to be hurt.

I vent my frustration on the drug dealer we're schooling. As soon as Jace counts five, I tear after the human, chase him into an alley, and bring him down. Pound him long and hard, splintering his ribs and then starting on his arms. Legs are next—bastard's never gonna push his shit in our territory again. Before I can break every last bone in his body, though, Jace yanks at my arm with a curse.

"Ease up," he orders.

I ignore his words and take aim at our dealer friend again. The pussy whimpers and curls into a ball on the ground at my feet. See? He's still got some working bones left for me to break. The alley's behind a hole-in-the-wall bar. Nothing scenic here—just bricks, dumpsters, and the days-old

stink. Fits my mood just fine.

Jace jerks hard, but it's Blade who makes the point. Literally. Fucker whips out his knife and lays the edge against my throat.

"You might wanna listen," he growls in my ear. "Now."

Since I can smell the coppery scent of my own blood now, he's got my attention. Rather be beating the shit out of our local low life, though.

"I'm all ears," I lie.

Jace slams me back against the closest wall so hard an entire constellation of stars dance in front of my eyes.

"Listen. To. Me." He snaps out the words, laying his arm over my throat as Blade sheaths his knife. He waits until I tip my neck the barest inch in submission. I'm walking a fine line, pushing him. He fists his other hand in my T-shirt.

"I can still smell Marly on you," he snarls, his face close to mine.

"Got a new law against that?"

He punches me hard in the jaw. My head flies back against the wall. No big deal. I've hurt worse. Like when I woke up and realized Marly wasn't there and wasn't ever coming back.

"Marly's not at your place," he says.

"Gold star for you." I spit blood and am pleased when I hit my Alpha. Over his shoulder, I spot Blade moving in.

Blade stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Jace. "You unclaiming her? She fair game now?"

Fuck. I shove Jace off me and go for Blade. My fist connects with his face, his pounds my ribs, and then we're grappling with each other, banging off the walls and the ground. My world narrows to Blade and the fight. The pain radiating through my body—fucker goes for my knee, too—only tightens my focus. It's over too soon, though. Before I can do any serious damage, I end up on the ground with Blade sitting on my chest and Jace yanking my head back. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the drug dealer limp-running away. *Coward.*

"Leave Marly alone," I snarl.

"Like you've done?" Blade's hard-eyed gaze taunts me. We both know how I've been spending my nights—keeping watch over Marly from a distance and making sure none of the pack gets too close or too fierce with her. "You wanna know what I could do with a sweet thing like her? Bet

she'd taste like fucking candy.”

That seals it. Blade's a dead wolf. As soon I'm on my feet, he's breathed his last.

He laughs as if he doesn't give a shit, shifting his weight downward so he's parked on top of my bad knee. Pain manages to shoot up *and* down my leg, and for a moment I see stars.

He doesn't get to go after my Marly.

Not yours, the suicidal, crazy pants voice in my head points out. *You convinced her to leave*. Blade rides my chest, his knife digging into my skin. Maybe this isn't happening. Maybe it's all a goddamned nightmare, because nothing's gone right since I lost Marly.

It's your own fault.

Hindsight's a bitch.

I buck beneath Blade and almost throw him off. He cuffs me hard with his knife-less hand, and then we're rolling around in the dirt again, trading more blows. I land a few hard hits before Jace is pulling us apart, cursing and kicking.

“Knock it off. That's an order.”

I almost refuse, but he's my Alpha and I love my pack. And since I've already lost the woman I love, I can't afford to lose anyone else. Shit. When my back hits the dirt, I stay down. Blade rolls off me cautiously. His face looks even less pretty than usual—he's bleeding from the mouth and I've bruised his cheek good. Satisfaction roars through me. He doesn't rush to get to his feet, either. Maybe I'm not *too* old to do some damage.

“Stay away from her,” I growl.

Blade turns his head to glare at me. “Do you claim her?”

“You want to stick her with a broken down wolf?”

“If that's a *no*, I could claim her,” Blade says to Jace and I start to roll to my feet. Jace shoves me back down.

“Simpler if you admit it,” he tells me. “You want her. And you want to kill Blade here for even thinking about touching her, let alone kissing her.”

I do.

“I'm cutting off any part of you that touches her,” I snap. “That's a fucking promise.”

