

## **Chapter One**

I WAS sitting patiently on the kitchen chair, my knee bouncing uncontrollably, words spitting out of my mouth unconsciously. I clenched my fists for a second or two, then gripped the edge of the table till my knuckles went white. I shook my head in disbelief and caught myself just a second before I slammed my forehead against the table.

"That motherfucker!" The curse just flew out, crashing against the walls of an empty room.

"Third fucking night this week! Motherfucker!" I screamed again as I stood and started walking furiously from one corner of the kitchen to the next.

Okay, I admit I wasn't very patient. It just wasn't a part of my nature. I can't say that I even know a shifter with icecold nerves. The boiling kind is much more common.

I made dinner for my boyfriend, Tim. I set the table, dressed up, and waited for him to show up. For the last three hours!! I had called his cell phone twice and gotten the voice mail. I had called his office and gotten no answer. I might have considered that something had happened to him if not for the resilience of his body, his unnatural strength, and the exact same situation having happened twice already this week. Our anniversary had been three days ago and I wanted to celebrate it. Desperately.

We had agreed to have dinner at home before the actual date—when he had stood me up—on the actual date—when he had stood me up—and finally now, three days later—when he, obviously, had stood me up. I'm thirty-three fucking years old and I'm still getting stood up, and by my fucking mate at that! If he'd done that eight amazing years ago, I would have dumped him so fast his head would have spun. Fuck the fact that we belong together! I certainly wouldn't have gone through everything I did to be with him. But nooo. He had to be the most perfect guy I ever met so that I could fall in love with him and now, eight years later, wait for his fucking ass to get home.

God, I was furious! I wanted to beat him bloody, until he begged me .... The familiar click of the lock snapped my head in the direction of the door. I should have heard him before that, probably would have if not for my mute ranting. Tim carried his tired body inside, looking like a stampede ran over him, twice. I just didn't give a fuck.

He saw me and stopped, shame and remorse plainly visible on his face. "Sebastian, I'm sorry, I can explain—"

"The fuck you can! I've been waiting for you for three bloody hours! That's seven all together this week!" My hands flapped around my body in furious gestures while I tried my best not to rush him and strangle him to death.

"My boss wanted me to stay for dinner. He wants to give me this big client, and apparently I have to prove myself first by kissing his rosy, wrinkled ass. It's not like I wouldn't have liked to be here with you instead of wasting away at some fancy dinner where a waiter kept pinching my ass!" He said it angrily, as if that explanation could ever placate me. He caught on to his mistake, but by then it was too late. I crossed the distance between us and my fist found its way to his gorgeous, steel jaw. I felt the blow all the way to my shoulder and my knuckles just screamed in distress.

Despite his tiredness, Tim turned toward me as fast as only a shifter could manage and pushed me backward, hard, before I could land another punch. I would have too. He knew me well enough to predict most of my moves. But even I couldn't tell you what I was going to do next when I rode on pure rage.

He stood me up on our anniversary so that he could go to a fancy dinner and get groped by a fucking waiter! There were no words to express my anger, and he knew exactly where he'd crossed the line.

I rushed him in that moment, not thinking about it at all but wanting him to pay. I slammed against him and crashed his body hard against the wall. He took a few seconds to recover, but as soon as he did, punches landed against my back and he tried with all his might to dislodge my grip around his torso.

I didn't budge. There was no way in hell I was letting him just smooth his way out of it. I should mean more to him. I should be the one he wants to return home to. I should be the one he answers his phone for. I should be the one ....

On the verge of tears, I bit him. My teeth taking the flesh of his pectoral muscle and holding hard. He needed to know he was mine. He needed to know how much I wanted him.

Just like that, all the fight left him and he moaned, somewhere between actual pain and sweet delight. His palms found their way to my back, caressing, pulling me against him, and I could already feel his cock filling in reaction to me.

"Say it!" I bit the other side too, making him feel it, tasting his sweet blood and making him remember. But he moaned again, his head lolling to the side, his eyes already closed. "Say it, you motherfucker, or I'll hit you again!" I hissed, my anger still lurking beneath the surface.

"I need you... I love you, Sebastian... I love you ...." Tim tightened his grip on my back and whispered to me what I desperately needed to hear.

"Not good enough!" I pushed at his shoulders until he hit the wall again with a gasp. "Make me believe it!" I licked the length of his neck, leaving a wet trail, which made him shiver against the chill air.

"Only you, Sebastian... I would rather die than let you leave me... I love you more than my life.... Please, love me, Sebastian. Please forgive me, punish me... just stay. Just tell me you love me." And I could hear the tears in his voice, the emotion he was hiding deep inside. Hell, I could smell it! Too scared of the outside world, pretending to be someone strong, someone in control, someone who needed no one. Except for me. He still needed me.

"I love you, Tim." I whispered against his lips, and then I took them between mine in a bruising kiss.

I pushed my tongue down his throat, tasting him, making him feel me. I sucked him, remembering the sweet taste I'd been missing so much in the last two weeks. I took

the very air from his lungs and made him surrender to me. I needed him like the flowers need the sun, and he needed me just as much.

My teeth nibbled on his lips until they were red and swollen, perfect for me to suck them some more. Tim was pushing at my clothes, grinding against me, whining as if in pain and whimpering when his hands fumbled without success and his cock couldn't get enough of that sweet friction.

Grabbing his shoulders, I pressed him against the wall, my eyes giving him that silent order to stay in place, not to move a muscle. And in return, he whimpered some more.

I slid my fingers gently between the buttons of his shirt, caressing the soft skin below with the very tips of my fingers. I let my claws lengthen to sharp points, issuing enough pressure for him to forget his name, and then I ripped open his shirt. Like a savage, I exposed him to my eyes. I wanted him, still dirty from the day at the office; I wanted him, tired and smelly. I wanted it to be what it was. A possession, where he was mine just the way he was, where I could take him as brutally as I wanted to and know that he would love every single minute of it.

I licked my way from the arch of his arm, where the smell of him was the most potent, to the tip of his nipple, where I played like I'd just found the most interesting toy. I nipped at it, sucking strongly one second and barely grazing it the next. Tim was a mess beneath my fingers, forcing me to press harder against him every time he leaned toward me in search of more, always more.

My fingernails sneaked to the sides of his torso and, at the same time that I bit the pouting tip of his other nipple, they scratched all the way down to his hips, leaving red marks that forced him to hiss under me but also to thrash like a captured wild beast.

The tip of his cock was finding its way out of his pants. That one loose button was enough to set it free, to bring it closer to what it wanted, to bring it closer to me.

"What do you want, Tim?" I pushed against him, pressing both our zippers at his painful erection. I knew what I was doing; I knew just how out of it he was.

"Mhmm ...." He humped and groaned, not even knowing what it was that he was asking.

"Tell me what you want!" I barked at him, startling him from his haze but also arousing him some more.

"Fuck me, Sebastian... please... push that long cock in me... make me beg ...."

"Do you think you deserve it?" I asked at the same time my palms found his face and forced him to look straight at me. I pressed against his bruised cheek harder than I did at the other one, taking another hiss from him, but also all the attention I wanted.

"No. I don't deserve it. What can I do for you, Sebastian?" he asked in a pleading voice, just a notch above a whisper. He understood where he was standing; he understood that it was me who was taking tonight.

I pressed my cheek against his tender one, licked the whole earlobe that was in my reach, and told him, blowing air on the wet skin all the while, "I want you to drop to your knees. I want your fingers to take hold of my pants and stay there, and then I want you to let me fuck your sweet, soft mouth."

He was shivering in my arms, listening intently, as it was unavoidable, but softly needing nonetheless. With my speech over, he dropped to those knees as if I'd pushed him, took hold of my pants, and waited intently.

They were tight because I wore them for him, so that he could ogle my ass all through dinner as I served our courses. Another thing he'd missed, and for which he was the one down on his knees and not me. I lowered the zipper and took only my cock out. The pre-come that had left me as he squirmed in my arms just minutes before was smeared on my belly, and I could see in his eyes that he wanted to taste. I moved my cock to the side a little before I spoke, "Lick it. And don't tickle me. You know the way I like it."

It wasn't really an order as much as it was a request. To outsiders, I would have sounded like a brute, forcing a man to do something degrading or something against his wishes, but I knew Tim well. I knew what caused every drop of precome on his rock-hard cock, I knew what every expression on his face meant, and I knew the exact limit when everything would stop. On the other hand, he knew that every word out of my mouth was nothing more than a request, no matter how much strength I pushed into it or how provoking my words were exactly. He knew that he could get up from the floor at any given time and I wouldn't do anything to stop him. I, on the other hand, knew that he would never refuse my advances, never deny me my possession, but then again, I was the same. He knew me as well as I knew him.

The first lick was rough and I felt it all the way to my toes. Then he nibbled on the skin, using all the teeth he could, to scrape over my stomach, to bite it as he lapped at every smear of come that had found its way there.

"Take my cock. Love it." The words were rough, the same as my voice. I wanted him badly. So much more than I'd wanted him the first day I saw him. It was like the attraction only intensified as we grew older, as the years together climbed in number.

His mouth was like a furnace, burning my skin so well. He took me halfway, only a couple of inches short of his limit. He liked my cock, as it was so different than his own. Not overly thick, but long. Too long for his beautiful mouth, but a perfect fit for his ass. He liked the fact that it was curved at the tip so slightly and that the crown was just a shade darker than the rest of it.

I took hold of his hair, always so soft and just long enough for me to hold on to it, as I pushed my cock in his mouth as far as it would go. He wanted to gag, to force me out, but I knew he wouldn't. He felt as if this was his punishment, which he was more than willing to endure. The fact that it almost made him come was not so bad either. "You're so fucking beautiful!" I told him a fraction of a second before I pulled all the way out.

"Lick me, baby, suck the tip. You know where all of that is going next." He moaned, his eyes half-lidded, almost there, but knowing when not to come.

He did as he was told, his enthusiasm obvious in his every suck, as well as his every lick. "Now open wide, and don't you dare come."

He whimpered for me, looking pleadingly into my eyes. This was the worst part for him. Taking me hard and forcing the orgasm away, while for him it was the best it got.

"No, baby. Not this time. Hold it."

With that, I pushed in his mouth again, one stroke, then the next, forcing my cock in just that tiny little notch more than he could take and being none too gentle about it. "God, how I love your fuckable mouth!" I gasped and heard him whine around me, just enough sensation to push me over the edge, if not for my quick retreat.

"That wasn't very nice." I said it even though I knew he didn't do it on purpose. He was close, and my words could always push him where he needed to go.

"Turn around. Put your bruised cheek on the tiles and your ass up in the air." I watched him turn, heard him hiss as the cold connected with his face. His pants were still on him, so I pushed them down to his knees and took a moment to admire the beautiful white ass that had been mine for almost as long as my memory served me. I didn't even remember anyone other than him anymore.

His ass was perfectly rounded, and, when spread, my fingers took hold of it all. It was firm, but the skin was almost too soft, and bruised so easily. I spread him wide, looking at his little pink pucker, almost winking at me as his muscles contracted in expectation. He was undulating against thin air, whining softly in expectation, but knowing better than to ask for it.

I spat between his cheeks, smearing the saliva with my thumbs and circling his opening roughly. He moved against them, wanting me desperately but still holding back. Sharp hair surrounded it, as some time had passed since he'd last shaved, making it interesting for me to tease some more, to rub and glide until he was on the verge of tears. Only then did I push both my thumbs inside forcefully, spreading him, hurting him, reminding him I was still there.

Tim panted under me, loud breaths betraying his pain, but it didn't stop his hips from pushing backward, from pressing against my fingers in ecstasy. Spitting once again, I pushed inside him some more, easing the passage, circling roughly inside, deliberately avoiding his prostate, giving him more pain than pleasure.

Once my fingers left him, he cried out, whimpered, and his hips followed after me. "Wait for it, you little slut!" I snapped, connecting my palm with his virgin-white ass cheek. The sound caused him to jump; still, the after-burn only made his hips dance faster, his sounds tempt me more strongly.

Spitting on my palms was not ideal as lube went, but he didn't deserve real lube. He needed to remember tomorrow why he had trouble sitting at the office, why his every step seemed that much harder than usual.

Wetting my cock with my hands took only a few seconds and I pushed one thumb in him again, spreading his still-red cheek that had a perfect imprint of my palm decorating it. I didn't wait for any fanfare, nor did I prepare him for the intrusion. I simply pressed the head of my cock next to my thumb and pushed forcefully inside. It was hot and tight, squeezing around me almost painfully as his whole body reacted to the pain.

Tim screamed under me, his hips pulling away instinctively to escape the burn, but I held him in place with my now-free hand and, instead of easing him away, pulled him an inch more on my cock.

"Do you want me, bitch? Do you remember who you belong to?!" I hissed, holding myself in place, as well as him.

"Yes, yes! I belong to you, Sebastian, only you!" Tim gasped as he said the words, feeling my whole length inside him, getting used to it, remembering the feel of it as it almost split him in half.

There was a time when he could have taken me just as roughly, more than a couple of times a day, when he would have begged for my fingers to join my cock in fucking him, but we didn't have that much time anymore. I knew he was a gentler soul now, I knew how much it cost him not to beg for me to stop. But I also knew how little time he needed to get used to me, and what a pain slut he really was.

"You want my cock?"

"Yes! Yes! Please, Sebastian... fuck me. Fuck me hard!" he begged, his hips already pushing backward, wanting more.

So I gave it to him. I pulled back a little, then slammed hard inside, pegging his prostate in my first try, listening to his moans as he joined me on the ride. His hips danced seductively under me, and I spared him none of my strength. I pounded as hard as I wanted, never letting go and never easing up on his gland. Feeling his tightness, as well as his heat, grind against me every time I pushed inside.

I slapped his ass once more for good measure before I leaned over him and bit the flesh just under his shoulder

blade. He screamed louder this time, and I reached beneath him, gripped his balls, and twisted them painfully, not letting him come just yet. "Hold on! You can do it," I told him before I bit him again. More to the side this time, taking more flesh between my teeth, drawing that sweet blood.

Tim screamed once more and I only pumped harder, taking all the whines he could give me and waiting for the cries that always pushed me over the edge.

They came as soon as I spread my hips more and engulfed his, giving him more length and that torturing glide over his sweet spot. I rewarded him with a few short thrusts before I said, "Come for me, Tim!"

His orgasm was long and forceful, massaging my length with such strength that I barely managed the last few deep thrusts before I came with him.

I would have collapsed in any other situation, but I knew how tender he would be as soon as the adrenaline rush subsided, so I gently slid out and pulled him against my body. "I love you, baby."

His hair was wet and I moved the stuck strands from his forehead, caressing the injured side of his face, the gentle skin of his neck. He was beautiful and completely mine. A little brat seeking discipline.

The aftermath tasted as good as the games themselves, and I relished the opportunity to wash him, caress him, kiss him senseless, and put him to bed.

## **Chapter Two**

WALKING down the dark hallway, I kept stumbling over things I couldn't see. The darkness, so thick I had trouble breathing, crawled around me, and the only thing keeping me sane were the sidewalls my fingers barely grazed. I could feel the frames under my fingertips, edges of the doors, but the hallway kept on going and going. My shallow breathing had my heart beating at an insane speed. There was no scent in the air, my senses half-numb as if I were in a vacuum. The fear made my whole body shiver and even my lower lip trembled as I kept on walking further into the dark.

The situation itself wasn't something I found scary, but the feeling that gripped my chest had me almost wetting my pants. I could almost taste the discomfort, the ominous foreboding that something wasn't quite right, that something was about to happen and I wouldn't be able to do anything other than stumble in the dark some more.

The sound started as a cricket's song, the murmur of the waves, something quiet and calming. Almost enough for me to imagine myself on the beach. The gentle song turned into grinding that kept getting louder and louder as I walked. It joined the overwhelming dark and soon I couldn't keep my hands touching the wall. I gripped my ears in a deafening scream as the sound became more than I could bear.

Dropping on my knees would have been the end of me if not for the faint light at the end of what seemed an endless tunnel. It was just a trace of something else, a promise of an escape, of an end. So I got back on my feet and ran straight, as fast as I could, as fast as my lungs allowed me, and I kept my hands firmly over my ears the whole way there.

The faint light got brighter only so much, no matter how long or fast I ran and just as I was about to give up, just as I was about to get down on my knees again and cry, I saw him. I saw the outline of him in the distance, his whole body just the way I knew it to be, and his face, almost close enough to kiss.

Like Wonderland, it played with my mind, distorting the familiarities, distancing the reality. I saw Tim as I always saw him, as the man I knew through and through, but no matter how fast I ran, there was no way of reaching him.

I screamed his name until my breath left me, but his eyes held such peace in them. His smile was one of indulgence and sorrow. He kept telling me how sorry he was without saying a word. He kept showing me how much he cared without even cracking a smile. I saw everything in the curve of his brow, in the shine of his eyes. I saw everything in his face, but I couldn't reach him.

As my voice abandoned me, my Tim turned around toward that faint light, his whole form just a distant figure that headed away from me. In a slow pace, almost too slow, but still too fast for me to catch. I screamed, my voice long gone and the raspy sound climbing out of my throat, but nothing could have stopped him and I kept on watching as he disappeared, leaving me alone in my darkness.

I WOKE up all sweaty and scared. My heart beating in a crazy tattoo, my breathing that of a slacking runner. I saw the white of our bedroom around me, the bright morning light hitting the big, wide windows, and I reached over my bed, desperately needing Tim.

The sheets under my fingers were cold to the touch, as empty as my chest had felt in the nightmare, and suddenly the horror of the dream struck me all over again. I started hyperventilating, searching the room frantically with my eyes and seeing the traces of him all over, but Tim was nowhere to be seen. Just as I was about to jump out of the bed, I heard the singing he marked his mornings with. His beautiful voice echoed against the bathroom tiles, and for the first time since I'd opened my eyes that morning, I knew everything was all right. Tim was safe.

By the time he got out of the bathroom, his body was smooth and covered only with a small towel. I could see the drops of water sliding down his back as he turned, the marks I had left there, and the wetness of his beautiful neck. I loved everything about my man and I treasured our mornings the most.

"What are you up to today?" he asked casually, already immersed in his morning rituals.

"Nothing much. I'll stay here for a while longer, then go to the workshop. Will I see you tonight?" I work in a wood shop, specializing in woodcarving. All those intricate designs you might see on old bed headboards, backs of chairs, furniture... my boss makes them and I carve them. Unless there is too much work to be done and the boss needs me to jump in and help.

Even in the middle of the city, I managed to find something as close as possible to nature to occupy my time. I was more of a wild creature than Tim ever was. I craved the run we went on every month, I enjoyed the kill that overwhelmed our muzzles. I felt the rush in my blood. I felt it in the rage that consumed me more often than not, as well as in the itchiness beneath my skin that called for a change. My wolf was a wild one, and not being able to exhaust him left me agitated whenever I lacked other physical activities.

"I don't know. I'll try and get out early," Tim answered absently. He was already in the office, working on his files, sucking up to his bosses. I never could understand the attraction in being confined in a tiny box of a room with no sky, no nature, only artificial furniture and stale, stinking air.

"Yeah ...." I answered, not willing to argue at all. I wanted him next to me for longer periods of time. I wanted to run with him, I wanted to fuck and bite and I wanted to love him. This wasn't what I had signed on for all those years ago.

There wasn't a waiting, obedient wife at home that forgave everything and gave just as much. There were just the two of us, separated from the pack, fighting for that right and moving on. We were two men strong enough to part from our family in order to be together in simple unity without conflict. Well, without too much conflict. Wolves fight, it's inevitable.

"We need to go for a run," I stated calmly, even though the last thing I felt was calm. Just the mention of a run had my blood simmering, and I could almost feel the change tingling beneath my skin. Tim sighed, like the very thought pained him. I hated this same discussion, constantly repeating every two weeks. Me jumping out of my skin with the deep need to set my beast free and him just waiting to get it over with so that he could return to his papers.

But it wasn't all that bad. Tim was an ass in his corporate world, where there were rules and limitations, where everyone was more important than him. Once I got him between the trees, the man I fell in love with would resurface. Like clockwork, at the very first smell of pine, the light would shine in his eyes again and I would have my wolf back.

We run almost to the point of exhaustion, we kill and share our prey like the human side of us demands. We nip and bite like playful children and we chase each other aimlessly around the trees. With the first warm rays of light, we shift back, our backs pressed roughly against the dried pine needles, the smell of wilderness filling our nostrils and the earth chilling our skin. We make love like it is the very first time, the tenderness warming up our wanting flesh, the roughness giving it the bite of color. We are the perfect wild couple, completely free of human rules.

"Your eyes have shifted," Tim whispered next to me, his body so close I flinched at first. "You're thinking about it. You want to run," he said, his fingers touching my forehead, following an imaginary trail down my cheek, stopping at my lips.

"I can hear your heartbeat, the rush of your blood. I can smell the wolf on you." His lips touched mine in the complete opposite to the kisses we had shared the night before, and I imprinted that moment in my memory, like so many moments before.

"I will see you tonight. Maybe we could go for a run this weekend," Tim said as he lifted himself off the bed and finished dressing.

I couldn't help but feel disappointed. Getting my goodbye kiss and my run never seemed so pitiful before. He was doing it all to placate me; there was no joy in the expectation, and there was no passion in his body. I needed to take him away. We'd been parted from a pack for too long, and it was beginning to show.

Loving the man with all my heart somehow deleted all the flaws that appeared in our relationship during the years. I'd willingly left all I'd known to be with him and haven't regretted it, not once. Tim was my other half, no matter how corny that might sound. I loved his every breath as if it were my own, and there wasn't a thing on this Earth that I wouldn't do for him.

Even almost a decade later, I still adored him. I adored the man he was as well as the one he'd become. Just watching him from my bed sent shivers of lust down my spine. I wanted him. There was no denying that. He is an attractive man. You couldn't look at him and not see it. His once-messy hair was now cut short, pointy tips carefully styled, making him look more like a *GQ* cover model in a fancy suit than a wild shifter. Of course, he wasn't a wild shifter anymore.

His eyes are light blue, enough so to define his face, and if the lighting is just right, the color turns into something almost transparent. His eyebrows are low, almost towering above his eyes, and when in anger, just that look is enough to stop you in place. Of all the Alphas I've met, and I've met a few, none of them had the same effect once they turned their eyes toward you. Tim had it mastered; only, it didn't come with the appropriate air of danger. He wasn't born to be an Alpha.

His nose is perfectly straight and smooth, if that makes sense at all. The tip is just a tad closer to his mouth, and just a tad wider at the bottom than is should be, making him all the more unique. The upper lip is a little wider than the lower one, but still perfectly curved, and it makes his whole mouth look more sophisticated. His face is narrow all the way, ending in a pointy chin.

Even his body is elegant, smaller than mine but toned enough to make him quite a sight. The energy we burn prevents us from gaining too much weight, and despite our inactivity in the past years, we still look much the same as we did in our twenties.

I got another soft kiss and a smile as he left, this one deleting all the disappointment I felt with the previous one. I smiled back tenderly, looking forward to tonight, but even more to the weekend. Even he was having trouble hiding the spark of excitement in his eyes. I let him go, content with our new plans and believing him enough to let my blood boil with yet-soft traces of expectation.

CLOSED off in my own section of the workshop, I could hear the sounds of the machinery in the next room. You can almost taste the wood dust in the air and the potent smell of the freshly cut wood. I loved it here.

I'd spend hours every day focused on my carving, trying to finish one project without neglecting the next. The long projects were by far the worst. Months of effort and sweat invested in them, only to sell them and never be able to see them again. Maybe that's the sad side of being an artist, any type of artist. Parting with the work you care deeply about and knowing that it's a necessity.

Taking a break in my world usually meant switching to something else once I got frustrated with the current taste, and today I ended up giving the final touch to a pair of carved chairs. Who would have ever thought that a wild wolf like me could spend months patiently playing with a piece of furniture? Never once losing my temper, but also enjoying the work. The distance from a full-blood pack had as many advantages as it had disadvantages. But everything worked that way in life.

A woman had ordered two chairs some months ago, carved from an actual hollow log with leaves and roses climbing all around as if growing from the wood itself. It was beautiful work; I'm not modest. And it will be a torture to part with it. She wanted them for her twin daughters—something that will last.

It was then that Michael, my boss, walked into my workspace, a grim expression on his usually smiling face.

"What is it?" I stopped what I was doing and looked at him worriedly.

"Someone just called from the hospital. They said something happened to Tim and that you should head there right away. They even gave me the name of the doctor," he said solemnly. He knew Tim, called him over for every one of his barbecues.

The color drained from my face. I could feel it, the rushed beat of my heart and the temporary blockage of my mind. Tim couldn't be hurt. Tim is all I have in this world.

Somehow I found my way to the hospital, almost attacked the nurse behind the counter before I remembered that I was given a name. As soon as I said it, the expression on her face turned into one of horror and she repeated the name I'd told her, making it echo throughout the hallways of the hospital.

I didn't wait long before a man in his forties rushed to meet me, the white coat flickering behind him. His expression was also grim, and he directed a glance full of rage toward the nurse behind the counter just before he took hold of my elbow and led me to the side.

"Mr. Vory?" he asked, and all I managed was a slim nod.

"There was a crash on the highway this morning, where several vehicles were involved. I am sorry to inform you that Tim died in the crash and there was nothing we could do to save him." He paused, his hand still gripping my elbow, but once he saw no reaction from me, he continued. "Tim crashed against a truck carrying steel bars. One of them pierced through the windshield and stabbed his heart. He was dead on impact. I am sorry for your loss."

I heard his words, but that didn't mean I believed them. Tim was strong, he was a werewolf. He couldn't die. He couldn't die so idiotically. I loved him. He couldn't die.

"No one told me. He went to the office. He should be working. No one told me." I looked at the doctor expectantly, as if he held all the answers that mysteriously eluded me.

In reaction, he just looked pained. "There was confusion in the administration and we were under the impression that you were already informed. I am sorry it took so long for us to correct that mistake."

I was still in bed while he died. Still feeling the taste of his kiss against my lips. I could still smell him. Even my clothes carried his scent. My beautiful wolf.

"I need to see him," I whispered, my heart constricting tightly in my chest.

"Of course. Follow me." And he led me through the hallways until I was standing next to the hospital gurney, a white sheet covering everything but my love's face.

The doctor mumbled something before disappearing from the room.

I had eyes only for Tim. His face looked so peaceful and pale, a few cuts marring his forehead and cheek. There was no heartbeat in the room other than my own. There was no breathing to be heard. The smells of the hospital muted the scent I so desperately needed to smell. I touched my fingers against his handsome cheek and felt only the coldness, so unnatural compared to the usual heat of our skin.

Tears flowed down my cheeks... nothing like the discreet showing of sorrow when a tear slides down one's cheek. No. Mine showed the despair and unbearable hurt that consumed my body. The tears flew down, dripping over his still face, finding their way down my neck and flicking away from my face every time I strongly blinked.

I leaned closer to him, to my beautiful wolf. He was still there, I could touch him. He should still be here.... I licked his cheek like the wolf I am, tasting the remnants of his blood, the sweetness of his skin, as well as my own tears. I licked his eyelids as I whined like the wounded animal that I was, and whispered, too low for anyone to hear but Tim. "Please wake up.... Please love, please wake up.... Don't leave me, Tim. I love you, my wolf.... Please come back."

My nose was buried behind his ear, where I could smell him the best. The scent that will perish once I leave his side, and remain only as an imprint of a memory. I licked his skin there, my palm pressing the side of his face and feeling none of the life that should have been there. My whines intensified as my wolf slowly realized that his mate was gone, and that I was now completely alone in the world.

I roared then, my voice reaching the deafening magnitude of a wounded shifter. The glass on the cabinet burst under the assault of sound and still I roared, mourning as a wolf mourns the loss of his companion.

People came in the room, standing unobtrusively by the door, the doctor saying something that fell on deaf ears. They were too scared to approach me as the shift started to take over my body. My claws lengthened, my eyes shifted, and I knew I was out of time.

Whining with my loss, I touched the cold lips with mine, tasting for the last time the man who meant everything to me, and then I was gone.

Just a blur of speed left for the curious as I ran outside, out of the hospital, out of the center, and into the closest

## Sebastian's Wolves | *Valentina Heart*

25

woods. The shift was an unstoppable force that overwhelmed me, and I ran into the wilderness with it.

## **Chapter Three**

SNIFFING the bark of a tree, I could feel my ears twitching at the sound of a squirrel nibbling on a nut. A bird landed on a nearby branch and just a soft whisper of a breeze caressed the highest of the leaves.

There were still traces of a deer around me, the faint smell of his fur where it had rubbed against a tree, the hoof prints in the dirt where he had nipped at the strands of grass. I padded over to the small tangle of roots beneath a large treetop and sipped at the water gathered there.

The air was fresh and there was a certain peace in the undisturbed nature surrounding me. I nudged at the caps of white mushrooms with the tip of my nose as I moved on further into the forest. It changed during my runs, from the distinctive smell of pine into something less potent, tamer, but also much older.

I was lost in the forest. At some point of my obvious escape, I stopped paying attention to my surroundings, to my direction. I just ran and slept. Hunted and sniffed without a care in the world. There wasn't anything more to it. I was one with the wolf again, and it was the precise place where I wanted to stay.

It was hard at first, my wolf mourning the loss, flashes of our past tormenting our days as well as our nights. I kept seeing Tim smiling at me, kissing me. I saw him hugging me in comfort, bending me over in passion. Tim was everywhere, and I kept smelling him even weeks after I ran from reality.

When the anger finally came, it was accompanied with memories too. Of the first time I saw him, nothing more than a bitten youth, looking for a home but scared out of his mind. The connection that was there from the very beginning, the ferocity with which he fought for our freedom. The wolves we took on in a fight, without an ounce of hesitation, in front of our old pack. The proof we had to deliver in front of curious eyes, that we were more than capable of taking care of ourselves. I loved the viciousness in his attacks, the focus he had with no room for any type of mercy. My beautiful wolf.

After the anger slowly dimmed, it was the wolf that remembered. The playful wrestling on the pine needles that were a pain in our fur. The bites that were more seduction than malicious intent. The possessive grip our jaws had once they managed to catch the other's neck. Chasing tirelessly after one another, nipping at the hind legs and sprawling tiredly in the tall grass.

The wolf howled at the full moon every month, singing that heartbreaking song, and sometimes others would howl with him.

I had no concept of time in those months. I chose the way of the wolf and simply ceased to care. There was nothing to go back to, no reason to shift back again. I would have stayed that way for the rest of my days if not for the inconvenient meddling of fate.

I was sleeping when I heard them. It was nothing more than the shift of dried leaves, but it was enough for my ears to pick them up. After that came the smell, that distinctive, unique scent every shifter had. I could distinguish fourteen different tones of wolf, and it was obvious they had come for me.

My wolf was an aggressive one. A beast ready to fight no matter the odds. But this one time, he didn't even want to stand on his legs and face them. They were just a nuisance, breaking his rest.

The first one to come in my line of sight was obviously the Alpha. His coat was thick and black, his legs muscled, and he was both taller and larger than me. With his eyes the color of yellow gold, there was no doubt in my mind of him being a pureblood. It was rare among our kind to retain the blue eyes if you're a full-grown male.

On the other hand, I was very far from a pureblood. Still, turned at the gentle age of six, it was all I'd known my whole life. The wolf was me and I was the wolf.

I sat calmly, my front legs straight in front of me, giving me balance. I wasn't planning on crawling in front of him. He might be dominant, and he might be the Alpha, but he was not *my* Alpha and I didn't care for his punishment.

Staring at him dispassionately, I was aware of the rest of the pack circling me. Silent as they should be, but for a wolf, distinctive enough. They knew I was not a threat, but they were taking every precaution. You never knew when one wolf could become feral.

It took him a while longer, but eventually the Alpha lowered his head. The change was swift as it always was, and just a few moments later, a naked man was kneeling in front of me. His hair as black as his fur had been, eyes the same with a certain depth of experience. He was older than me, closer to his fifties would be my guess, but still too young to have that shine of gray in his hair.

A crease developed between his eyes as he frowned at me. It gave him an even more dangerous look if possible.

"You shouldn't be here," he stated seriously. Like I didn't already know that.

You never entered a pack's territory without asking permission first. They were very lenient about letting drifters lead their own lives outside the pack. But the rules were still there. They needed to know the count of the outside wolves on their turf at all times.

I broke that rule. By our laws, it was enough of a violation to earn me quick death. I welcomed it. I all but exposed my neck for the sharpness of his teeth.

"But we've been watching you for a while now. Almost since you entered our territory. You never shifted back and your peaceful demeanor tells me that you're not feral yet. But I can't take the risk that you won't soon cross that line."

I sighed. Or what passed as a sigh in wolf form. I was so tired of living that even sitting took too much out of me. I extended my legs and lazily laid my head on my paws, never once taking my eyes off of him. That little habit was a part of my nature.

"You need to go back. To your pack or to the territory you have the permission to reside in." He regarded me again, seriously.

I just puffed air from my muzzle. Like I had any idea where I even was. The only fact I was sure of was that he

wasn't the Alpha of the North Pack, which was my old pack, nor the East Pack, from where I took off.

He must have figured that out, because the next thing he said was, "You're in the territory of the West Pack. You can ask for permission to stay here if you want, but for that you have to shift."

Of course, I already knew that. Either shift and show me that you're normal or run along with your tail between your legs. Those were the only blood-free offers currently on the table.

The very idea of going back home, or what once was home, made me shiver. I wasn't a part of the pack there, and the only place I had left was the apartment I once shared with Tim. Even the wolf whimpered at that thought, drawing looks from the wolves surrounding me.

I needed a pack. I had known that even before Tim died. I flinched on the inside. I wasn't ready to put that final word next to his name yet. I had no idea how long I'd been wandering the wild, but I was old enough to know that the last thing I needed after such a prolonged solitude was more of the same.

So I stood carefully, my eyes focused on the soft grass beneath my paws, and I let go. It wasn't natural to hold the shift for too long. Every shifter had two complete, conscious forms, and the human one was always dominant. For that to stay true, you needed to stay in the human form more often than not, because the alternative was the dominance of the wolf. And as much as the wolf was conscious, his main nature revolved around the hunter and the prey. Once the

tables turned, the human inside lost all control and became feral, together with the wolf.

If the shifters behaved anything like the real wolf and possessed the same strength as one, no one would have bothered them. But the unnatural viciousness and force that was left behind was the main reason why there were no known feral wolves at large.

Shifting of the bones and receding of the fur once took a long time and was an excruciating process, but with time, it becomes as easy as breathing, and where one moment you stand as a full-grown wolf, in the next you are a naked, kneeling human.

It took me a while to get my bearings, the haze of wilderness still vivid in my mind. It had been too long since the last time I'd used my human muscles, my human eyes. Everything was... less, all of a sudden. The wind felt strange against my skin, brushing it like a feather instead of ruffling my fur like a living force. My eyes seemed to see both less and more at the same time, but certainly nothing like a wolf might see. But the biggest shock was definitely the hearing. What was just moments ago a complete awareness of my surroundings now became almost deafness as all the distant sounds—as well as the close, quieter ones—disappeared.

I was never so much aware of the difference between the wolf and the man, my muscles still shaking under the exertion of the change and shock. I shouldn't have waited for so long, I thought to myself vaguely.

The Alpha cleared his voice, like I might have forgotten his presence.

"I take it this means you wish to speak."

I shook my head numbly. There was nothing to talk about. Except maybe where I would be staying. I had no documents of any kind, not a penny in my possession, not even a pair of pants on my body. As far as the choices went, I'd already decided on mine.

He offered an invitation and I accepted. I just hoped there were no idiotic initiations attached to that offer. I wasn't at my best, but fighting in wolf form, which the challenge most likely would entail, couldn't end up too well. I had no mercy left in my body, no room for emotion, and especially nothing resembling human courtesy. I was pure wolf still, and I would be for a while yet.

"Ray, Mark. We'll take him to the pack house until he comes to," the Alpha said quietly, his eyes never leaving me. I could feel them burning a mark at the back of my neck.

There were still wolves around me, but two large individuals found their way to me, their arms slipping under my elbows, and in a matter of moments I was hanging between them, too weak to even verbally protest.