Blade stacks his hands behind his head, somehow managing to look like he's laid out on a bed and way more comfortable than me. Alleys suck for

fighting. I've got boulders digging into my head and my ass, and my knee's screaming louder than a little girl. But the biggest problem right now is in my head. My imagination eagerly supplies the pictures to go with Jace's words. Blade kissing Marly. Fucking her. Holding her, sleeping with her, loving on her. It's not even the sex part that gets me seeing red—although I don't want to share her body, either. Nope. It's the thought of her opening up her heart and letting him in. The thought of her having *feelings* for him.

Fuck. Me.

“Pretty sure we're good with her.” The tip of Jace's boot not-so-accidentally collides with my shoulder. “She's kept her mouth shut so far, and she's a good woman. She's not the screw up in this scenario. That would be you. So admit that you love and go after her.”

That was one order I'd be happy to take.



WARE

MARLY'S CAR ISN'T PARKED OUTSIDE HER NEW RENTAL HOUSE, SO I'M CLEAR. Instead of getting something practical like a Toyota truck or one of those little Japanese imports, she's gone all-out crazy and picked up a used Dodge Charger. The car is a beast, with an engine meant for racing underneath its hood. Not that she doesn't deserve it, but the hidden need for speed is a surprise. Guess there are plenty of things I don't know about her yet.

Yet being the keyword because I plan to learn everything about Marly. You know, if she'll let me.

Blade swings off his bike. "Remind me why we're here?"

I'm here because I was an asshole and an idiot—Marly would probably tell me that kind of stupidity comes with penis territory. Can't say as how I disagree with her right now.

"Gardening," I grunt. "We have four hours before Marly finishes work, and it's her birthday."

True, her birthday was weeks ago, but she didn't get a chance to celebrate it—this is the do-over. The *do right*. When I realized my idiocy in letting her walk out of my life and came up with the idea of flowers and re-celebrating her birthday, all I needed was an opportunity—so thank God she's a librarian. She's got regular hours, so I can predict her coming and going. She also gets to read the sexy books first before they go out on the shelves. And those skirts of hers... well, let's just say I've got fantasies about taking her back in the stacks and doing her up against the books.

Shit. I'm lost in my own head thinking about her.

"Uh-huh." Blade saunters over toward the stack of boxes the gardening center dropped off a few minutes earlier. I haven't had much time to refine my plan, so I'm kinda winging it. I need to do something big, though, something that will buy me enough time to get down on my knees and

grovel. That's Blade's favorite part.

I don't bother with this flower shit, but Marly makes me want to be different. And since it's not as if the pack has FTD on speed dial, I had to get creative. Cost a fortune too, although that's not the point.

Marly likes flowers. I know this because she always picks up those shrink-wrapped bunches the grocery store sells. Her face lights up when she takes the flowers out, and then she always spends way too many minutes arranging them. My kitchen had vases when she lived with me, along with a whole lot of other new shit. She never came back for her stuff—just sent a rent-a-guy with a van. I let him in, too, and even helped him tape up the fucking boxes. Thought that was what I wanted, her gone, when I should have been thinking about the way she smiles when she's done shoving flowers into the vases. About the way she strokes the petals with her fingers. Among the many things I've never done, I've never brought her flowers. She bought her own.

Yeah. That went right in the *fuck up* column. Don't pass Go. Don't collect two hundred dollars. I screwed up, and now I can only hope she'll let me fix things between us.

I thumb open the first box. It's full of these little purple flowers. If flowers came dick-shaped, these kinda fit the bill. The gardening center lady babbled shit about the language of flowers to me, but I ignored her and the wad of cash I shoved in her direction shut her up fast. These flowers shouted *fist me*, but I'm a guy and what do I know? I mean, I'll bet Marly's head doesn't run a pornographic slideshow when *she* looks at flowers. I officially suck.

"Thought it was supposed to be a candle for each year." Blade eyes his bike. He's jonesing for a getaway, and I don't blame him.

He's here because I called in a favor. You ever try planting two thousand fucking flower bulbs? I have the feeling I'll be picking the dirt out from underneath my nails for weeks to come. Since I didn't want to wait six weeks for the flowers to magically appear on their own, the gardening center chick convinced me to buy "forced bulbs." Yeah. I don't know what that means either, except that I have two thousand things that look like potatoes sprouting a stalk of blue. Smells pretty, looks good... so check and check.