The walk seemed like a long journey where I was the unfortunate weakling, but in all honesty, I had no concept of time. My arms trembled under my own weight, pulling them down, and that was also as far as my perception went.

I was eventually dumped on a bed, unable even to shift to a better position, and despite the soft glide of the sheets against my skin, it still felt like sandpaper. When the bugs started crawling down my body, I had no strength left to resist. I succumbed to my exhaustion.

THE moment my dreamless sleep started to clear away, a voice sounded from the left side of the room.

"I need to know your decision," said the voice I recognized as the Alpha's.

Opening my eyes still wasn't an easy task, but the previous fatigue had cleared out and I did feel better.

"I humbly ask permission to join the West Pack." My own voice was weak, but I gave my body no choice but to straighten out in the presence of my future Alpha, and my head bowed in a sign of submission. My lack of strength didn't justify disrespect, and no Alpha would tolerate rebellion. There were always ways to put a wolf in his rightful place.

"Which pack did you belong to before? Are there unsolved differences that might come and bite me in the ass once I accept you?" His voice was rough, and I couldn't help but notice that it suited his appearance. He was not a weak wolf by any means.

"The last pack I belonged to was the North Pack. But I fought for my right to separation and it was granted. That was eight years ago, I think. I don't know what year it is. After that, I asked the Alpha of the East Pack to grant me the right of residence in his territory and he accepted. I haven't informed him of my departure, but I don't think he will consider that a transgression."

The Alpha just nodded. "There is no rule that obligates a lone wolf to give a report of his whereabouts. That won't be a problem. Now tell me why you gave yourself to the wolf."

At that I showed my first sign of rebellion. He might be my new Alpha, but Tim had no connection to him. He had no right to ask. My eyes clashed with his for the first time since I'd woken up, and I flat-out refused.

"Do not play games with me, pup!" the Alpha growled. His shoulders swelled, his eyes lowered, and that menacing air surrounded me. It was almost too hard to breathe, and I could swear that I saw the outline of his wolf as the beast fought to get out.

I'd spent too much time away from a pack, and my groveling left a lot to be desired. You just didn't defy your Alpha. And the whole pissing contest made me level my body with the bed and stretch out my neck in an act of submission. It was that basic instinct at work again. My wolf knew a dominant when he saw one, despite my human stubbornness.

"That's better. Now answer the question." He leaned back into his chair and waited.

I kept my position as I felt my eyes swell with tears and my body go numb. "My partner died."

"I am sorry for your loss. That was the reason why you left your old pack? There were problems because of your relationship?" That question was far from safe ground, but it was easier remembering the good times than the bad.

"Some were okay with it, some not. I was bitten when I was six and I grew up with a pack. I had no issues with aggression or an occasional dominance contest. I used to be a Beta. But Tim was new to the life and he took it hard. We weren't pureblood, and it seemed easier to just leave."

The Alpha nodded again. I realized that he needed to know a bit about me. A good Alpha knew all the members of his pack, but it didn't make the interrogation any easier.

"How did he die? Was there a conflict with a pack member?"

His question was legit. Shifters never got sick. We also healed much faster than humans. It wasn't light speed or "heal before my eyes" vampire sort of regeneration. It was just an out-of-the-ordinary speed of recovery... unless we shifted. The change took away the injury, but we paid for that with the energy our body daily produced. The same went with strength. We weren't invincible, but compared to a human, we seemed extremely powerful.

"He died in a car accident," I whispered, outright crying this time.

The Alpha frowned again, that crease between his eyes almost as menacing as his eyes. "How could he die in a car accident?"

Yeah, it was a shock to me, too. "A steel bar pierced his chest. He was dead on impact."

He still wasn't impressed with the explanation, but he let it go. "You won't be yourself for a while yet, but I also need to know your occupation. You will be provided with a room here on grounds and all other necessities. Still, I don't approve of laziness, and every wolf needs to know how to take care of himself. We prefer the work to be beneficial to the pack's well-being, but it's not a condition."

"I work with wood. Back east, I worked in a wood shop, carving designs on furniture or making furniture. Some people requested art pieces, so I can do that too."

That frown was back again. "Give me a moment." He left the room, but was right back, carrying a wooden piece the same length as his forearm. He turned the sculpture to me, and I gasped. It was the head of a wolf, a mean-looking wolf, that was an extension of an entwined wooden base. I remembered the time I'd made it. The very project had excited me, as it was so close to my *other* nature, and Tim could barely stand afterward due to my reawakened, insatiable appetite.

"There was another one. A wolf, waist-high, howling at the moon. You have that one too?" I looked at him expectantly.

For the first time, the man smiled. "It's on the porch. You must have been too out of it to see it when they brought you in here."

"This is you." I motioned my head toward the sculpture in his hands. "I was given a picture, but never connected it to our world. The man who ordered it was human."

"That was my old friend. He liked your work and tested you with the sculpture. The big wolf was my request after I saw this one. You really caught the frown." The Alpha laughed again, and it was not an unpleasant sound.

"I am so glad they found a good home. It's always so difficult to part with the work I invested months in."

The Alpha nodded again and put down the sculpture on the nearby desk.

"I've asked all I needed to know. My name is Konner Vuk. Welcome to the West Pack. Dinner is in two hours. You can meet some of the others then."

"Sebastian Vory," I said in answer, and he took my hand in a firm grip before walking out the door.

## **Chapter Four**

THE smell of food dragged me out of bed in the end. I probably would have gotten up eventually, with the sound of the dishes being set on the table, but the smell was so intoxicating that my stomach protested unbearably. Living on raw meat for a long period of time makes you wish for the finer things in life.

The house looked like a warm fairy-tale home. There was wood everywhere in the most beautiful shades of natural brown. Shielding the ceilings as well as the floors, arches between rooms, and framing the windows. There was nothing flashy about it, nothing that didn't fit. Pictures of people and wolves filled the walls; huge antlers towered over the entrance and smaller ones marked the rooms.

A massive staircase climbed to the upper floor and carpets broke the easy flow of the wood in places, brightening it with distinctive colors. The furniture was of the best design and quality, the warm wood calling to me. There were voices further down the hall, sliding of bowls in the kitchen, contagious laughter of running pups.

It smelled like home as no other place I've ever been to. And that simple, joyous fact saddened me. There was a family of wolves just a few feet away, and I was the stranger crashing the party.

Trying to get rid of the sorrow plaguing me, I stared at another family wall. More pictures of the Alpha and what must have been his parents; of a pack of wolves, at least sixty of them if not more, spread out in a meadow, grooming each other, lazing around after what must have been a successful hunt.

"We are very close around here." A voice from the door startled me.

"Yes, it's very obvious. You are lucky."

"That one was taken after a full moon hunt. We were celebrating a blessing in the form of six new pups birthed to the pack. Those small antlers belong to the first kill Madoc made." Konner smiled at the memory.

"You will understand once you meet him. Those big ones you saw above the door belonged to my grandfather's prey. He was a great hunter. He would always put down the biggest prey so that the whole pack could feast. Times were different then. We were lucky to be wolves because, as men, we would have probably starved. These are all memories. Every member of the pack has something personal on the walls, something no one will ever take down. It is our way," he explained, the pride obvious in his voice. "Come now. You must eat."

I followed him into the biggest room of the house, impressed at first glance by all that space. The ceiling was very high, crisscrossed by wooden beams, and hanging from it was a chandelier made of hundreds of different wooden pieces creating a series of black shadows on the walls. It smelled like nature, and it mixed invitingly with the smell of food spreading throughout the house.

My stomach growled, but I ignored it. I'd just entered a pack's home, and the silence in the room was palpable. They

were curious, their noses high in the air as they tried to scent me. These weren't the same wolves that had greeted me in the forest, as I was only able to recognize two familiar scents: one belonging to the Alpha, and the other to a man in the corner of the room.

I was still too impressed by the sight to give him much thought. He was not a threat to me and I knew I would eventually be introduced.

There were long couches and padded wooden benches forming a circle in the room. Small tabletops nestled between them. The open space in the middle was filled with pillows, smaller ones in warm colors and the big, sitting ones in harsher tones. Pups sprawled on them, quieted by my arrival, but not focused enough to stay that way. They were already tickling each other and softly growling in challenge. They were adorable. Pups were always a blessing for a pack, as nothing brought peace and happiness as much as their presence did.

The circle of the furniture was broken in only two places, one being at the wall—where a massive stone fireplace dominated the room—and the other at the opposite wall, where the door leading to the kitchen was placed. Two other walls were filled with bookshelves, more pictures, and trophies.

Fifty people could easily be placed in the room with each of them sitting comfortably. It was most impressive, considering the fact that it was designed hundreds of years ago and yet even today had the ability to shelter the whole pack.

I observed them more closely and noticed that there were as many women as men in the room, all of them speaking softly now, sprawled over the couches, a few of them on the floor, pulling on the children in teasing. The atmosphere was almost enchanted, and it was the Alpha that broke the magic.

"This is our newest member, Sebastian. He will be staying here for the time being, and I trust you will make him feel comfortable. Unless he turns out to be an ass—then he's on his own." It was a joke as much as a warning. If you fuck up, you'll be the one dealing with it.

The pack laughed, the Alpha with them, and then he casually asked. "Do you need anything? Have any questions? You can usually ask me, but if I'm not around, my Beta should be." He nodded toward the back of the room and that familiar scent I still remembered from the forest. "That's Magen over there, my Beta."

"I do have a question. Where is the TV?"

It was suddenly so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Even the pups looked at the Alpha expectantly.

I looked too, only to see him scowling, and I could hear Magen snickering in the corner. But I was serious. I didn't see a TV set anywhere, and I liked watching movies, especially after so long without civilization. I also missed video games terribly. I wasn't a reader and there was just so much company a man could take every day. Not to mention the fact that I've been without a pack for years and just getting pushed into a room full of chatting wolves wasn't at all pleasant, despite the warm buzz going around.

In the end, it was Magen who answered. "There is no TV in this house. Our dear Alpha thinks it corrupts young minds and distances the family."

That caused both Alpha and me to scowl, but obviously for different reasons. How can they have a thirty-plus household without a fucking TV around? That just wasn't right.

"It does! If we got a TV, all of you would now be staring at the shiny thing and no one would talk anymore," Konner said, quite agitated by the subject.

"You're the Alpha. You can always limit the amount of time the thing is turned on," Magen simply said, but the Alpha shook his head in disbelief and left the room, still mumbling quietly about insufferable Betas and blasted technology.

I debated for a second if I should stay with the pack or make myself scarce. The latter won. I didn't feel comfortable with so many voices around me. What I craved, though, was my tools and a piece of wood. I could park my ass anywhere and just lose myself in work. It was either that or running. Shifting wasn't an option, and wouldn't be for a while yet.

In the end, I followed my nose to the kitchen, hoping for a snack before dinner, but seriously doubting it. If the women were anything like the ones in my old pack, the only thing I could look forward to was a slap on the wrist.

"Hello. I'm Sebastian. Is there anything I can help you with?" I asked once I entered the room and measured the four women standing there.

All of them were busy chopping, stirring, and pouring. Two of them were in their thirties, one was just out of her twenties, and the obvious boss on the premises was over sixty, but almost as menacing as the Alpha himself.

She measured me like a real wolf does with its prey and grunted, never once stopping her chopping. It was impressive, but also expected. She was a wolf that had years of experience behind her, and let's face it—in her eyes, I was nothing more than a pup.

"You know your way around the kitchen?" she asked in a voice much softer than I expected.

"I've never cooked for so many people, but I can find my way," I answered, at which point she just nodded and moved away from the counter.

"Take over here. When you're done, make a salad. There will be less than a third of the pack at dinner tonight, so what's on the counter there should be enough."

I rushed to the sink to wash my hands and before I knew it, I was chopping away. She observed me for a while, and once she was satisfied, she turned to whatever she was doing next.

She spoke again once I was filling the bowls with the salad. "I'm Lana, Konner's mother. The brunette is India, she's mated to Ray and one of those pups in the back is theirs. The shy one is Roisin, she's sweet on Madoc, but I ain't seeing anything happening there." She chuckled rather meanly before continuing. "And the spitfire in the corner is Areli. Don't let her talk you into anything. You'll just get in trouble. It's a given."

I remember Konner talking about Madoc and I wondered what the story there was. All of the women were gorgeous. It was like shifter genes never produced anything less than perfect. Even Lana looked like she was in her thirties, only my senses telling me her real age.

Once everything was set—poured in bowls, bread cut, plates on the counter—Lana bellowed, "Dinner!" and like they were a well-oiled machine, the pack members started coming inside the kitchen and taking one item at a time. Even children came and Lana gave them a glass each to carry to the table.

The shock must have been showing on my face, because she chuckled. "They are well trained. Even kitchen duty isn't always distributed to the same people, but I am always the boss." Lucky for me, I knew what I was doing in the kitchen.

The dinner went by in a haze. I was full before I even realized that I had eaten. The food was unbelievably good, but I was too hungry to appreciate it. And the overall atmosphere was homey, for lack of a better word. They all joked, fed the smallest of the children, and passed the food around. I was sitting there, not speaking unless spoken to, but not once did I feel left out.

Konner watched over everything with just enough curiosity to spur spirit, but discreetly enough that you didn't feel assessed. He was by far the best Alpha I've had the privilege of meeting. And out of five of them on the continent, I've met three—not including him, of course.

Once my eyes started making an issue of staying open, I excused myself to the pack members closest to me and headed back to the room. Of course nothing is easy in life, my first night with them included.

"Sebastian!" Konner yelled after me. "Take a shower to wake up, then come back down to the pack room. I have something for you. We won't keep you up for too long."

I would have trusted his word if not for the amused laughter of other pack members. Still, he was my new Alpha. There was nothing left but to obey.

Walking into the bathroom, I wasn't prepared for the mirror. As a first reaction, it was a funny one. I jumped two steps back, looking for the enemy in the stranger, but it didn't take me long to realize the person in the mirror was me.

The embarrassment that followed was related to my reaction, but the horror after was all for the fact that I had faced civilization in such a state.

My hair was just shy of my shoulders, knots plainly visible, not to mention the ruffled look it had, that only weeks spent without the company of a comb could accomplish. The beard I never knew I could even grow was rather impressive, but it also looked like something more often seen on a homeless person than on a wolf. The only thing that suited my current look were my eyebrows, which usually stood our more prominently when compared to other people. And my eyes were recognizable—the warm brown in them, anyway. Now they also carried a certain dullness mixed with the color. It wasn't a look I much cared for, but I cared even less to do something about it.

Overall, I wasn't as dirty as I was unkempt. As a wolf, I jumped in a stream every now and then, and I groomed myself regularly, but no one kept tabs on the human.

Not willing to face others in the same state ever again, I picked up the scissors from the small basket on a shelf next to the mirror and started cutting. I was far from a hairdresser, but I was more than capable of cutting the same length all around. I measured with my fingers, trying to leave the length of three fingers of hair everywhere on my head. That was more than enough hair left if I wished to visit a professional on a later date and have him not leave me bald. As for the beard, I cut off as much as I could. All of that was coming off.

I set the water in the shower and jumped in, feeling the warmth on my body. In that moment, the sensation felt too close to an orgasm for my comfort. I was still too raw to think about such things, but both a shower and an orgasm were things I hadn't experienced in a long time.

I soaped my body several times, just enjoying the luxury, before I dedicated my attention to my beard. I shaved it relying only on my touch, as I had many times before. Closing my eyes, I could remember the feel of the razor on my face as Tim used to shave me. The way his fingers held me still and his perfect motions took off the excess hair. Every move was efficient and precise, and just thinking about it brought back an erection, as well as unbearable pain. I loved Tim.

By the time I decided I was clean enough, my skin was pruned and enough time had passed that someone was knocking on my door.

"Come in," I yelled from the bathroom, wrapping a towel over my hips in a hurry.

A small boy took two steps inside and, never taking his eyes off the floor, whispered, "Alpha said to come wake you."

I couldn't help but smile, especially as I noticed the way he was gripping his hands behind his back and how he rocked in place slightly.

"Tell him I'll be there in two minutes," I said softly, not willing to scare him.

Not even sparing me a glance, he took off, slamming the door behind him.

I threw some clothes on me after I wiped away the excess water from my skin, and went to the mirror one last time. There was no way I'd be coming before the pack looking like an idiot again.

My hair was still wet, so I took care of that by rubbing it with the towel aggressively, and took a moment to get familiar with myself again. The new Sebastian was skinnier than the old one, my hair longer even after I'd cut it. The bones of my face were more prominent, high cheekbones and a strong jaw really visible and giving me a certain dangerous look that, before, I would have easily broken with a crack of a smile. I didn't smile much anymore. I didn't feel it.

It was never a good idea to keep an Alpha waiting, so I followed in the boy's footsteps and found myself under the arch opening into what he referred to as the pack room.

I had a strange feeling of déjà vu as all eyes turned to me again, only now there were even a few gasps. The first that recovered her equilibrium was one of the girls from the kitchen. Areli, I think that was her name.

She plastered herself to my side with that characteristic wolf speed, sliding one palm over my belly and the other to

the nape of my neck. I could feel her fingernails scratching in lazy circles even as her other hand rubbed at my belly. If she'd been ten years earlier and a guy, I would have been on my knees, blowing her. But in this particular case, it made me sleepy, and all that previous fatigue came back with a vengeance.

"Areli, stop it," Konner said, exasperated. "He plays for the other team."

If anything could have pulled me back to my full awareness, it was that one sentence. I measured all the wolves sitting on the couches and benches, expecting hostility and above all judgment, but all I saw was mild curiosity directed at me and amusement at the way Areli just as fast detached herself from my body.

"Relax, Sebastian, they don't care. You are more likely to find a date in this pack than a challenge. Now come." Konner motioned with his hand.

I walked to him, relaxing visibly. In my old pack, I had to watch my back all the time, especially when Tim and I first got together. We rarely went anywhere alone for the simple fact that strength was in numbers. We were spared the bad treatment in the presence of the Alpha and Beta, as they never approved of hateful violence, but neither Tim nor I were tattletales. We simply took what they dished out until we left.

"Sit," Alpha said.

When I complied, he relaxed back in his seat and lifted his palm up in the air for the rest of the wolves to quiet down. Most of them did, except the red-haired little guy to the left of us. He was skinny and not very tall, but there was a certain sweetness about him that made me like him just by looking at him. He was chatting to one of the ladies I recognized as Roisin. She was blushing profusely, trying to disappear into her seat, but the guy still kept talking.

Konner threw his head back and sighed loudly. "Madoc!" he yelled, causing Madoc to flinch and shut up instantly. "You are a wolf, for Christ's sake! You have to use your senses at all times. When everyone else around you shuts up, it's usually a sign that you should too, unless you are an Alpha. Are you an Alpha, Madoc?"

"Nn... no, sir," he uttered, actually trembling in place.

"Out of this house, it's a sign of danger. When nature is quiet, something is wrong and a wolf has to notice it. Do you want to get killed?"

"No, sir." Madoc was as small as Roisin next to him, both of them trying to hide in plain sight. It was more than obvious what Lana meant about them.

"Good. Now show some respect."

Konner turned to me then, his hand reaching for a bundle of leather on a small table next to him.

"We welcome you as our newest member," he said in a warm voice, honesty so obvious it almost made my heart hurt. "We hope to leave as much of our trace in you as you will surely leave in us. Welcome."

At that I almost did let out a tear, but it was stopped by pure shock as I accepted the leather from his hands.

As soon as I took hold of it, I knew what it was, but I opened it anyway. A set of twelve wood-carving chisels filled the leather, each in its own little pocket and different in

shape. To say I was speechless was an understatement. No one except Tim cared about me enough to give me something I might actually want. To think that a man I had only met that day welcomed me in such a way was overwhelming.

"Thank you," I barely whispered. "Thank you all." And I turned to look at each and every one of them, knowing in that one moment that I wouldn't be leaving ever again. I had lost my best friend, my mate, but I had gained a family.

## **Chapter Five**

Two months later

A MONTH before, I had lived through the anniversary of Tim's death. It was another day that I spent as a wolf, crying my silent tears and running to the point of exhaustion. At certain moments I still wanted to join him, but just minutes later, I wanted to kill someone, something. It seemed unfair that he had died in such a stupid way. Wolves died in challenges, in wars, or simply of old age. No one died in a car accident. Everyone gave me space in those few days, while I gathered my composure to the level where I was a person they could live with.

I was also a changed man, my original personality surfacing under all that grief, and I started carving everything in sight. At first it was just details; the back of a chair got a leaf design, pups got gifts in the form of animals they might hunt once they shifted, but what caught my attention time and time again were the wooden columns holding the porch roof in place. I would sit for hours watching them, thinking about designs and the work they would entail. They stood on each side of the main steps leading to the house, and I was reluctant to take on such a project without Konner's permission. Only... I lacked the courage to ask for it.

So what I did instead were those little things, and every time I passed the columns with one of my tools in hand, I would nip a bit of wood somewhere to the side, or at the very bottom where it wasn't as noticeable.

That was how one day, as I was returning from the forest, I saw Konner and Magen circling the columns and commenting.

"At first I thought we had termites, but I can't smell them or hear them and it doesn't look like the damage they would do," Konner said.

"It's almost as if someone deliberately damaged the wood. Maybe one of the pups was playing?" Magen added.

"Yes, but they lose interest soon, and if it was an accident, it wouldn't explain this." Konner turned to the other column and pointed to another one of the nicks. I visibly flinched. There was no way for me just to leave the other one in peace when I had already marked the first column.

"And I swear the damage is worse every few days!"

"Why don't you just ask them for permission to carve them?" Suddenly a voice next to me spoke and I turned, scared out of my wits. It was Madoc, crouching next to me, behind a tree, but his voice carried enough for both the Alpha and Beta to turn toward us. The pup had all the best intentions, but I swear he single-handedly put every stone on that road to Hell.

Konner looked pissed, while Magen was quite amused. I walked out from the forest, my head bowed, and I stood in front of the Alpha. Of course, Madoc was nowhere to be seen. He was used to messing up, and if he had any

characteristics of a wolf, they were related to running quickly when in danger.

"Are you trying to take down the porch roof?" Konner asked, that crease between his eyes only getting deeper.

"No," I said, and scowled, not really meaning to.

Of course, that pushed Magen into full-out laughter, and that pissed Konner even more. They were a completely incompatible pair and one would think they would never be able to work together. But in all reality, Magen listened to orders well, and where Konner was too serious, he spun a joke, making light of the situation and diminishing the Alpha's temper in the process.

"Then what are you trying to do?" The laugher made Konner annoyed, which was better than anger any day.

At that I actually fidgeted. "I want to carve them, but I didn't think you would give your permission, so I stayed away from them as much as I could. But every time I pass and have a tool in my hand, I just have to do something to it. I'm sorry," I explained, the words rushing out of me like a flood.

"You're an idiot. Konner doesn't care what you carve, he knows it will look good in the end." Magen was still laughing.

"Thank you, Magen, I can speak for myself," Konner turned to him and snapped, but the smile on Magen's face didn't waver one bit.

"You should have asked. You're new here, so you probably don't understand yet. The worst questions in this pack are the unasked ones. I don't read minds, no matter how good I am. And if you won't tell me what you want, I can't help you. I wish for all of my pack members to be

happy, you included. So if you have a question in the future, ask it. Otherwise I *will* punish you." The Alpha was sympathetic and strict at the same time, but it relaxed something in me to know that I couldn't screw up so easily, and that even if I did, I wouldn't be kicked out for it.

They were turning to leave, but I had no answer about the columns, so I braved that question. "Hmm... Alpha? What about the columns?"

He turned back. "What about them?"

"Well, can I carve them?"

He smiled then. "Yes, you can carve them. But don't overdo it. I don't need the roof collapsing on our heads."

And just like that I got a new project. I couldn't get to my tools fast enough.

I rarely left the pack house in general for any reason other than to shift and run. But I interacted with others, slowly getting to know all the members and not shying away at the crowd. It became natural to sit in a room filled with pack members and shoot the breeze. I even enjoyed it.

What was disconcerting to realize at first, was that I'd spent ten months in wolf form, running from painful reality. What was surprising to Konner was that I'd stayed sane. He presumed that it had something to do with the reason I'd shifted in the first place. He thought that it was easier to accept it in the wolf form, but on the other hand, even in wolf form, the pain was too strong to lose that connection to humanity. The pain kept the control in the hands of the human.

In the end it didn't really matter. I was here and the past was left in the past. I was meant to live on while Tim

had to die, and no matter what I did about that fact, I couldn't change it. So I simply accepted it. It still hurt, but finally, I was as close to peace as I could get.

IT WAS one of those afternoons when the light was just right and the temperature just cool enough to chill my skin under the sweat that coated it. I was working on the columns, carving the top of one of the many trees planned in the design. Madoc was sitting next to me, silently observing, and once in a while, he would get a broom and swipe away the wood dust under me.

I heard the car approaching, but didn't give it much mind, all my focus centered on the tiny leaves forming the final shape of the treetop. Even when the car door slammed closed, I didn't turn around. But then Madoc started to discreetly move backward, and I glanced in his direction. He was scared and ready to flee. I couldn't not look then.

The wolf standing next to the car was something else. He had black leather boots that buckled all the way to his knees and gray, torn jeans that must have been a fashion statement rather than an indication of his financial status. He had on a bright blue leather jacket and a sleeveless, loose T-shirt under it. But what was most striking was the pink Mohawk on his head. The hair on the sides of his head was bleached and was quite a contrast to the pink. I didn't take my eyes off his hair until he coughed to get my attention, and by then I couldn't look away.

He had two parallel scars that climbed up the length of his neck and licked the edge of his chin, a touch of stubble on his jaw and upper lip, and the most mesmerizing eyes I'd ever seen.

The blue there caused me to lose myself. I sank deeper and deeper, like there was no bottom in sight, and the feeling consumed me like another's embrace might have done a long time ago. I was blind to everything else, deaf to words, and insensitive to my surroundings. The world just stopped. There was nothing else there but the sweet, comforting blue, and I felt as if I'd finally found that little piece of heaven where the dull pain of loss in my chest became numb and the world seemed to align itself just right once more.

I had no idea how long I had been staring, but I noticed the oh-so-pretty blush coloring his pale cheeks, and then he spoke.

"It's not polite to stare at people like that."

Of course, his voice didn't help matters. To me, it sounded like the dirtiest fantasies voiced as a seduction, and my cock reacted almost instantly. I could feel it pressing against my zipper and I knew my arousal traveled through the air until it surrounded him in its intensity.

There was no mistaking the moment he scented it for something else. He shifted in place, trying to accommodate his own rising flesh, and the chains that were hanging on his hip jingled in reaction. Something was between us, and I feared that I was just too weak to resist it.

"Welcome. What can the Alpha of the West Pack do for you?" Konner's sudden voice broke my focus. I didn't even hear him step behind me, and if the stranger's reaction was any indication, he hadn't even seen him.

It must have been quite a blow for the Alpha not to be heard or noticed while he was obviously there, because the power suddenly radiating from him in waves was intoxicating and almost made me kneel from my sitting position.

The stranger, on the other hand, instantly dropped to his knee, his right hand pressed knuckles-first to the ground and the Mohawk shivering like a piece of jelly under the movement. He was breathtaking. Smaller than me in his build, but not as much as Tim had been. Slender too, but again, not to the point of being too skinny for his size. There was muscle under those clothes, and there was fire under that exterior. I could almost taste it, and I burned for the feel of him against me.

"Forgive me, Alpha," he said in a strong voice. I could feel him so intensely, the tiny little needles of his remorse prickled against my flesh. "My name is Eshan Low. I come from the East Pack with some news."

"By all means, then, do come in." Konner smiled like the predator he was, and if I were in Eshan's place, I would have been shaking down to my core.

"You come too, Sebastian," Konner threw over his shoulder, and I obediently followed.

I knew for a fact that a quarter of the pack was lounging in the pack room while I was outside, but as I followed them into the room, I found it to be empty. Using all my senses, I managed to smell them leaving out the back door. Madoc was the only one still lingering there.

"Madoc!" Magen yelled all of a sudden, making me flinch in surprise, and I could hear Madoc scurrying away to the forest. Eshan flinched as well, but he felt worse for showing it, and when the Alpha told him to sit, he did so with obvious relief.

"I would offer you refreshment, but I sense the information to be important. You care to share it with us?"

Eshan lifted his eyes and faced the three of us. He was scared of the Alpha, wary of Magen, but he innocently blushed once his eyes found mine. I had never caused a man to react like that to me, not to mention a wolf. But on the other hand, I've never reacted to someone the way I did to him.

"I don't know how to say this delicately, and I hope my punishment for betrayal won't be too severe," Eshan said. I almost growled at the thought of someone laying a hand on him, but contained my outburst at the very last moment.

"My Alpha is killing people. Now, I know that is not a crime. At least it isn't in the way I was taught. I'm not sure in anything anymore. But he isn't stopping at humans. He's killing wolves too. Mostly half-breeds, but he doesn't make much of a difference when it comes to purebloods. He just checks their connections better."

Konner lifted his palm in the air and Eshan stopped, looking at him expectantly and inching backward in expectance of a blow. I wondered what kind of a pack he was living in. Even Tim and I, who had been bullied, had never flinched at the single movement of another. But then, I knew his Alpha. It had been nothing more than fleeting acquaintance, when we had asked for permission to stay and he'd granted it. Let's just say that he had made an impression, and not a good one.

"It is not that I don't believe your word. But how come we have never heard about any of this?"

"You couldn't have. He's covering his tracks. Every single death is made to look like an accident. Drowning while out fishing, hit and run, DUI, construction accident .... No one is asking questions," Eshan said in frustration.

"But that's not bloodlust. What possible reason could he have for such a risk?" Magen asked, shocked.

"Money. He's trying to take over the East Coast, discreetly, and the way to do that is to be the major player in all the large businesses. He and his legal advisors are taking over everything they can by any means possible. And if someone stands in his way, no matter how insignificant or how important, he arranges an accident. First it was only revolving around the pack. If someone had a connection with something he wanted, he ordered them to be on his side or not to interfere, because if he'd killed a pack member, the others would have talked. This way no one cares and no one can prove anything." There was a note of desperation in his voice by then.

"Do you have any proof?" Konner asked.

"I have only some documentation on the wolves. The way they died and the reason. For some, I do have papers where they opposed a certain merger or spoke against a cause, but not for all of them. Maybe you can see his financial dealings and connect those to certain deaths."

"I will need to see that. What is your rank in the pack?"

"I'm just a runner. Fighter when he needs one. I staged one or two accidents at the beginning, but those involved humans. Once I realized there were wolves in his way, I made myself scarce in case someone needed killing."

"Do you know if he's cooperating with any other Alpha?" Konner was serious now. No emotion was leaking from him, but that only made the whole situation worse. The deadly resolve was the most dangerous state of a wolf.

"No. We are strictly forbidden to contact anyone from other packs. He isolated us to the point that only visitors are allowed to come to us, and even then he's careful about what they see and with whom they have contact. I only managed to leave because he knows I have family outside his territory and I told him my father died. He'd forbidden me to leave at first, but then I told him all of my family would be coming to look for me and cause all sorts of problems, and he didn't want that."

"For how long can you be absent?"

"I got four days. After that I have to head back."

"Very well. I will contact other Alphas and discuss the situation. You will know if the evidence you collected is enough or not before you leave. Until then, you are welcome to stay here. I trust you don't mind sharing a room?"

I still remembered the shock of waking up before dawn that first night at the soft steps heading toward my bedroom. One of the pups crawled into my bed and was out like a light. Not ten minutes later, two more joined him, and by morning, I had six little heads around me on the bed. As wolves, we usually sleep together, but Konner gave me the room so that I could recover. It was only later that I found out the room belonged to the pups. The adults would crowd them, so they mostly slept as a little pack in the room that

was now mine. By the dawn, they had enough and returned there without even paying much attention to me.

It was one of those feelings I forgot while living with just Tim. The closeness of a pack and the lack of intimacy that could drive a human crazy. I didn't even realize how much I'd missed it until those few hours before morning when all those little feet kicked at me and little heads nestled on my chest, belly, and legs. They were everywhere and I loved it.

Now I slept with Madoc and Areli, Roisin being too shy to share a bed with Madoc. There was such obvious chemistry between the two, and yet it was so apparent that neither of them was ready to make that first move. Of course there were always other crashers, depending on how many pack members spent the night. It's not hard to imagine how large the custom beds were.

"Not at all," Eshan answered.

"Good. That's settled then. Sebastian, you are responsible for our guest." And with that, the Alpha left the room without looking back. Magen, on the other hand, couldn't leave without smirking at me first.

Without them in the room, my eyes had no problem centering on the only person I had had any interest in during the past year. That blush was on his face again, and his hands twisted in his lap. It was hard to imagine him as a nervous person, with the confidence he showed in front of the Alpha. He was a fighter. That was obvious. Yet, once I looked at him, his eyes would almost instantly stray downward.

"Do I make you nervous?" I asked after a prolonged silence.

"No," he said without even taking a breath, and there was a visible challenge in his eyes once he lifted them enough to see me. Still, the traces of the newest blush that followed that statement showed just how untrue it was.

I smiled slyly, not being able to resist. There was an attraction between us, my scent alone a testament to it, not to mention the heat that was traveling between us when we were less than two feet from each other, like at that moment. He wanted me as much as I wanted him, and the wolf in me was ready to pounce. The sheer force of my human will was holding me in place.

"I want you," I said without hesitation, not seeing a reason to wait.

He licked his lips, the tip of his tongue provoking the beast in me as it left wetness in its wake. His eyelashes were so long as he blinked, looking almost wet around the blueness of those eyes. The deep scars on his neck called to my wolf, giving us the vision of the male in fight. I was definitely in lust, if not already in love. I wanted to smell him, but I wanted to mark him above all else.

My instinct told me that he was one of those wolves that were compatible with me. It never took more than a look, a smell. All of us knew. Settling on one person, one wolf, for the rest of your life was a challenge, but everything in life was a struggle, and it was natural to fight for your mate. He was strong, much stronger than his unconventional looks showed. I could sense it, I was drawn to it. I needed a strong mate, just like with Tim, and nature always took care of us by giving us exactly what we needed.

I knew Eshan would fight for me once I claimed him. He would fight even the Alpha if he posed a danger to me, and I would do the same. He was a good choice, and I could feel the anticipation coming from him as he waited for my first move.

There were no words needed between wolves. We already knew that I was the dominant and that he was strong enough to fight me off. We also knew that I would win every time, despite the struggle he would present to me, and we also knew that nothing we could fight in the future would separate us.

The look between us was smoldering now, the heat attracting the rest of the curious wolves from outside. He was gripping the edge of his chair, almost crushing the beautiful wood, and I was leaning forward, one painful inch at a time, as I slowly worked on closing the distance between us.

We were leaking pre-come, both our erections struggling to break free. There were tiny drops of sweat on his brow as his heart rushed forward, disregarding all physical limitations. And then he licked his lips again.

He saw me move before I did, the slight tensing of my muscles tipping him off, and he was out of that chair like the wind, running for the front porch. I was right behind him, matching his speed, the breeze slamming his intoxicating scent right into my face. It made me dizzy, but I never slowed down.

Eshan jumped over the porch fence, shifting while he was still in the air, and touched the ground as a magnificent wolf. His clothes scattered around him and he ran. He was

smaller than me, but not by much, and he was so dark he seemed black. Well, most of him was. From the top of his head down to the tip of his tail, pink fur followed the length of his body, flanked on both sides by a line of bleached fur. It was such a unique sight that it gave me pause, but once he neared the woods, I shook off the astonishment and shifted right after him.

It was hunting time. And my new mate was the prey.

## **Chapter Six**

HIS speed equaled mine, and I had to put all my strength into that run. The wolf was even more excited than I, my paws softly thumping on the ground after every jump, the automatic agility making me one with his nature. His scent was more potent now, the chase making me more excited. I growled softly, straining my muscles to the limit. He was so close I could almost take his leg between my teeth.

In the excitement of the run, he turned suddenly, taking those precious seconds and using them to force himself forward. It only made me angry, and I ran harder, letting the low bushes scrape against my fur, focusing only on his hide. It was more lust and rage that pushed me than my own capabilities, and that same haze of instincts brought me close enough again.

This time I didn't miss my chance. As soon as he was in my reach, I snapped my jaw around the pink tip of his tail and pulled him backward, disrupting his rhythm. He yelped in surprise, but in the next moment he was already twisting to his side and jumping over my back, his teeth grazing the front side of my back leg.