I drop the first box into Blade's arms. "Start planting."

He looks in the box, and I swear he pales. Pussy. “You owe me.”

“I’ve got you covered.” No way I tell him now that these flowers are “highly scented” according to the gardening center lady. We’re gonna smell like a pair of girls by the time we finish.

We get busy digging. Problem is, you can’t just dig a hole and drop the suckers in. You have to *not* break off the flower when you transfer the bulb from its cardboard nest to the dirt. At least they don’t have thorns. And they *are* kinda pretty.

“I’d tell you to get her a cake next time,” Blade grumbles. “But you’d probably want a four-story cake or something.”

He’s not wrong. Marly didn’t get a birthday because she was stuck out in the bayou with Big Dog. I figure the other holidays were probably a pass too, so I’m planting her a field of fucking flowers. Just to cover all of my bases.

Three hours later, we’re down to the last few bulbs. While Blade finishes up, I circle around the side of her house and go to work on her bedroom window. She needs better locks, which I’ll fix next, because I’m inside in under two minutes. I shove the window up, swing over the sill, and drop onto the floor. I’ve barely had time to look around when I hear Blade’s low whistle.

“We’ve got a problem,” he calls, and then I hear it. The sound of a car approaching because today of all days, she’s home twenty minutes early. Fuck. Me. I was supposed to have time to break into her place and take a quick shower. The flower stink wasn’t necessarily a deal killer, but the dirt and the sweat? Yeah. I’m nowhere near as pretty as the flowers.

I stand there looking out her window like a first-class idiot as she parks, gets out, and promptly freezes. My wolf kinda hopes she’ll run. Everything would be so much simpler if this was just a game of chase.

She’s wearing one of those pencil skirts I love. The gray fabric hugs her thighs and her ass, stopping teasingly short of her knees. Her legs are bare and she’s wearing a pair of three-inch pumps. The cherry on the sundae, however, is the silky pink blouse with a floppy bow that sits right between her tits. *Hello*. My brain promptly shut down, stupid fucker.

Blade saunters toward her, and she marches toward him. When she’s inches from him (because that fucking wolf is playing her, and he’s not backing down an inch), she slaps a hand square in the middle of his chest.

Hard enough to hurt, too, so better him than me. “Are you the hit squad?”

“Nope,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “You can call me FTD. Get your ass out here, Ware.”

Yeah. *That* makes her stand on tiptoe to peer over Blade’s shoulder. I don’t like their proximity and I’m already busted, so I drop out her bedroom window and make for her like this is exactly what I planned.

“Happy birthday,” I growl, shoving Blade out of the way. Bastard laughs and heads for his bike with a wave of his hand. Seconds later, I hear the roar of the bike as he tears off down the street.

Marly glares suspiciously at me the whole time. You’d think I was trying to clean her place out. “It’s not my birthday.”

Details. “It was. You want to wait another year to celebrate?”

She sucks in a breath and tries to step around me. Yeah. I’m a wolf, so I don’t budge and that move sends her slamming into me. Not like she’s got a whole lot of momentum going, but I’m feeling way too fucking fragile. How do people talk about their feelings? Is this why Hallmark makes so much goddamned money?

Before she can make a second attempt to avoid me, I throw an arm around her shoulders and turn her around to face her front yard. I’m obviously not big on flowers, but it looks kinda nice. Instead of the neat grass square, she’s got a sea of purple. The flowers cover every inch of available space. The garden center suggested planting them in some kind of pattern, but I’m no artist. Instead, Blade and I got the bulbs marching in neat fucking rows.

“I brought you flowers,” I announce, just in case she’s suddenly gone blind. The grass we cut up and removed is stacked neatly to the side, and it occurs to me that maybe she *likes* grass. Maybe I should have asked permission or checked out her opinions on spring bulb plantings.

Yeah. As if.

I just want her to be happy. Want to see her smile. Want to make her *mine*.

“Wow.” Her eyes flit here and there, taking in my flower arrangement, so I tug her up the sidewalk to her front porch. She’s not yelling, but not smiling, either. I’m not sure what I expected, but this isn’t it.

“A lot of flowers,” I add, because I’m a fucking idiot.