Unlike him, I didn't yelp; I growled. He drew blood and that only made me try harder. I flung him from me, throwing him onto the wet leaves, and, not sparing a moment, I was on him, pushing at him, nipping, trying to get a grip on the back of his neck. But Eshan used all his strength to twist

and wiggle until he was free, two steps away from me and panting.

I was ready for him, I wanted to bite him, I just plain old wanted him. But then he shifted. Not satisfied with the progression of our wolves, he hoped for an advantage in human form. I followed his example and I knew the smirk on my face was more than obvious.

Blood was trickling down my thigh, but I ignored it. I was more interested in the smell of him. There was a graze visible on his shoulder, nothing serious, but I knew there were more marks on his back and I ached to see them. I wanted to lick them, slowly. Just the thought made me shudder.

His body was sculpted to perfection. A small trail of hair under his belly button that connected to the dark patch above his cock was the darkest color on him. The paleness of his skin was giving him the falsely innocent and weak appearance. Just the look in his eyes told me there was nothing weak about him.

I was the one to attack first. Two steps bringing me to him, but instead of a direct crash, I feinted left and, before he could adjust his defense, was on him. He twisted again while we were falling to the ground, caught my neck in the steel grip of his arm and, when there, wrapped his legs around my waist.

I could feel the heat of his erection against mine, and almost everything disappeared. Almost, if not for his moan at the contact. Just like that, I was back on track, knowing that there wasn't another option but to claim him. Showing

weakness in that moment equaled failure. I wanted him too much just to give him up.

I pressed my erection harder against his, gritting my teeth under the sensation, but resisting as much as humanly possible. Eshan wasn't as strong, and his grip loosened just that little fraction that I needed. I slipped from his hands and flipped him over, bringing his arm to the center of his back.

He couldn't move. I was too heavy and too strong in that position, and the sweet victory brought a self-satisfied smile on my face. Eshan only grunted in reaction, the circular motion of his hips heightening the scent of his arousal, which crashed against mine. Like an electric shock, it was traveling down my body, eliciting a vicious growl of possession.

Gripping the other arm and bringing it back, I pulled him on his feet in one fluid motion. There was certain hurry in my actions, but that didn't stop me from enjoying the sudden feel of my cock nestled between his ass cheeks. The soft skin made me moan, and I thrust against him once, twice, and would have continued our aroused dance if not for him pushing back against me frantically.

I growled again, my nose buried behind his ear. He smelled so good, like sex, wolf, and male, but underneath it all, there were traces of vanilla that reminded me illogically of his hair, and a delicate touch of wild rose. I bit him then, pulling at the taut flesh and sucking in the salty taste of his skin.

The reaction was more than I had expected. He bowed in my arms, something between a scream and a moan escaped his lips, and his muscles trembled as if he was a virgin. It was the last straw, and my wolf side took over.

I pushed him roughly against a wide tree and he grunted, but still moved his hips as seductively as a stripper. My body was hard against him, the friction between us too sweet. But I needed more, I needed to satisfy both the man and the animal, and the game turned into something very different in a flash.

My hips pressed him roughly against the tree and I moved away slightly, observing the marks I had left on his back. There were bluish bites, some bloody, some almost there. Scrapes where my teeth had only managed to nick him, but they bled the most, and I couldn't resist him any longer. I licked the wounds with such satisfaction that the thrill almost made me come. I humped him uncontrollably, but I didn't lift my face from his wounded skin. I tasted the cuts with moans escaping me, I pushed my tongue into them and lapped at those tiny traces of blood. The bloodlust was so close to the surface in me, muted only by the overwhelming feeling of satisfaction. I could have killed him then, my wolf beyond hungry, but instead I gave in to my other uncontrollable desire.

I freed his right hand and entwined our fingers. I reached under his knee, pulling the leg up in the air. He grunted again, but there was no fight left in him. Eshan was pure sensation, his sounds close to begging, his whines the best incentive a wolf could get.

The bark was rough against his skin, his cock rubbing against it in search of relief, ignoring the pain, too wild with want. But I pressed him even harder, I lifted his leg so that his knee was level with his chest, and I held him there.

"Please..." Eshan whispered, his hips circling, but only slightly, the position being too limiting.

"What do you want, little wolf?" I whispered roughly into his ear, just before I bit it.

He took a second to moan again, but there was still coherent thought in his mind. "Please, fuck me, take me, mark me... please!" he yelled.

"Can you take me, little wolf? Will you scream for me?" I growled back, his sweet sound being almost too much for me.

"Yes! Yes! Please!" He gasped under me as my cock slid over his crack. "Sebastian!" The half scream was desperate, just the way I liked it.

"Hold onto the tree," I said as I freed his left hand.

He reacted with wolfish quickness, but it still gave me enough time to spit in my palm. I wanted to take him slow, to prepare him, but it was a possession, one wolf conquering the other, and there was no time for gentleness.

Slicking my cock with my spit was as much preparation as he would get. I pressed into him, the tightness almost too much for my cock. I brought my left hand up and pressed between his shoulder blades, holding him steady, and then I pushed in, all the way.

The scream was one of a wounded animal, the smell of blood stronger between us. He stood in place, my tongue licking on his neck gently, comfortingly as he panted. His eyes were squeezed shut, and his body trembled, his muscles quivering around me. All I wanted in that moment was to move, to push harder, but I held my mate in my hands, his sweat-covered body was pressed against mine, and I could feel his wild heartbeat. I gave him time, as much as he needed. There was no time limit on our mating; it was as much for him as it was for me. My licking moved behind his ear, my soft whines encouragement for him to take me, to give himself to me.

It was such a tender moment, despite the rush and the pain, my body rubbing against him in delicate little moves, my tongue washing his tender skin, and my thumb drawing little circles between his shoulder blades.

Once his breathing slowed and his muscles sank into mine again, I heard him whisper. "Take me, Sebastian, please." And that was all the encouragement I needed.

I pushed into him again, the tightness not as intense as it was before. My body slid over his, the sweat between us making us slick. I moved with a certain determination and I listened to his every soft sound.

It didn't take long for the possession to become something animalistic, my thrusts almost frantic and his hips pushing back, impaling him on my cock. He was wild with lust, his eyes glazed over.

There was no more time; my orgasm was already knocking at the door. I licked his neck once again, nuzzled against him, and then I bit him.

The strong muscle between his neck and his shoulder gave way for my teeth and the rush of warm blood overwhelmed my mouth. He screamed again, his head thrown back, and with the rush of the bond, we both came. The scent of vanilla and wild rose surrounded us.

I pumped inside him a couple more times, filling him with my seed and scent, and I let him shiver in my arms until the shock passed. I worked over the bite with outmost care. Licking the edges of the wound, sucking it gently, taking care of my mate until the bleeding stopped.

Eshan was too exhausted even to stand, and I lifted him off the ground, hugging him close to my chest. With a glance, I found a patch of ground covered with leaves and I took him there, laying him gently beneath me.

My mate had given himself to me, and I needed to take care of him. I kissed him with the sweetness of the most gentle of lovers, licking at his lips, caressing his tongue with mine. He wanted to move into it, to lift himself up, to participate, but he had no strength left.

But then again, he wasn't supposed to have strength—it meant that I had done my job right, and now I needed to love him. I licked at the bite again, washing the swollen skin and at the same time admiring my work. The wound was deep enough to scar. I loved the fact that he now had my marks on his body and not only the scars left there by others. I was so proud in that moment, my mate under me, depending on my gentle touch and completely trusting. There wasn't a sensation in the world that came close enough to that.

I followed down his chest, nipping gently at his skin until I reached the seed covering his belly. I licked it with delight, not being able to suppress my enjoyment at his taste. I cleaned him completely and he barely moved. Next, I lifted his legs up, holding them without any help from him, and I looked at his tender hole. There were remnants of blood and seed, some swelling as a result of my intrusion, but he was still beautiful. With my tongue I cleaned him,

tasting both myself and him in my mouth. I licked at the soft, bruised flesh, and it gave me the first sounds from him since he came. Soft whines could be heard from above, but I took no notice; I simply licked him until there were no traces of our fluids and until his hips became too restless.

"Shhh, my little wolf, let me take care of you," I whispered as I came back up, my lips pressed against him in a comforting kiss. He was simply adorable, so relaxed and tired, completely at my mercy. It was almost enough for my cock to rise again. But I ignored it and lowered myself down again.

This time my lips and tongue concentrated on his beautiful cock. I licked it from the base to the very tip. I sucked on his balls, I played with his slit, and almost like an afterthought, his body bowed on the fresh ground and his seed filled my mouth without a single sound escaping his lips.

It was the last of his strength, and he willingly gave it to me. No hesitation whatsoever. I wanted to lie with him on the ground then, to watch him breathe in exhaustion, to study the marks I had left on his pale skin, but the wolf in me decided against it. He wanted our mate to be warm, and I reluctantly agreed with him.

I lifted Eshan's sleeping form into my arms again and I headed back to the house. He never once opened his eyes, his limbs limp against me, but I was almost drugged by the vanilla and wild rose as his scent intensified due to his closeness to me.

In front of the house, Konner and Magen greeted us, Konner with a happy smile on his face and Magen with a smirk that almost made me blush. But both the wolf and I were too satisfied to care, and I simply ignored him.

"You can use your usual room. I'll keep the others away for a few hours. But I expect you at dinner," Konner said as we passed him, and I bowed my head in thanks.

True to his word, the room was empty, and I laid Eshan on the bed gently. His head lolled to the side, the pink and the blond making a contrast to the sheets. He looked so peaceful, with one of his palms resting next to his face, one of his legs bent slightly. I kissed his lips with such emotion it brought tears to my eyes, and I realized that I was happy. My wolf wanted to howl and I simply wanted to laugh.

Eshan was nature's gift to my broken heart, and I humbly accepted him as such. I was happy.

"I EXPECT you at dinner" meant just that. I held Eshan in my arms, spooned tightly behind him. I touched that tempting trail of hair on his belly and bumped his straining erection every so often. My cock touched the flesh of his ass, but I made no move to go further than that. I just cherished the moment the way it was.

Areli walked into the room casually, that wicked smile of hers in full bloom. "So this is the wolf that captured your gorgeous heart," she said in a voice that was all but quiet.

Eshan jumped in my arms, his head turning toward the door, and almost instantly he blushed. It wasn't about our nudity; it was natural for wolves to parade around naked. What bothered him was the novelty of his submission and the well-fucked look he sported.

"He succeeded where you have failed. I haven't decided yet if his amazing cock won me over or his incredible strength," I poked back at her.

She knew very well how new our mating was and still she was trying to provoke a fight between us. Areli was a beautiful wolf with a temper and certain stubbornness not many could handle. She was old enough to find herself a mate, but no male in the pack could handle her. I knew for a fact that Konner was considering lending her to one of the other packs in the hopes of settling her down. I also knew we were late for dinner, otherwise he would have sent someone other than Areli to come get us.

"That's wicked, Sebastian. You know I'm just playing with you," she said in her whining voice.

"We'll be right there," I told her instead of retorting to her provocation.

"Well, don't mind me. I'll just stay here and enjoy the view." She wouldn't budge.

Of course, I didn't have as much patience. I growled loudly, the sound echoing through the room, and I was on my knees already, staring her down. She jumped at the sound, traces of fear showing in her eyes, and she was out the door instantly.

Warm palm slid up my back and I switched all my focus to my love.

"You were mean to her," Eshan said, never breaking contact with my body.

"Tell me that when she grabs your balls at dinner."

"She would do that?" he asked, shocked. We were wolves and very free when it came to physical contact and our bodies, but copping a feel when someone wasn't interested was already pushing it. Areli pushed really well.

"Oh, yes. She's alone and most of the wolves won't come near her. So she pushes every single one. She doesn't care if they are mated or not."

"But how do the women take it?"

"Let's just say that it's never boring around here. But we are wolves, we don't hold grudges."

His fingers strayed to my chest and the tip of one insistently rubbed against my nipple. I exhaled loudly and gripped his fingers, bringing them up to my mouth for a kiss. He had long fingers that curled around mine, and I pulled him in for a real kiss.

"You were wonderful," he whispered, breathing the words into my mouth.

"You were better," I breathed back, my heart already racing with excitement.

"I never imagined it could be like that. So wild and overwhelming. It hurt so bad at first, yet later on, it was wonderful." Eshan shuddered in my arms, just the memory causing pre-come to trickle down his cock.

"It will be different next time. Less animalistic." I laughed as I desperately tried to control my impulses, which demanded of me to throw him on the bed and fuck him again.

"Are you sore?"

"A bit. It will pass in a couple of hours."

"Good. Because now we have to go, and later I know I won't be able to restrain myself." I stood then, thankful for the distance between us, and I pulled him on his feet.

"I have some clothes in that closet there. Choose what you like and we'll get your clothes out of the car after dinner."

I walked to the recliner in the corner and picked up my jeans. I wasn't in the mood for more clothes than necessary, my skin being still too sensitive to stimulation. Eshan put on a pair of sweatpants, wide enough to envelop my thighs but hanging loose on him. His erection was less noticeable in them and I imagined the material wasn't as rough on his skin.

The marks on his back were already half healed, only the bite mark on the side of his neck still looking angry and red. I loved seeing him like that, marked and aching because of me. It stirred more of the wolf in me, and I had to walk over there and hug him from behind.

"You are so gorgeous, Eshan," I told him, my tongue tracing the teeth marks of my bite.

"You are the gorgeous one," he said, instinctively leaning backward against me.

"We have to go now, or I'll just take you again."

"Okay." His voice was already dreamy, and with difficulty I separated us and headed toward the dining room, never letting go of his hand.

### **Chapter Seven**

AS SOON as we stepped into the dining room, the scent of arousal flooded the air. All unmated females had their eyes plastered on our chests or lower regions. It was the wolf way, despite our recent mating.

No matter how unconventional our bond might be, none of the fifty wolves in the room had disapproval in their eyes. It was awe-inspiring, and instead of putting me at ease, it made me tense. Eshan wasn't faring much better, but his reluctance to take a seat might have been connected to the number of people waiting for us.

It was Magen who came to our rescue, his arms slung over our shoulders as he brought our heads into close proximity with his.

"We ain't gonna bite you, little pups. Come sit down before you starve to death."

He led us all the way to the top of the table, where Konner was sitting. Magen sat on his right and Lana on his left. She had her place secure until Konner found his mate. We were placed next to Magen for the simple reason of proximity. Konner wanted to talk.

"I thought I told you not to be late," he said casually, his knife sinking into his rare-cooked steak.

"We apologize, Alpha."

"Now that you are bonded, how do you plan to make it work? Do you want me to release you from your commitment, Sebastian?" His eyes were suddenly on me, the look as piercing as that of a hawk.

It made me uneasy, not to mention the fact that Eshan and I hadn't done much talking in the last few hours.

"We haven't really discussed it, Alpha," I managed to say.

"I would like to join your pack, but there is no way my Alpha would allow it," Eshan said, his voice subdued.

"Your Alpha is a problem that we will have to solve soon. Just let me know, Sebastian, if things change concerning your pack status."

"Honestly, I don't want to leave. I feel like I'm finally home, and I don't think I could live in the East territory again."

Eshan looked at me with something close to betrayal in his eyes. We knew next to nothing about each other, and a dinner table wasn't a place where I could explain my reasons.

"I understand, Sebastian, but I don't think your mate does. Eat your dinner and go talk." Konner finished the conversation for us.

The room was filled with noise, clicking utensils, chatting wolves, and screaming children. There were low shelves going down the length of the walls that were used as tables for the children. Each pup had a small chair, a filled plate, and a glass of water or juice in front of them. I found it to be interesting, as it prevented them from making a mess on the big table and it allowed the adults to have some peace

while eating. The screaming and growling was too common for them to pay it any attention.

With my plate empty and a significant look from Eshan, I excused us from the table and we retreated to our room.

"DON'T think that just because you fucked me first you have the last say in everything! I won't accept a mate that thinks me below him. You can just forget that right away!" Eshan screamed at me as soon as the door closed behind us.

"That's not why—" I tried, but he outscreamed me again.

"And I'm not a bitch that will cook for you! I'm as much a man as you are!"

"I can cook," I said quietly, my eyes big in my face as I looked at him, wishing for the peace we'd known just a few hours ago.

"You have the gall to think that I will just leave my whole life and jump when you say jump! Well, you have another thing coming, *Alpha*!" The word was said with a sneer and I involuntarily winced.

He was well and truly pissed. And I was the one who made him mad. I was also the one who could fix things. Being stronger than him meant nothing. My tail would be safely tucked between my legs if I ever got my mate angry at me, the present situation proving my point. He was the most precious person in my life, and when I had done something wrong, I felt the pressure in my chest, that feeling of unease telling me that I had to set things right again.

"I said I can cook." I interrupted his mantra and he really looked at me then, his Mohawk pointing obtrusively my way. I still wasn't used to it.

"I don't need a bitch or a chef, I need a mate, and you're it." I looked back, letting him see the truth in my eyes. "There are reasons why I can't go back East. Anywhere else you want me to go, just say the word. I'll even beg my old pack in the North to take us in. There isn't anything in this world that I wouldn't do for you. I'd die for you, Eshan. But forcing me back East would kill me. My wounds are still too fresh, and I'm afraid that our love can't heal them in such a short period of time."

"I don't know anything about you," Eshan said calmly then.

"Nor do I about you," I stated in return.

"We have to change that."

"Yes, we do." I gave him a moment more before asking, "Come to bed with me. I want you to hold me."

A few minutes ago, I might have found hesitation in his face, but now he listened without even thinking about it. His mate asked and he indulged.

I didn't take my clothes off this time, placing my head on his shoulder as he pulled me next to him. My strength was an advantage in a pack; it marked my preference in bed and secured me wins in challenges. But my mate was my pillar of support, someone who would comfort me when I needed it the most, someone who would let me break down in front of him and never say a word about it. My mate was my other half, and my other half had to know me.

"I came here two months ago and asked Konner to accept me in his pack. Before that, I had spent almost a year in wolf form, roaming the wilderness and trying to forget." Eshan gasped next to me, the time period giving him pause.

"I left my life behind in the East; I just shifted and ran, never once looking back. My mate had just died, leaving me alone without a pack to call my own and without the comfort of my wolf. We had been together for eight years, officially, though I had known him longer. Before we fought for our freedom, we belonged to the same pack, but we were not welcome there. So we made our own life and built our own future. We were happy. Until everything got smashed on the freeway." I felt his hand tighten around me, his lips touch my hair. I cherished his comfort even though I talked about another man.

Tim had been someone special to me—a best friend as well as a lover. I thought that I would never find someone new so fast, that Tim would still be such a strong presence in my heart. But I had also never thought that my tears would dry out so soon, and that a new mating would not only make me happy, but it would also heal my broken heart.

"I will find a way to come back to you. I like it here and I will probably be leaving my heart once I leave. But I will talk to you, send an e-mail if I manage, call you from a pay phone. We will be together, even if Konner doesn't manage to sort things out back east."

"I love you, Eshan. My wolf loves you," I whispered against his chest, trusting his words as if they were my own.

"I love you, Sebastian. My wolf loves you," he whispered back, his Mohawk grazing the top of my head as he leaned down closer to me.

"Tell me something about yourself?" I urged him, the desire to be near my mate in any way only intensifying with passed time.

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything, everything. Tell me what ever comes to mind."

"All right. I was born into the pack thirty five years ago," he started, and I already had something to interrupt him with.

"You were born into the pack? But you have blue eyes!"
I lifted myself up on my elbow, my eyes observing his.

"You could say that I'm an anomaly. My wolf's eyes never changed color, so a lot of the others consider me less than a true wolf. A lot of strangers don't know unless I tell them. That is one of the reasons why my hair is the way it is. Only purebloods can change the color of their fur with a hair dye."

"Yes, I forgot about that. But I've never seen a wolf that dyes his hair, so I just assumed everyone's fur does that."

"No. Only purebloods."

"Huh, you learn something new every day. Was it hard growing up?"

"Oh, yes. First as an anomaly, later as a gay anomaly. But I couldn't afford to leave. I can't fight the Beta for that right. I'm just not strong enough." "I was the second Beta in my last pack, so I fought the first and won. It saved Tim having to face Ari in a challenge. Instead, he got one of the strongest pack members that wasn't good enough to be a Beta."

"You had two Betas in your pack?" Eshan asked me curiously.

"I think it was a way for the Alpha to repay me for my loyalty over all the years I'd been there, and also to acknowledge my strength in the pack. Not everyone approved of my bed preference."

"He was a good Alpha, then."

"Yes, he was, but the pack wasn't worth shit. Not everyone there, of course, but it had more than a few rotten apples and the atmosphere almost killed us. I am grateful to him, for taking me in when I had no place to go and for helping me when I couldn't help myself. Still, I'm not sorry I left."

"My Alpha is luckily too busy to make my life miserable, and I stay away from him as much as I can. He doesn't like me very much, but I serve a purpose, so he tolerates me. Still, it is difficult to live in fear of him. I never know if one of these days he will snap his fingers and say, 'Eshan, bend over and endure your punishment'."

I growled without even thinking about it. "No one is laying a finger on you."

"I hope not. But I will have to go back soon, and I will have to depend on my own wits to get out of trouble."

I knew he was right, of course, but that didn't stop the hairs on my neck from standing on end or the rage in me from simmering.

"Has it happened already?" I eventually asked, not really wanting to know, but somehow needing to know.

I got an answer in the form of silence, and only his hand around me stopped me from getting out of bed.

"You endure what you must. We are wolves. We heal," Eshan said with certain seriousness in his voice, but I knew nothing made it right.

Violence was violence and rape was rape. Despite our sexual needs, wolves solved their differences by blood and blow, and the last one standing took the win. Sex was never meant to be punishment.

"Tell me something nice about yourself." I settled back down on his shoulder, loving the warmth of his body and trying to delete the awareness of his past from my mind.

"I have a baby sister that mated in the Center pack. She lives close to the West border and has three daughters. They are almost five now, but I haven't seen them in a few years. I miss them so much. The last time I was there, they climbed all over me, marking me with their scent even though they were not much more than a handful each. But they could bite pretty badly. You will have to meet them some day."

"I would love that," I said, really looking forward to that and imagining him laughing in their midst. I loved kids, and suddenly I realized that I loved everything that made Eshan smile.

"You know, I figured you for a pureblood when we first met, but the eyes threw me once you shifted. I assume your name is a family one?"

"Yes. It belonged to my grandfather and is passed down to the son every second generation. I think that is true with most purebloods, but I can't tell you for sure. Dewayne has been the Alpha for too long, and not all traditions are consistent with the other packs. I don't know which rules and customs are real and which are done to his preference." There was a certain acceptance in his voice, but nothing could hide the resentment he felt for his Alpha.

"Even if Konner doesn't solve the situation for the benefit of all, we will find a way to be together. Believe in us." I lifted my head up and took hold of his palm. There was nothing sweeter than kissing his lips in that moment, but it was more important to look into his eyes and see that realization in them that I meant what I said and that I would do everything and anything for him. So instead of the taste his lips would have provided, I was satisfied with the press of my own against his knuckles and the smile he awarded me with.

The look we shared was precious, but it lasted no more than a speck of time before it was gone. Instead he took hold of my neck in a possessive grip and there was no letting go.

The force that accompanied the meeting of our lips was enough to rattle our teeth, was too intense to give us time even to breathe. He wrapped his tongue over mine; he sucked on it and bit it. I could feel his stubble rubbing into the soft skin of my face, and it only caused my blood to run hotter. We bumped our noses as we turned our heads in opposite directions, trying to get more, to consume more. I tasted blood as his tooth nicked my lip and I groaned in delight. He was just as wild as I, and it was finally time for him to show me.

I was flipped on my back, his fingers holding my head in place by my hair, his lips trailing a rough, bruising path down my neck. My fingernails scraped against his back, but I was held firmly by his hand and by his body, which pressed my hips against the mattress.

It was in me to fight, to give him the same struggle he had given me, and I knew that it would be like this for some time yet to come. We were still too raw with passion, our scents driving us crazy, our bodies too hot to take it slow.

And that was as far as my thoughts went because in that moment his teeth found my nipple and there was nothing left but a bright burst of light where my body trembled and my mind vacated the premises.

His hands somehow found my shoulders, his teeth unbuttoned my jeans, and before I could even grasp the events around me, I was in his mouth and he was sucking me dry. Eshan had a talent he'd kept from me, his lips taking hold of my sensitive skin with a skill no man should be capable of. He was everywhere, his tongue tracing the slightly prominent vein up my length, his teeth scraping the other side. He was sucking and caressing at the same time, he was rubbing that stubble against my balls and base as much as he could, and, not giving me a chance to think or to even breathe, he pinched my nipple, pressing a fingernail against it, and I screamed my lungs out as I came down his throat.

But he was nowhere near done. As I gasped for breath, he had my knees against my chest, and I only heard the muted pop of a bottle moments before his cock slid into me. There was not enough breath for me to scream anymore; I keened softly, thrashing my head against the sheets. The burn was excruciating, touching the edges of my long-lost

memories, but the sharpness of it keeping me just beyond reach.

He gave me a moment to adjust, a moment to breathe again, but it was, in the end, just that—a moment—before he started thrusting forcefully into my passage once more.

I could say that it hurt too much to be enjoyable, that it was too brutal to be called making love, but not once did my erection falter and not once did I wish to be somewhere else.

His pace was even, the thrusts deep, and every time, he grazed my sweet spot. The grip his hands had on my thighs was bruising, and he only pressed me harder against the bed the more excited he got. I was beyond moaning soon enough, only groans and gasps vocalized in some primal manner. Eshan followed my example, grunting with every push as he watched my face, a glint of possession very visible in his eyes.

He was almost there, and as much as it might have made me a slut, I was right there behind him. The burn was gone, leaving only tingling pleasure behind, and I gripped him with my muscles every time he pulled out, wanting him inside, trying to keep him there. It made the slide more intense, the expression on his face a contorted mask of concentration and restraint.

"I need you to come, Sebastian." His rough voice was somewhere between an order and a plea, but it was enough of a stimulation for my back to bow and for the hot essence to spray over my belly.

He bent then, his body pressing my legs uncomfortably against my torso, and bit my neck savagely. I could feel his

teeth deep in me, the blood flowing freely down my neck and chest, making me convulse uncontrollably.

"Yes, baby, come for me!" Eshan gasped in my ear, still pumping into me, and it was as if my cock was directly connected to his voice, because I came and I came until I was nothing more than a boneless heap of flesh under my lover.

He relaxed his taut muscles over me once his orgasm flooded my insides, the sweat on our skin mixing with the fluids on my stomach, but it was okay. It was us and it was just as it should be. He licked the side of my cheek and my earlap, growling the words of possession softly, and I couldn't have agreed with him more.

I was his, and he was mine. I fell asleep with his half-hard cock still in me and his hard body nestled between my spread-out legs.

# **Chapter Eight**

I WOKE up to the sound of morning birds and to a tongue lapping at my neck. Last night played out behind my closed eyelids and I smiled the sweet smile of satisfaction. A chuckle roused me further, a chuckle that had nothing in common with Eshan, and I flashed my eyes open.

Areli's wicked green eyes stared at mine, and I could suddenly feel the length of her body pressed against mine. I struggled to sit up, only to realize that Eshan was still lying on me, his body completely relaxed and his soft breath tickling my nipple.

My panic only increased once I felt a body on the other side of me too, and I whined in distress. It was enough to wake Eshan up, and he lifted his body to look at me, all sleepy-eyed and happy. He noticed Areli on one side of me, still trying to lick the dried blood off my skin, and Madoc on the other side, pushing his body closer in search of warmth. But instead of defending my virtue, the bastard laughed.

He took hold of my wrists and pressed them to the mattress, the smirk never leaving his face. His Mohawk was crooked but still so very pink and bright. He was a vision in the morning, only visions never laughed at their mates.

Without sparing Areli another glance, he said. "You can look, but watch your hands. I hear there might be a mate somewhere for you, and it would be a shame if he refused you as damaged goods."

Vaguely, I could hear Areli complain, but she stayed on the bed and she kept her hands to herself.

That magnificent cock that had slipped out of my body during the night found its way back in and I bowed in submission, my muscles tensing under the invasion, but I still moaned in satisfaction. He was so long, hitting all the right spots, and the rough night had left only tenderness in him. He kissed my chest and chin, slowly pushing inside me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, pressing my body down that steel rod.

The sensation was so different than our two other times before, and I reveled in the softness of his touches and the gentleness of his hard flesh in me.

There were no words this time, nothing but tender loving, and we came with the unison of experienced lovers. I moaned through my satisfaction and Eshan screamed through his.

Someone yipped to my right just before I heard a thump, and it broke the magic of the afterglow. I looked to the side and saw Madoc's head peaking over the edge of the bed as he sat, now, on the floor.

With the little strength I had left, I laughed like a man possessed, thinking how we had just fucked in front of Areli and Madoc, not even caring that they were next to us in bed. It wasn't something unusual for wolves, but we were two men and the bed was as much theirs as it was Eshan's and mine. I never would have thought something similar was possible before I joined this pack. So I laughed, enjoying Madoc's blush and Areli's annoyance, loving the feel of

Eshan's body on the top of mine. I was truly happy. And then the cell phone rang.

BOTH of us were dressed, I sitting on the edge of the bed while Eshan walked from one wall to the other for the last twenty minutes. Konner was in the corner of the room, consulting silently with Magen, and even though I could hear what they were saying, Eshan's distress robbed me of my usual focus.

"Maybe you don't have to go back. You could just stay here and he won't even know where to look for you," I said, not being able to stand the panic that danced in Eshan's eyes.

"I can't stay! Dewayne says jump, you jump. Think of all the things he could do if I don't come back! I know things, I know pack business. There is no way he would let me live if he suspected something was wrong. Even if he couldn't find me, he would wipe out my family." Eshan was wild now, standing in the middle of the room, facing me.

"Calm down, pup," Konner said. "Something probably happened and he wants his pack in one place in case there is trouble. That's what any good Alpha would do, and Dewayne might be many things, but he's not stupid. There is no way he could know where you are, so don't worry about it. And you are right. You have to go back. I didn't want to say anything last night, but now I have to. There will be a change of leadership in your pack in a few days."

Eshan gasped. "They believed me."

"Yes." Konner nodded. "It is Alpha business and we will be the ones to solve the problem. Sebastian will be coming with us, as we can't rely on anyone from your pack. You included. We don't want to compromise your position there, so there will be no mention of you, but that also means you're on your own until we get there."

"That's not a problem. He's going down. I can hold on for a few more days. This will pass." Eshan gestured to his nervous body. "By the time I drive back, I will be calm again."

"Good. Not a word about this to anyone and don't mention any of it over the Internet or phone. As far as you're concerned, nothing of this ever happened." Alpha spoke in a stern voice, and even though it wasn't directed at me, I felt how serious the threat underneath it was.

Eshan just nodded and bowed his head in sweet submission, and Magen and Alpha left the room.

I jumped on my feet as soon as the door closed. "I love you, baby. Everything will be alright."

My hands were behind his neck, my forehead pressed against his. "In just a few days we will be together again."

"I know, I know. I love you, Sebastian."

There was no time for another dose of loving, no time for a proper good-bye. He packed his things and took a shower, leaving all the things that had my scent on them behind. It was pure relief that our wounds healed so fast and that the last mark I'd left on his body was only a faint bruise now. The silver lining of the bond mark was like a pressed, shiny tattoo, visible under a certain angle, but hidden by the collar of his jacket.

His hair was loose and combed to the left side of his head, leaving the other side cut short and blond. It was just as impressive as a Mohawk, but then again, Eshan himself was impressive.

I took his palms in mine. The rings that had dropped to the grass with his first shift when he arrived were on his long fingers again, and I gripped them in a desperate attempt to keep my hands off of his face and body.

"Your hair isn't done," I whispered, the tips of my fingers itching to move those loose strands from his cheek.

"I know. It will show Dewayne that I left right away. Maybe he won't be as pissed at me as I expect him to be at the moment." He wanted to hug me as much as I wanted him to, but that grip we had on each other kept us rooted to the ground, and only our eyes showed the longing we tried to conceal.

"I have to go, love," he whispered, tears almost overcoming his resolve to keep them inside.

"I know," I whispered, holding on to mine just as strongly.

My wolf leaned down, his gentle lips pressed against my eager ones. It was quick, more a casual brush of lips than an expression of passion between us, but it had to be enough.

He let go of my palms, turned around, and grabbed his bag beside the door just before rushing out of the room. I wanted to go after him, I wanted to go with him. Somehow even his destination didn't matter as much anymore. My heart was leaving, and I wanted him to stay. But there was nothing good I could have accomplished by following him.

Only moments later I heard the car start, and Eshan drove away.

I sat on the bed long enough for my muscles to cramp, but when my sorrow had wrapped itself in that dull ache, I was ready to face the world for the day. I followed my nose to Konner's office, where I knocked softly, asking for permission to enter.

It was Magen that said enter, and when I did, I found them positioned in their respective corners, looking at me with certain compassion in their eyes.

"So when are we going in?" I asked Konner, eager to follow my mate.

"I tried to plan it so that we would go with him. I don't want to see another wolf die for the rest of my days, but despite the turn of events, I can't rush the hostile change of leadership. The goal is to eliminate those involved, and for now, we only know that the Alpha and the Beta are doing it voluntarily."

"How many of us will be going?"

Konner regarded me with something close to suspicion, but shook it away and answered the question. "Alpha and Beta from every pack, plus two more strong ones. We don't know how many in the pack are involved."

"And who will take the Alpha's place?" I had never been involved in a shifter war, and I never even heard of one happening in our immediate past.

"We gather the strongest remaining members of the pack, and those wishing it fight for leadership. Of course, if none of them, by our estimation, is strong enough to lead the pack, the winner takes the place of the Beta and we bring in the Alpha from another pack. The Alpha is a leader of a hundred or more dangerous shifters. If he doesn't have a will of iron, he cannot be in charge of so many individuals. He also has to be someone we can trust, as no one wants another full-scale shifter war on our hands."

"So we are leaving in two days. What if something happens there before?"

"The plans won't change. Only fools rush into a fight unprepared, and I, for one, have enough years behind me not to act foolish."

"I will be your guide through the city?"

"Yes. Alphas don't trespass on other's territory. We rarely do so even with permission. So the town is a big unknown for us. We will depend on your guidance."

"Isn't it dangerous to leave all the packs without their first and second?" I realized just how inexperienced I was when it came to wolf politics. I had never been more than a Beta for show, and it saddened me to a degree that my culture was such an unknown to me.

Konner frowned at me, his chest visibly inflating as if he saw my question as an attack on his leadership.

"The pack listens to what their Alpha says. If they can't sustain themselves for a few days, I need to issue some much-needed discipline. It is organized this way so that all the Alphas and Betas are together and there is no danger of one of the Alphas attacking the territory of another while he is not there."

"Okay, I meant no disrespect. I have just one more question. What am I supposed to do with myself for the next two days?"

Magen smiled and Konner joined him. "Well, you will train, what else!"

SWEAT was dripping into my eyes, and my hair was plastered over my forehead. The blow was forceful, and I was only lucky his claws weren't extended. I still heard ringing in my ears, but I turned around and faced the smirking Magen once again.

The bastard was enjoying the fiasco, especially because I was yet to issue a blow, while my skin was crisscrossed with red lines where his claws had expertly marked me. He was toying with me. Supposedly training me, but in reality making a joke out of my performance. Not that he didn't have full right to do so—I was pathetic.

My rage was burning under my skin, and I knew full well that as soon as I released it, the fight was over. If I couldn't win with a clear head, there was no way I could half-blind.

"Sebastian! Focus, or you're staying here!" Konner yelled at me in passing, and it was almost as if he had released me from my restraints. Not going wasn't an option. Eshan waited for me, and I couldn't disappoint my mate.

I charged forward, but it wasn't a fool's move. I crossed the distance between us, my body feinting left, and in the last moment, when Magen would have struck me much like all the times before, I punched him straight forward, my claws extended and slamming into his chest.

The damage would have been extensive, but Magen was too good a fighter. In the last possible moment he twisted his body to the side, and instead of a deep wound, he ended up with an angry slash extending from one nipple to the other.