And there it is... her lips quirk up. She’s fighting it, but I’ve got a

chance.

“I can see that,” she says, and then she laughs. “Oh, my God. My landlord is going to kill me.”

“He’ll have to go through me,” I promise her.

She studies my masterpiece a little more and shakes her head. “You’re unbelievable.”

She’s still smiling, so...

“Is that good?” Because I can do better. I can be whoever, whatever she needs, although I’m kinda hoping she’ll take me as I am.

Love me as I am.

“The pack’s going to give you shit about this,” she announces. Sounds damned pleased about it, too. “Hate to break it to you, but it’s hard to overlook a yard full of hyacinths. This must have cost a fortune.”

“Whatever I have, it’s yours.” I pause, waiting for her to make a suggestion. She just gives her yard another once over, though, and keeps on walking. The view’s definitely better from her porch, so I move with her. I’m kinda hoping she’ll ask for something. A Herculean task like shoveling shit out of the world’s biggest fucking stable, brokering world peace, or prying the heart I’m keeping for her out of my chest so she can hold it in her hands.

She leans down, slipping out of my hold, and traces her fingers over a purple stalk. I need to get inside her head and figure out what she’s thinking. What she needs. She can’t be done with me, can she?

“They’re beautiful,” she says softly. “Thank you.”

Has she moved on? My dumbass self left two weeks ago, and time’s kinda stood still for me ever since, but for her? Yeah. Probably not. Bet she’s found someone smart enough to appreciate her. I try hard not to think about another guy holding her, kissing her. *Loving* her.

I move on to Stage Two in my plan. “It doesn’t matter to me what the pack thinks.”

She slants me a sidelong glance I can’t read. “Is that true?”

I take. I don’t give. I don’t put it out there, don’t let other people see how I feel. There’s no way the pack misses four thousand fucking flower bulbs, and I’m completely, entirely good with that. I could rent one of those skywriting planes too and advertise it everywhere.

So one word sums it all up.

“Yeah.”

The other word? *Marly*. She’s my everything, my center, my heart.

“I wish I could believe you.” She sounds wistful. Fuck. This isn’t a fight I can win with my fists.

“I love you,” I growl.

The words kinda hang in the air between us. This is so *not* part of my plan. I drew the line at spelling out those three words in fucking flower bulbs, but maybe I should have reconsidered. I draw her back against me and bury my face in her hair. Inhale her, hold onto her, lose myself in her.

“Is this another game?” She tugs at my grip, but how am I supposed to let her go? How can I make her feel the way I do? The answer is that I can’t. I can be as much of a partner to her as she’ll let me be. I can be the guy waiting for her when she’s done with work, the one who’s there when she needs something, and who beats the crap out of anyone who hurts her—but I can’t force her to love me. That’s a gift.

“Can we go inside?” See? I’m learning. It’s not like I can’t force my way in—hell, I was standing in her bedroom when she drove up—but it doesn’t matter if she doesn’t *ask* me. Doesn’t want me.

She’s destroyed me.

She sighs, but then she nods. “I don’t see how talking’s going to help.”

I can’t help but agree with her. “Kisses are better.”

Fuck me. When did my voice get so rough and gravelly? There’s a note of... desperation? Might as well own it.

She reaches in her purse, fishes out a set of keys on a long, pink, sparkly lanyard and then hands me the purse. I take it. I stand there on her front porch, holding her bag, while she unlocks the door. I was just inside. I know there’s no one lurking there waiting to hurt her, but I’m also damned grateful that Blade isn’t watching from the curb. Marly comes first, but the pack loves to give me shit.

Marly gets the door unlocked on her third try and steps inside. I dog her heels in case she’s thinking about ditching me, but she doesn’t stop by the door, so I’m safe enough. Instead, she keeps moving, tossing her purse on the sofa and heading for the kitchen. The sofa is way too small for me and holds a million throw pillows. I’ve seen fewer ticks on a dog. The kitchen is open to the living room, separated by one of those half-wall things.

Marly slams into the kitchen and yanks the fridge door open. She bends

down, and I'm really, really enjoying my view. Her ass is gorgeous. She emerges with a beer in her hand.

One beer.

Yeah. I'm still in the doghouse.

Of course, I'd be happy to drink after her. I move into the kitchen. Some day soon I need to teach her self-defense—there's only one exit from her tiny kitchen, and now I'm between her and it.

“You gonna share?”

She pops the top and shakes her head. “What do you want?”

There's only one answer to that. “You.”

She takes a long pull on the beer. “You had your chance.”

“I screwed up,” I acknowledge. “I should have put you first, but instead I pushed you away. We had sex—” really awesome, smoking hot fantasy sex—“but you deserved more than that. I can't promise I won't be a bossy bastard, but I'll listen. I want to change for you. Think you can see your way to forgiving me?”

She shakes her head again (at this rate, she's getting whiplash) and sets the beer bottle down on the counter. “Why do you always get to be the one in charge?”

“That what you want? To call the shots?”

“You don't always know what's best for me.” She slams back more of her beer, and I suspect she's giving serious consideration to breaking the bottle over my head. Since the flowers aren't working, I go with Plan B.

I drop to my knees.

“I brought you a present,” I confess.

She blinks down at me and shifts nervously. I'm close enough that her knees bump my shoulders and I can smell her. She smells fucking delicious. I wrap a hand around her ankle and rub my thumb over the soft skin. She feels good. Right.

“Ware—” She inches right as if she can get away from me that easily.

“Look at your present,” I croon and hold out my arm. The pink and black letters scrolling across the inside of my arm spell out *Marly*. She's inked into my skin, her name guarding the vein that runs straight to my heart.



MARLY

WARE DRAGS HIS THUMB OVER THE SENSITIVE SKIN OF MY ANKLE, AND I WANT TO melt when I need to be strong. But sex with him has always been mind-blowingly dirty—and satisfying. The problems come when we have to get out of bed and face life head-on.

He tilts his gorgeous head back, his eyes searching out mine. “You’ve brought me to my knees,” he confesses.

Ware’s off-limits—and he’s on his *knees*? He’s the last person I expected to see when I came home today, and I’m still not sure why he’s here. He wants a second chance, but at what?

He’s on his knees.

My head—and my girl parts—are stuck on that. Ware’s never pretended he was anything but dominant, and he’s always been clear that he gives the orders. Kneeling, bending, giving in, compromising... those words simply aren’t part of his everyday vocabulary.

I’m spread wide open like it’s *his* birthday and I’m the present. And you know what? I’m having a real hard time coming up with any objections. Except he doesn’t move any closer, doesn’t *do* anything, and soon I’m biting back a greedy moan. He needs to touch me *now*, damn it.

“Ware?”

“Shhh,” he whispers hoarsely. “I’m admiring my view. You have any idea how pretty you look? How good you smell? Open up for me.”

He taps my thigh with his hand. Guess Bossy Ware is back—but that’s okay, because I’m melting for him. I edge my thighs apart, the tight fabric of my professional skirt binding my legs together.

“Take it up for me,” he says roughly, his breath catching. He leans in, wrapping his hands around my thighs, his fingers teasing my skin. It’s hot today, and I went barelegged—there’s nothing between Ware and me. I slowly pull my skirt up until I’m flashing him the lace edging my panties.

“So pretty.” He catches my knees with his rough, callused hands, pushing me wider.

He runs his thumbs up my thighs, massaging the tense muscle, and his

touch feels so good. I should stop him, should make it clear that he can't fuck me and leave me, but I'm caught in the pleasure. He's touching me, but he'll do it on his terms. I want to scream at him, kick him out—and wriggle closer, shove his fingers into my pussy and *take* what I need. *Space*. That should top my wants list, and yet I inch closer to him. How can he dominate me from his knees? I'm so wet that my panties are soaked.

When I squirm, he pins me in place effortlessly.

Wolf eyes watch me. "Pull your skirt all the way up."

I do it, too. My heart pounds, my pussy creaming, because he's utterly, wonderfully, impossibly sexy. We're playing a game here, and we're playing by his rules.

And I love it.

His eyes go straight to my panties. They're more cheerful than sexy, hot pink with white polka dots. I hadn't planned on showing them to anyone tonight, but Ware's gaze darkens and he smiles. Slow and knowing. I'm in *so* much trouble.

"Take your panties off for me."