"That was better, pup, but I bet you can't repeat it." And the bastard was smirking again. He just wanted to bleed.

This time I stood calmly on my side of the open space, evaluating him and spinning all the blows he gave me in my mind. It was incredible how foolishly he got me every single time. I was easy prey. I really had no business mixing with the Alphas in this fight. The only problem was, Eshan waited for me there, and I wanted to be there.

I barely registered Magen's eyes shifting into yellow gold before he was on me, his claws striking at my head. I dodged and ended up with only a cheek graze. His right hand was almost at my stomach, the motion promising more than simple retaliation.

I saw it all as if in slow motion, and with more luck than brains, I caught his wrist from the side and twisted his arm away from my body. If I was an experienced fighter, as I had been years ago, I would have issued my own blow, but as it happened, he recovered fast and was out of my hands before I could figure out what to do next.

"Better. We just might make a wolf out of you."

Despite his words, I didn't feel better about it. I shuddered even to think what would happen to me if I found myself on the other side of a training match with Konner.

BY DINNERTIME, there was neither a muscle in my body that wasn't stretched to its maximum nor a bone that wasn't

rattled. My skin painfully moved with the rest of my body, cut, bruised, and bloody. The earliest marks were now red, pulsing lines and the newest still oozed precious fluids.

The saddest thing of all was the fact that I was more tired than aching. I walked by sheer determination, my twisting stomach leading the way, my eyes already half-closed.

I wasn't even sure if I had enough strength to eat. The phone rang somewhere in the house, the sound barely reaching my brain, until Lana called my name and I realized I wouldn't be eating soon despite all the smells that called for a taste.

"It's Eshan!" she screamed at me, and suddenly I was grabbing the phone, the sound of a chair dropping to the floor vague in the kitchen.

"Eshan?" I inquired, not really believing Lana for some reason.

"It's me. I found a payphone. How are you?"

"Tired. Magen has been showing me how to fight. All I had known once, I've forgotten, and his lessons bloody hurt!" I heard others in the dining room laughing, but I just didn't care.

Eshan chuckled. "Wish I could have seen you, kissed all your boo-boos away."

Who the hell says "boo-boo" still? But the very vision of him licking at my wounds made me moan, and an instant erection sprouted from my loins, despite the helplessness of the rest of my body. "I love the sound of that," Eshan purred on the other end.

"I need you so bad ...." I whispered, my hand hovering above my cock.

"I need you too. I love you, Sebastian. I hope we see each other soon."

"We will. Otherwise I will haunt you in your dreams and that will force you to come back." I smiled, imagining his Mohawk pointing at my belly as his mouth devoured my cock.

"I have to go now. I will be counting the minutes."

"Be careful, Eshan. I love you more than words can say," I whispered and heard the click of the phone on the other side as he hung up.

# **Chapter Nine**

I WAS never more grateful for the company than the next morning. My dreams were filled with undefined longing and by the middle of the night, my body got more exercise than rest thanks to all the turning and kicking I did while sleeping.

"Shhh, Sebastian. You will see him soon. Sleep now," Areli whispered in my ear and pressed the side of my body against the bed with her own.

I heard a few of the pups climbing on the bed, Madoc putting his head on my chest. Even Roisin came to me, spooned behind Madoc but petting my hair almost unconsciously. Shifters felt the need of others of their kind. In a matter of minutes, I was cocooned in a shelter of warm shifter bodies, more than half a dozen heartbeats around me and all the comfort one wolf could possibly want.

It was the middle of the morning when I woke up with a start. One of the pups howled quite loudly in his sleep, and all the other sleepers around me popped up like a meerkat gang.

I was feeling good, rested and optimistic, so when Areli bit my ear playfully, instead of pushing her away, I grabbed her half-dressed body and tickled her. She didn't expect it and her first reaction was screaming as she tried to wiggle away. Of course, when the pups figured out what the deal

was, she was overwhelmed with tickling hands and there was no way for her to get free.

"That's what you get for being mean," I whispered as I left her in the wicked hands of the youngest, but I still heard her gasp, "Pay... back," as she fought for breath.

"We leave tomorrow before dawn, and tonight we run," Konner said as I joined the early risers for breakfast.

"The whole pack will be here?"

"Most of them. The annual run isn't for another two months, and then all of the members will come. We even invite the loners, and some of them join us."

"How long does it last?"

"Just a weekend, but we set up the barn for sleeping, as we run the whole night. During the day we cook and hang out. I swear even wolves gain a few pounds under Lana's experienced hand."

"Cool. I hope Eshan will be with me by then." I wondered for a minute. "More training today?"

"Yes, but no claws this time. Ray and India are best at hand-to-hand combat, and they will put you through your paces. But I don't think you can handle both of them at the same time. You looked like a pack of pups had a go with you yesterday." Konner chuckled as he picked up a glass of tea.

"Ha-ha, very funny. I haven't fought for a while, that is all."

"If you say so." The bastard was still amused by me.

As an afterthought, he popped another question. "You can shoot, right?"

### 101

"Yes," I said, grateful that I wouldn't be spending my time on the range too.

"Good. There will be no shooting unless they shoot first, but we can't afford to be weaponless in a situation like this. Now eat and go get your ass kicked."

And that was exactly what I did. I got beaten blue by both Ray and India. Separately they were manageable to a point—meaning that I could actually deflect every third or fourth blow. Together they had knocked me down more than thirty times until I couldn't stand up anymore, and it never took them more than three moves to incapacitate me. If nothing else, this proved that staying a member of the West Pack required you to stay fit and to possess at least basic self-defense skills.

THE smell of prey was all I could focus on, the sound of the rabbit passing through a bush. I gave chase, feeling that freedom only a wolf could experience. I ran after him, flipping the leaves as I passed, slipping under the fallen trees, and I could almost hear its rushed heartbeat as it felt the distance between us disappearing.

I always knew when I shifted in my dreams, like an unconscious realization that you were no longer a wolf, but a man. It never woke me up, but I was aware of it, and this time it was no different.

The forest turned into a familiar hallway filled with darkness. Things I couldn't see tripped my legs again and again, and the tingling fear slowly turned into an outright

panic. I knew this place, the memory shimmering at the edge of my mind, just out of reach.

The lack of smell and sound rushed the beat of my heart, the sudden change from the wolf that was aware of everything to a lost, stumbling man was almost a shock.

There was no end to the tunnel, only darkness in front of me and behind me, the walls of the hallway turning into my only support and waymark.

Then, out of all that darkness, a familiar man started to form. Like an unraveling scroll, it slowly revealed the image hidden inside. I only needed to see the pink tip of a Mohawk to know who it belonged to, and I only needed to see my mate to remember why the dream seemed familiar.

I didn't wait for the image to become a solid unit before I started screaming my soundless lungs out. He was closer than Tim once had been... the image almost a realistic copy of his body, the smile as real as the one he had given me just before he left.

My hand stretched out toward him, my fingertips all but grazing the leather he was wearing, but the speed with which I ran, the will with which I kept reaching forward, meant nothing. He was right there, but could have been miles away.

I WOKE up covered in sweat and screaming, much as I had in the dream. But the screams were voiced this time, and they echoed through the pack room like razor-sharp blades.

Almost instantly I was surrounded by caring pack members caressing my back, moving the hair from my forehead. I was pulled into countless hugs by people who had fallen asleep on the floor and benches surrounding me after our run. They all cared for me and all of them freely offered comfort. The air was filled with their reassurances that it was nothing more than a dream, that I am awake now and I should go back to sleep. But I knew it was no dream that woke me; it was a mate bond telling me that I was out of time.

I jumped to my feet and, not caring about my nakedness, searched for Konner. I walked from one room to the other, stepping between stretched out and entwined bodies. My heartbeat refused to slow down, the pain in my chest only making things worse. I couldn't lose Eshan as well. Wolves don't have suicidal tendencies, but a wolf with two dead mates could be capable of anything. I had it in me to just die.

"Konner! Konner!" I screamed at him as I shook his shoulder. He was snuggled between two pack females on fresh hay and woke right away, looking at me with worry in his eyes.

"I had a dream, like when Tim died. We have to go! I have to go! Konner, I have to save him!" I rambled on without even taking a breath.

Konner extracted himself from the bodies surrounding him and grabbed hold of my bicep. He led me out of the stable into the dark without saying a word, but I never stopped talking, too frantic to just shut up.

"Enough!" Konner said in my face once we were away from others. It was an Alpha command and instinctively my

#### 104

mouth closed and tears started trailing down my cheeks. I couldn't do it again, I just couldn't lose Eshan too. I couldn't!

"Now tell me, SLOWLY, what is wrong."

"I had a dream. Like I had before Tim died. I have to go save him. They caught him, that's why he didn't call yesterday. They caught him, Alpha." I sobbed at arm's distance from him as he watched my face with all the concern an adult would hold for a child.

"He will be alright, Sebastian. We will get there in time and you will have your mate with you before you know it." He softened his voice.

But it was almost as if I didn't hear him at all. "I can't lose another mate. I will die first. I will kill them all and then I will just die. I don't wanna be wolf anymore, I don't wanna live without him. I just found him, Konner ...." I still sobbed, not being able to find an ounce of self-control in myself.

Suddenly, Konner shook me like a rag doll. "Stop it! Stop it now, Sebastian! He's still alive and we are going there to save him. If you don't calm down, you won't go with us!"

I heard what he said, but I just didn't have it in me. I remembered the pain my body and mind had been in when I had lost Tim. I remembered kissing his cold flesh and losing his scent while he was still in front of me. I just couldn't hold another mate in my arms and not hear his heartbeat. It was my biggest fear and living through it once almost broke me. I never wanted to kiss the cold and lifeless lips of a loved one again.

"Call your wolf!" The Alpha ordered me as I sank into despair, but I barely recognized his words.

Konner growled, letting out that knee-dropping sound of an Alpha. *Sebastian!* My eyes snapped to his at the silent mental call of an Alpha. *Wolf! Now!* And just like that, change passed through me, bending bones and spurting out fur.

Only an Alpha could communicate silently and pick up images of others while in wolf form. I didn't even know it was possible for him to issue a command like that while being human.

I sat on my haunches, my head bowed, and I patiently waited for my next command.

"Stay wolf until you calm down. I will go and wake up Magen and Mark. We are supposed to leave in an hour, anyway. Follow me," Konner said as he marched his way into the house.

Magen was under the table in the dining room, his head resting on Mark's muscled chest and Ria spooned behind him. You never knew with whom and where you would wake up after a run.

"Magen, Mark, wake up. It's time to leave," Konner said, never raising his voice, but it was still enough for Magen to open his eyes.

"What's he done now?" he asked as he positioned Ria against a large pillow on the floor and he and Mark headed out of the room after Konner.

"He had a dream. It looks like Eshan is in trouble, so we will be leaving earlier than expected.

"You're leaving?" Lana said from the kitchen door, catching us just before we left.

### 106

"Yes. It's the usual. If they give you any trouble, rat them out to me. I'll take care of it when I come back. And keep Areli in the kitchen. I don't need her bored out of her mind while I'm gone," Konner said.

"Yes, Alpha," Lana said with a slight bow.

The Alpha was responsible for the whole pack. Once he received that title, there was no one above him in his pack, not even his mother.

"We'll go get dressed. You're driving first and take Sebastian with you. You have to pick up his clothes because I don't want him changing until he's under control. I'm calling the others." Konner motioned with his fingers for Mark to follow and marched into his quarters.

"Well, pup, it looks like we're off to an adventure." I just whined at him, at which he laughed.

I CHANGED when we were a couple of hours from our meeting point with the other Alphas. By then I was fueled by rage and pure determination. I knew my mate depended on me, and I wasn't willing to let him get killed.

Lochlan was the first Alpha I saw when we got there. His imposing form had dominated all gatherings in my old pack, and I presumed it would be the same here. Ari stood beside him, his hands behind his back and his eyes ever watchful. I felt a pang of sorrow at the sight of them. Longing mixed with the memories of Tim and homesickness.

There was a man standing to the side that I had never met before and was actually bigger than Lochlan. I presumed he was the Alpha of the Center Pack, the only one I hadn't met before.

Konner and Magen walked to the small gathering of Alphas and Betas, and I trailed along behind them. I stood to the side, like the rest of the fighters not strong enough to carry a title of an Alpha or Beta.

"Greetings," Konner said with a huge smile on his face, and others responded with the same, their expressions just as satisfied as Konner's was.

"I wish we could meet more often like this. Even Alphas need a holiday," South Pack Alpha Cason said, and the rest of them chuckled.

"We can always leave the Betas in charge and go hunting for a week," Konner suggested, and all the Alphas murmured for themselves while the Betas whined their dissatisfaction.

"I will call you and we'll discuss it, Konner. The idea has potential," the Center Pack Alpha said.

"How have you been, Sebastian? How's Tim?" Lochlan asked. There was no malice in his voice, just simple curiosity and care.

"I'm good now," I said in a small voice. "Tim died a year ago."

Both Lochlan and Ari gasped, and I unconsciously moved behind Konner. It was a sign of weakness no Alpha would show, but I wasn't an Alpha, and talking about Tim with someone who knew him hurt too much.

"He died in a car accident and Sebastian stayed wolf for a little less than a year. I found him wandering on my territory, so I asked him to join the pack. He's good now. He found another mate, whom we believe is in trouble with Dewayne. Hopefully we will prevent another breaking of the bond." It was basically a nice way of saying, "Let's hope Sebastian doesn't end up without another mate." But I was grateful to Konner for speaking instead of me. The looks of pity the other Alphas and Betas gave me were more than enough.

"You are a strong little wolf. We won't let anything happen to your other mate," Center Pack Alpha said in a voice that dangerously reminded me of Santa. I almost pouted at the *little wolf* comment. I could look half of the gathered men in the eyes, but my hiding and the inner pain I emanated made me a vulnerable pup in their eyes.

He continued by saying, "Now let's get down to business. We have a few hours to reach Dewayne's pack house; anything later than that and the members will be leaving for the week. My pack members don't stay later than the afternoon the day after the full moon. I doubt it's different here." The others nodded in affirmation.

"Eshan complicates things. Magen and Sebastian will have to find him. The rest of us will proceed as is the custom. The Alphas and the Betas will fight Dewayne and whoever decides to fight for them. The rest of you will control the crowd. Does anyone know if there will be a suitable Alpha to take Dewayne's place?" Konner asked.

"I don't know the pack very well, but I doubt it. Dewayne couldn't have pulled this off without the majority of his pack being involved. The ones that weren't, obviously weren't strong enough to oppose him either," Cason answered.

## Sebastian's Wolves | Valentina Heart

#### 109

"Then we agree on Stone taking over?" Konner looked at them.

The Alphas nodded. "He's on the other side of the world right now. It will be a couple of days before he can be here. And he will probably want his brother, Tait, for his Beta. Those two are inseparable," Santa said. It bugged me that he didn't care enough to introduce himself.

"I don't really care at this point. They can always challenge him—that is, if there is anyone brave enough after Stone clears the pack of the rest of the cowards that were involved but aren't wolf enough to fight." Konner finished the discussion.

"Sebastian, lead the way. Magen, as soon as you smell them, shift and follow Sebastian around the property. You will be his eyes and ears until you find Eshan." With that, the Alpha howled the beginning of the hunt, and we were off.

# Chapter Ten

THE wolves felt safe in numbers. The afternoon slumber after a night of hunting and the whole day of eating well-prepared meals had left them lazing around the property without a care in the world.

Magen ran in front of me, slowing his pace so that I could keep up. His weapon and clothes were in the rucksack on my back, and I relied on his senses to warn me of any upcoming danger. But there was no one in the woods anymore, what with most of the pack getting ready to leave, and we ran the territory without a glitch.

The pack house was smaller than West Pack one, but not by much. The smell of pine surrounding it brought back memories, and it took all I had in me to keep my mind on the task at hand. That nagging feeling in my chest pulsed with the same intensity as before, and I hoped that meant Eshan was still alive.

We were pretty far from the front of the house, where wolves and men were lying on the short grass. A fallen tree kept us hidden as we waited for the Alphas to get noticed. There was no way for us to get in the house, with too many members of the pack still inside. I assumed Eshan was in the basement if the house had one, or somewhere on the first floor, away from curious pups and unexpected visitors.

There was no need for the sense of hearing to notice the moment Alphas stepped into the meadow. The complete silence spoke volumes, and their very appearance was aweinspiring.

Konner was standing up front, as his status made him the leader. He was flanked with the other Alphas, while the rest of the men stood behind them. They were all massive people, striking in their looks and specific menace radiating like heat. I could see the wolves directly in front of them scrambling back, not willing to get in the way of such power. It made me smirk, the simple fact of knowing that they were on my side and that we were there to kick ass. Wolf instincts were wicked.

Then the back door to the house opened and Magen swore. Dewayne was coming out with a kid in his arms; a female was screaming at him, but I couldn't really see what was going on.

Two large males came out next, each with a child in their arms, and the blond, bigger one shut the woman up with a fist in her face. I was on my feet, ready to jump in, but Magen grabbed my arm and held me in place. I saw the reason for it once the trio had turned. Their claws were extended on the hands that were wrapped around the kids' throats. That soft piece of skin between the thumb and the forefinger cradled their thin necks, but just an inch to either side, sharp and deadly claws flexed. I trembled in horror at the sight. That an Alpha would do such a thing to the pups from his pack ....

"We can't take them. I'm sending an image to Konner, but I have to shift first. Don't move from this spot," Magen ordered in the same voice the Alpha used to discipline us. I watched his flesh reposition for the shape of the wolf, the soft fur cover his body. He was a huge wolf, a beautiful one.

Not a moment later, he shifted back and started pulling his clothes back on, but Dewayne and his accomplices were already at the edge of the woods and moving away fast. I threw a glance in the direction of our Alphas; they were just a few steps from us, their speed making them look even more dangerous. Cason and Lochlan were shifting quickly, their bodies changing shape in midair, while Konner and Santa stayed human.

"Magen, go help the Betas control the crowd. If anyone gives you trouble, put them in their place. No mercy." Konner turned to me. "You know the basics and you have brains. Go rescue your mate and try not to get either of you killed. I'm sorry for leaving you on your own. Good luck."