Oh. God. Ware's words are shockingly blunt. Overwhelmingly erotic. His rough command gets me going, too, and we both know I'm going to submit. Obediently, I push the scrap of cotton down my thighs, and he takes them the rest of the way.

"You gonna answer me? Or you want a clue?" He doesn't wait for my answer. Just presses his mouth against my pussy, and the heat of him sears me. And then he's lifting me up onto the counter, dragging my legs over his shoulders, and opening me up for his touch. He eats me in one long, wicked bite, licking me from bottom to top with a rough groan.

I grab his head, trying to find my balance, and he nips. I scream with pleasure.

"Let's try again," he growls. "Who's in charge?"

He licks and sucks, and then he fucking *pauses*. He wants his answer.

"You," I moan. "Ware."

"That's right, sweetheart. You've got a thing for the big bad wolf, and he's gonna see to this pretty pussy of yours."

He glides his fingers up my slit, taking his time finding my clit. He's in no rush, even if I am. He touches and strokes like he's got all the time in the world and I'm not moaning and yanking at his head. I'm not sure what

point he's trying to make, but I'm seconds away from an unbelievable orgasm and I want him to *hurry*. Instead, he slows down *more*, his fingers skimming my folds, driving me crazy.

"I'm going to kill you," I pant, and he laughs.

God. I feel that husky chuckle everywhere. That's the thing about Ware—he drives me crazy so easily. He circles my clit with one finger, holding me pinned against the counter with his other hand.

"Big bad wolf's gonna eat you up, baby girl." He whispers the words against my pussy, rough-soft, and I love it. I love *him*. Damn him, but I do. I'm going to let him do this to me—and I'm going to beg him for more.

"Ware—"

"I'll take care of you," he promises.

"Now," I demand, and he gives me what I'm asking for. Eases my thighs wider over his shoulders, cups my butt with his big hands, and spreads me over his mouth. I ride his tongue, his lips, hanging on and losing control. He drags his tongue through me, opening me up with one long, slow lick from top to bottom.

Ware Evans. Eating me up like I'm his new favorite flavor.

The pleasure builds fast. My thighs shake and I clench down on him hard, angling my clit against his tongue. God, the man can kiss.

"Tell me I'm forgiven," he growls. "Tell me I can have a second chance."

He can have whatever he wants, but I don't have the words to tell him. I whimper. I groan. He laughs and goes back to work, sucking my clit into his talented mouth.

"You like this," he asks, lifting his head for a moment. "You okay, Marly?"

His finger discovers a spot that makes me arch.

"Don't you dare stop." I'd have to kill him. I'd have to...

He gives me what I need so badly. He eats me up, licking me with devilish skill, until all I can do is ride his mouth and surrender to the orgasm.

"You cheat," I pant, a long time later.

"Fuck, yeah." He sounds completely unrepentant. "Gonna keep doing it too until you tell me you love me again," he growls against my pussy. See? There's no holding out, not when he knows my weaknesses.

Not when I love him.

I open my mouth to tell him how I'm feeling, but a large palm gently covers my lips. "I gotta tell you something first," he says.

I nip his finger and he growls. I'd like to skip the true confessions portion of Ware's agenda and head straight to the happily ever after. Apparently, though, that's too much to ask. He moves so fast, I almost miss it. My skirt slides back down, I'm panty-less, and I'm...

His.

He scoops me up in his arms and takes me out to my sofa. Seconds later, he's holding me on his lap. This is great, but we're not having sex. We're not talking about our future, or doing *anything*.

"You better talk fast," I warn him. I'm ready for our ride-off-into-the-sunset time. Why does he have to be so sexy—and so sweet? I curl my fingers into his cut and tilt my head back so I can meet his gaze. I need to listen to whatever it is he feels compelled to share.

"The Breed isn't my first pack." He rubs one big hand down my back as he says this. Slowly. Can't tell who he's trying to distract, but I like it. When I slide my arms around his waist, though, my fingers find the gun tucked in the waistband of his jeans. I can't help jerking away, and he brushes a kiss over the top of my head before sliding the gun out and setting it beside us on the couch.

"We were a small pack," he continues. He sounds casual, but his body is tense beneath mine. "Mostly just my father, mother, and me. A couple of younger wolves joined us, and we picked up two unattached females. We were up in Northern California, tucked away in the mountains. The first few years, no one bothered us. Didn't stay that way for long, though. First there was one challenger. Then six months later, a second. After that we were a fucking train station. Nothing but one wolf after another, trying for dear old dad."

How many werewolves *are* there? But Ware's not done.

"He won the first fights. Had to, because it was kill or be killed."

"You didn't kill Fang," I say, trying to make sense of Ware's story.

He shakes his head, his hand tightening on my back. "Nope. Should have. Would have too, but Jace had shit for Fang to do, so he asked me to hold off on the killing. If you don't kill your opponent, he just feels free to come back another day, you feel me? Dear old dad knew that and he did

what he had to do, but he was pretty beat up. He had injuries that didn't heal, and eventually he lost. His challenger became our new Alpha. He took everything—the den, the pack, my father's mate."

I take a moment, trying to imagine that. "I'm so sorry."

Ware shrugs impatiently. "My father failed her. He was supposed to protect her—not let her become some other wolf's property. I'm trying to point out the parallels here. I've got a fucked-up leg and way too many challengers. I'm not the kind of wolf you should choose as a mate."

"Because some day you're going to die on me?" Excuse me if I sound horrified. Apparently, the pack's missing a few fundamental concepts—free choice, consent, and divorce court come to mind.

"What if I can't stop another wolf from taking you?" he emphasizes.

"Good point," I hear a man snarl from behind. I bolt out of Ware's arms, but he's already in motion, swinging me behind him. I hit the couch hard, but it's a soft landing and nothing compared to the impact of Ware's body slamming into Fang's. Fang shifts, going wolf. Ware's not far behind, an eerie howl tearing from his throat as he shucks his human skin like it's one more article of clothing.

Fang slams into Ware as Ware twists. Locked together, they wrestle for dominance, snarling and rolling. Fang is massive, a big, black-furred beast with wickedly sharp canines. Over and over he aims for Ware's throat, raking his claws down my wolf's side as my brain replays Ware's words in my head. *He was supposed to protect her.*

Fang goes for Ware's bad knee. My wolf buckles, going down, then surges back to his feet. Lurches. Fang's last strike laid his knee open to the bone, and now he's fighting three-legged. *Who protects Ware?*

The answer's clear.

There's only me and I'm his mate. His partner. *His* as much as he is *mine*. I grab the gun and aim. He'll never be the only thing standing between me and certain harm, because I'll be standing there with him.

"No." I'm careful to point the trigger at Fang's side, following him with the muzzle. And then Fang shifts back, his human eyes meeting mine. *Don't hesitate.*

He's a wolf. A man. A *threat*.

I pull the trigger.

Fang jerks, his body slamming backward.



WARE

MY MATE ALMOST KILLED A WOLF TODAY FOR ME.

Not entirely sure how I feel about that, but we're both alive, and that's the right thing. Need to teach her a few things about handling her weapon, but she has good instincts and she didn't hesitate.

She fought for me.

Never had anyone do that other than my brothers. Right after Marly plugged Fang, Blade and Gator came bursting in. Marly's not getting her security deposit back—we messed up her house but good. They took care of Fang, while I took Marly back to my place. She started to ask once whether or not Fang was dead, but then she stopped. Guess she's learning, too. Fang challenged. What happens next is pack business.

Now, hours later, I've finally got her back in my bed. Feels fucking great, but I'm not the one who matters here. I drink in her scent, trying not to push too hard or too fast. "You okay?"

She's silent for a moment and I can practically hear her running through the day's events. "You know what? I am."

Thank. Fuck.



MARLY

"HOW DO YOU SEE THIS WORKING?" MY WORDS HANG IN THE DARK BETWEEN US.

"You just committed a felony in my presence," he points out dryly, moving about the room. "Think that means you can trust me."

"No, I mean why were you at my place?"

"Bringing you flowers." He removes his club colors and hangs them on the back of the chair, then yanks his T-shirt over his head.

"But why?" Granted, digging up my rented lawn and planting about a million flower bulbs counts as putting in some effort, but I still don't understand Ware's reasons. He's impossible to figure out sometimes.

“You deserve flowers,” he grumbles, as if that explains the time and effort he put into turning my yard into a sea of hyacinths. Maybe it does in the Ware-verse.

He shoves his jeans down his legs. Guess he must have lost the boots when I wasn’t looking. Even in the dark, he’s spectacular.

“I thought you were going to die when Fang pulled a gun on you,” I admit.

He shrugs, like it doesn’t matter. Maybe it doesn’t to him. “Stupid as fuck, doing that. And I should paddle your ass for not high-tailing it out of there like I told you to. Maybe he would’ve missed me and got you instead. Or maybe he would’ve plugged me and I would’ve gone down—then what would have happened when it was just you and Fang?”

That’s not something I care to contemplate. “I shot him.”

I still can’t believe I did that.

“You did what you had to,” he says, dropping down onto the bed beside me. “Nothing to be ashamed of there.”

And you know what? I’m *not* ashamed. Not of shooting Fang, not of what I like in bed, not of loving this man. Since he’s a wolf and not a mind reader, I tell him so.

“When Fang went for you and you were down, all I could think about was loving you. I couldn’t stand there and lose you. I know you don’t want that and you don’t have to feel the same way, but it doesn’t change how I feel.”

He’s silent for a moment, then pulls me against his side. I fit there, even if he doesn’t believe it.

“Sorry to make you say that,” he says, and his lips brush the top of my head. “Because I came after you today to convince you to give me another chance. I pushed you away because I’m too old and fucked up. My knee doesn’t work right, and Fang won’t be the last challenger. I didn’t want you forced into my world.”

“I chose to be a part of it.”

“Yeah.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “Figured that out when you committed a felony on my behalf. Thing is, I love you. I’m not big on emotions and feelings—they’re new territory for me, but I’m trying to learn and I want to be whatever you need me to be. I don’t want to let go of you—and I want you hanging onto me, too. So I’d like to figure this out with

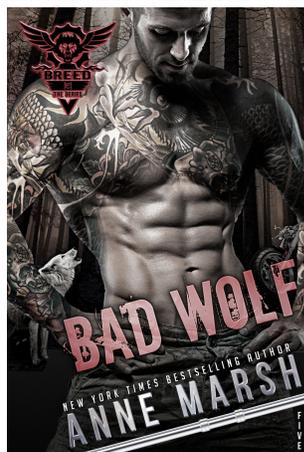
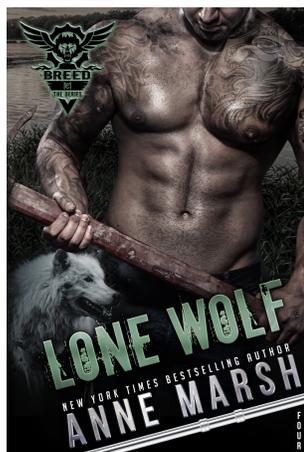
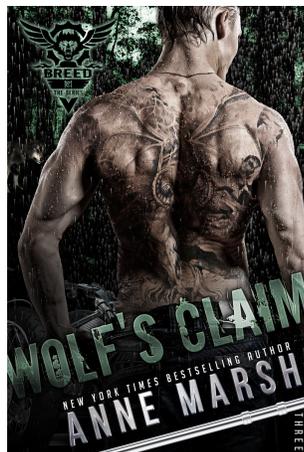
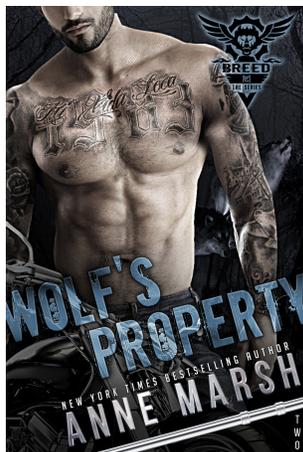
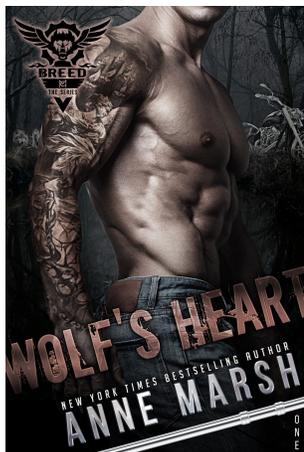
you.”

He smooths his hand down my back, and I curl into his touch. Still, I need to be clear. “A partnership.”

He’s silent for a second, and then he finds my mouth with his. “You got it,” he says against my lips.

The End





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