The next minute both of them were gone, running after Dewayne, and Magen was heading toward the front of the house. It was just me and whatever waited on the other side of the back door. I told the coward in me to get lost and rushed toward my fate.

I placed my foot on the first step leading to the long back porch, and the wood creaked under me as loud as a gunshot. I winced visibly, all my senses on alert as I waited for someone to notice me, to come running in my direction. But there was no one close enough to hear. The only sounds were those from the front, where my allies growled and bit, their jaws tearing flesh and their fists punching away. I knew enough about fighting to be aware of the situation without needing to see it.

The other two steps made no sound, and in a blink of an eye, I was pushing the back door open and entering the house. The quiet inside was almost eerie, the smells of strangers so strong it made the hairs on my body stand on end. It wasn't comfortable, being surrounded by unfamiliar furniture, seeing pictures of dangerous-looking wolves on the walls, and walking through the house with the horrific music of falling bodies that could be heard from outside.

It seemed everyone was up front, even the females whose children were taken away. I could hear their quiet sobs as they stood just outside the front door and waited for the outcome of the hostile takeover.

Turning the corner, I lightened my step, careful not to make any noise but intent on sounds not belonging to me. I was looking for a door leading down, convinced that Eshan was somewhere in the basement. Maybe it was more than logic, our bond giving me discreet clues, his love drawing me closer, but in that moment, it just didn't matter all that much. I was grateful for any help I could get. Once I noticed the blood-red door in the kitchen, I knew that was the one.

The steps leading down were lighted; soft tones of music reached me as I descended. The space was very clean, the air barely stale, no cobwebs sticking to my hair and no dust to make me sneeze. Wolves liked their living space clean, and it was almost a relief to know that this pack felt the same.

I was halfway down the first time I scented it, the potent smell of blood, fresh and familiar blood. It was almost like an intoxicating perfume, only one you wanted to taste. It was only a few minutes old and just that realization made me grind my teeth as I suppressed a growl. I imagined my forehead developing that same crease Konner had when something wasn't going the way he pictured it would. Nothing was the way I wanted it to be. The music was muted, barely recognizable, and even when I reached the last steps, it didn't get any louder. I could distinguish two people in the room, as they were breathing—one almost happy and definitely distracted, the other labored and rough.

I peeked behind the wall separating the steps from the room itself, and in nothing more than a blink, I scanned the room with my wolf vision and was gone again, leaning gently on the wall behind me.

There was a wolf standing in the corner, his back turned away from the steps, headphones on his ears, from where the music blasted. He was smaller than me, his chest wider and legs thicker. He wasn't a wolf easily dismissed, and I closed my eyes in concentration to plan my next move.

I noticed Eshan in the corner, his body nothing more than a lump on the concrete floor. He was dirty, his hair not as bright as it had been a few days ago, but it was the smell of blood that distracted me the most. I tried with all my might to ignore the sight of him completely. There was a wolf to incapacitate first.

Stepping lightly, I tried not to make any noise as I sneaked up behind the wolf. I was prepared for everything as I closed the distance between us, and only the sudden rush of hope when I was only two steps away pushed me off my guard. The light cast my shadow over his shoulder, and even though it was nothing more than the tip of my head peeking over, it was enough for the wolf to turn. His fangs bared, his claws extended, he slashed in my direction with full force,

and only luck, combined with the instincts Magen had drilled into me, prevented me from being cut into shreds.

I stepped back, narrowly avoiding the tips of those claws, and I ducked right after that as I moved out of the way of his other fast-approaching hand. The wolf was going on pure strength and intimidation, expecting me to turn and run. His moves, although fast and forceful, didn't hold any finesse and were more spur of the moment than a calculated attempt to attack.

I used that, falling on my forearms, supposedly by accident, but in reality just the way I planned. I scissored his legs and, while he was still falling, slammed the heel of my foot to the side of his knee. The scream was animalistic, but it was the pain that carried more use to me than anything else. It distracted him from his wolf characteristics, blinding his senses, no matter how momentarily, and I took advantage of his full human form by giving him a dirty shot. I kicked him in the balls just because I was mean and he deserved it, and then I planted all my strength in the blow that knocked him right out.

Eshan was in a cage, for lack of a better word. The bars much like those of a prison cell, installed to corner a sick or a weak wolf. Stronger members of our kind could break out with a bit of effort, but someone injured, especially with a guard around watching his every move, wouldn't even try.

I picked up the key from the hook on the wall, opened the cage, and walked inside. It might have seemed easy when all I could think about was getting to him and taking him home. Walking into a cage with an injured wolf was a whole different matter. Approaching him slowly, I kneeled first, my moves measured and above all slow.

"Eshan? Please wake up, little wolf," I whispered, not wanting to scare him.

His hair was hiding his eyes, and it took all I had in me not to reach out and move it out of the way. I wanted to see his blue eyes, and I wanted to get lost in them forever.

The bruises on his body were very visible, his little finger bent at a weird angle and obviously broken. There was blood covering his back, hiding the cuts I knew were there. I could smell them. I could see the old, darker traces of blood on his chin, a faint line of a cut that had probably marked his lip yesterday.

They beat him bloody and then they ran. I hoped for the Alphas to catch them, to rip them apart in a long game of torture. To give them a taste of all that they had given to others. But I knew it was not the way of the wolf. I knew that even if they did catch them, the death would be merciful. And that just wasn't fair.

"Eshan, love. It's Sebastian. Let me see the eyes I love so much," I whispered again, soft whines escaping my lips as the helplessness of the situation started to slowly affect me.

"Please, love, wake up," I leaned forward, sniffing him, trying to evaluate the wounds that were keeping him unconscious.

Then a groan burst through the room. Soft enough that only I could hear it, but almost too loud in the silence enveloping the room.

"Yes, little wolf, that's it. Wake up for me," I encouraged him more, inching my way closer to his broken body.

His shoulder moved, and he stiffened as the pain became more intense.

"I know, Eshan, you have to shift. Can I please touch you? I need to reset your finger. It's broken."

He moaned then, his body staying in the same position, but his injured hand extending at snail speed toward me. Not wanting to prolong his pain any more than necessary, I picked up his palm, turning it gently to assess the damage, and before he could even blink twice, I pulled the finger, setting it in place. Eshan only managed to growl painfully before he started shifting before my eyes.

The change was slow, and every muscle and bone carefully rearranged itself. The fur seemed to spurt out of his skin like a sped-up video of growing grass. Usually you never noticed that part, how the human body distorted illogically, and then reformed into a wolf in a way that was anything but illogical.

With the change complete, his breathing seemed to become easier, but the wolf showed no desire to move.

"Eshan, you have to change back, we are not safe here," I told him softly, my head as close to his as it could get. I nuzzled my face against his fur, my hand petting him in comfort. He was so soft and beautiful that I couldn't cease to wonder how I had been so lucky as to get the opportunity to share my life with him.

He was still in wolf form when I heard someone's steps behind me. Not even thinking about it, I turned, my teeth suddenly too big for my jaw and extending over my lower lip. My claws shot out as far as possible, and I crouched in a position that screamed *attack*.

A female stood at the bottom of the steps, her eyes wide and her fear so strong I could taste it. "I just... he... I'm sorry ...." she stuttered and turned to run back up.

"Stop!" I growled almost like an Alpha and she actually stopped in her tracks.

"What do you want?" I asked as I slowly stood up.

"To help Eshan .... They've hurt him, but they are gone now." Her voice was insecure, but I could sense that she actually meant what she said.

"Are we safe in the house?" I asked, feeling the seriousness of the situation and she quickly nodded, her hair bouncing around her face.

"Lead me to the bathroom once I make him shift. I need to wash him. What's the situation upstairs?" I turned my back to her, but never once let my guard down.

"Shift, Eshan, you're better now." I petted the wolf again, slowly rubbing the top of his head.

"The Alphas just got back and they brought the pups. It stopped the fights." I could hear her rubbing her arms as if she were chilly.

Just as I was about to start begging my little wolf to turn back to human, his pale, bloody skin took the place of his dark fur and he gasped at the shift.

"I'm going to lift you now. It's going to hurt and I'm sorry, but we have to clean your body and what's left of the wounds." I touched his messed-up hair and kissed his brow. He looked so vulnerable and young that it almost brought tears to my eyes. Male wolves should never look vulnerable. We always work hard to appear to be dangerous Alpha males, no matter our pack ranking.

I slipped my arms under his wounded body, careful to put my left hand as high as possible so that it didn't touch his tender back and my right under his knees. He weighed almost nothing in my haste to make him more comfortable. I took the steps to the upper floor as fast as I could, the girl rushing in front of me and Eshan moaning softly at every sudden move I made.

Thankfully, the shower was big enough for two and I dismissively barked at the girl to leave us alone. I took off my rucksack, careful not to jostle Eshan too much, and I stepped into the stall, not even bothering to take off my clothes. My back was turned toward the showerhead and I held Eshan close, letting water gently trail from my body to his.

"Can you try and stand for me?" I whispered, my lips constantly kissing his hair, forehead, his cheeks. I was so glad he was safe that nothing else existed.

Eshan slowly nodded and I lowered his legs, ever watchful of his barely existing strength. But he managed to firmly plant his feet in front of me, his fingers gripping my shoulders and his head bowed. I reached for a washcloth without any sudden moves and rubbed the dirt off of his uninjured skin. The water beneath us was brown and red, dried out blood washing away down the drain in an almost hypnotic slide.

The cuts on his back were angry, red bruises that stretched down to his pushed-out ass. His whole body was colorful, muscles shaking under the strain that simply standing up caused. He was bone-tired, hungry, and in pain. Despite all the serious wounds being nothing but bruises

now, his body felt them as if they were still there, the shock of the abuse he had received lingering on the healed skin.

"I knew you'd come," he whispered to me as his forehead found its way to my shoulder.

"You bet. I can't live without you," I said reassuringly, next to his ear.

I soaped him twice, washing away all the smells and all the traces of the last few days, and when we were done, I picked him up in my arms again and carried him to the room I had seen while we were climbing up. It smelled of a female and numerous pups, but it was soft and comfortable and exactly what Eshan needed.

As soon as his head touched the pillow, he was asleep, and I only took the time to get out of my wet clothes before I pressed my body next to his, cherishing the closeness and the opportunity to see him alive and whole. I placed the gun on the nightstand, still worried about other wolves, but also trusting the Alphas. Without that trust, I wouldn't have gotten undressed in the first place.

It was different when you lived in a pack. The feeling inside that keeps telling you that you should watch over your mate, keep him happy, satisfied and safe. You accept him as your equal, you accept the fact that every one of your pack members would defend him with their life and as much as he is yours, he is also theirs.

Eshan was my heart from the moment I marked him, but lying there next to him, looking at the strength his face showed even in his sleep, made me realize that our bond will never be like the one I had with Tim. There had been just the two of us, years of solitude and unconditional love. And I still

felt that empty space in my heart that he once had filled, the pain that had accompanied his death, as well as the happiness he had given me while still alive.

No. What I had with Eshan was nothing like the bond Tim and I had made. But that was somehow alright, because I never again wanted to have what Tim and I had shared. I could never again live away from a pack, never again wait for the only contact I was able to have, and I could never again find someone who could make me feel the way I felt when I was with Tim.

Eshan was the mate made for the new Sebastian, and Eshan was perfect in every way.

I was still holding him close when Konner appeared at the door, his strong form taking all the space and his anger clouding all thought in my mind.

"How is he?"

"He's been beaten pretty badly, but I made him shift and it's all bruising now."

"Good. At least one piece of good news today. Dewayne escaped, along with his two cronies. They had a car hidden on an old trail and they just left the pups there. Son of a bitch!" He hissed.

"What about the pack?" I tried changing the subject, not really thrilled with Dewayne's escape either.

"The Alpha and the other two were the problem. Those in front just put up a bit of resistance because they didn't really know what was happening. No one is interested in taking the position of the Alpha or Beta, and it's a pain, to tell you the truth. We can't stay here as long as it takes for the takeover to resolve itself. So get him ready, we will be

### Sebastian's Wolves | Valentina Heart

#### 122

leaving in a couple of hours. Cason and his Beta are staying here until Stone takes over the pack. Let's just hope for the best." With that, he turned around and left.

I didn't particularly care about what might happen to the pack. I had my life in another place and the only person I had come here for was safely tucked in my arms, and that was more than enough.

# Chapter Eleven

ONE would have thought that all our problems would be solved once the Alpha was out of the way and my love and I were together. Well, that someone would be wrong. It all turned to shit rather quickly.

"Do you want to go for a run? It's been almost a week...." The sentence wasn't even out of my mouth and Eshan was already snarling at me.

"No, I don't want to go for a run. Leave me the fuck alone!" He pushed his chair away from the table and stormed out of the dining room.

In an entirely human society, all the people sitting at the table and eating dinner would have turned toward me, but here all of them followed the scent of distress that clung to Eshan like an invisible cloak.

Children whined next to the table, not used to sensing such pain, and were instantly picked up by the closest wolves, who cuddled them until they settled.

My eyes were fixed to my plate, not really seeing it, but rather spinning the words I used in my head, searching for the problem that wasn't there. I already knew that nothing I said had pushed him into a rage; the incidents were getting more violent and they needed less and less provocation. Something was boiling deep inside him, and the only way to break it would be to break his shield.

"Go take care of your mate, Sebastian. I don't know what's gotten into him, but he's getting worse and it's affecting the pack," Konner said when everyone settled down, and I came to the terrifying realization that I didn't want to.

I didn't want to go and look for him, take on his rage and insults. Maybe I wasn't as strong as I used to be once, or maybe I was just as lost as he was and I didn't see a way out of it. Eshan was a mystery. My mate, but still a person I barely knew. What if he was always so angry? But I knew that wasn't true. The Eshan I first met had been someone different, someone gentle and dangerous at the same time. He was someone I could love, someone I did love.

Still, I felt as if I were a human desperately trying to save a relationship where all the problems were hidden away and I would eventually be left staring at his leaving back. Wolves don't act like that. Half of everything is instinct, and once you are mated, there are no disagreements strong enough to break that bond, because instinct always pushes you to do the right thing.

"Sebastian!" Konner yelled next to me, causing me to jump in my seat and look at him.

The expression on his face was somewhere between pissed off and worried, but the way his lip curled over his fang forced me out of my chair and I found myself following the miserable scent of my hurting mate.

I found him rather quickly, sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree. His head was bowed, his hair falling messily in his eyes. He never even put in the effort to lift it up into that Mohawk anymore, and it hurt to see him so defeated. There was a black leather jacket on him this time,

the smell potent and intoxicating; matching fingerless gloves sheathed his hands and the black nail polish still gave him that rebellious streak.

Surprisingly he was barefoot, an uninterrupted line between his washed-out tight jeans and his pale feet. He was getting angry again, I could almost feel it in the air. All that negative emotion building, just waiting for me to come closer so that he could lash out again. So that he could have a real victim other than the abused tree behind him.

I didn't want to get into it again, to take his screaming and rage like a submissive puppy. It would be easier to just turn away and leave. Leave him for good, turn wolf again and just forget about any human problems we might have. But I was under orders, and even the bond between us pulled me closer to Eshan, almost demanding me to help him. As it was what a true mate should do.

Eshan was on the verge of yelling again. I could see it in the subtle twitching of his fingers, the stiffness of his shoulders. Even his lips were sucked roughly in and out, at random, a few seconds at a time.

So instead of approaching him as I had every previous time since the moment he woke up, still bruised and disoriented, I shifted. Two feet of distance between us and I was just a crawling wolf, watching for any aggressive movements, completely at the mercy of my instincts.

I approached him as I would have a wounded animal, my ears almost flat, my muzzle close to my inching paws. I was flat on the ground and I could feel the change in him that my sudden change of form had caused. The tension was gone, the hostility too. The agony in him was as vivid as it

had been before, but he accepted it now; he pushed it through his every cell and tried to endure the pain that almost consumed him.

My progress was slow, my eyes watchful, but he ignored me, for lack of a better word. He knew I was there, he could see and hear me, he even knew the reason why I was there, but I wasn't a threat and somehow that was enough for him.

With my paws touching the ridge of his foot, I lifted my head up a bit and licked the whole upper side of it until I reached the edge of his jeans. I stiffened when his palm found its way behind my ears. Soft fingers massaging gently, almost seeking comfort in the expanse of my fur.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, causing a whine to slip past my clenched jaw.

"It's not something I plan, you know. Not something I want. Every time you come near, rage slips my shields and I lash out. I'm sorry, Sebastian." The words were still soft, only sorrow tainting them.

I kept licking his foot, enjoying the attention he was giving me after what seemed like months of distance and aggression. The simple caress lifted my spirits up so much it could have equaled a lottery win.

"I hate him. I hate my weakness that made me obey him when he called me back. I hate myself." He growled, the wolf slowly showing his head. "I fucking hate them all for what they did to me!" Eshan screamed then, his head slamming forcefully against the tree bark, his fist hitting the hard ground while his other hand squeezed around my fur, almost making me yelp.

That's when the tears started, the salt coloring the air around us, and the devastating misery coming from him made my wolf cry out in a deafening howl.

It was almost like the bolted doors between us shattered, and he pulled me into his arms, his tears wetting my fur. The grip was almost bone-breakingly strong, but I relished in the rediscovered connection between us and was too far gone to care.

"They took me, Sebastian... just like I was a simple human, forcing me into a car and knocking me out. I had no strength nor pride, my limbs tied and their tongues clacking endless insults. I was nothing but worthless entertainment .... Until I became the bitch." Eshan stammered through his sobs, the last word said with such coldness it froze my heart.

The meaning reached the wolf with certain delay, but once our mind wrapped around it, understanding it, the howl was that of a deeply injured mate, and Eshan's grip on me hardened.

I was beyond thought, my instincts demanding retribution, my bond seeking comfort, both on the giving and on the receiving end. But it was Eshan who took the decision from me, by simply whispering in my ear, "I love you."

He wrapped his body around mine, never letting go of my fur, his tears leaving cold in their wake as the soft breeze washed over us time and time again. It took effort, the forming of confidence that had been lost, combining our strengths so that the pain could lessen in time. So that we could heal each other.

"It wasn't the first time... the searing pain inflicted as part of a punishment, but it was the worst time. The wolf was rebellious, forcing me to fight all the way, demanding that I respect my mate even at the cost of angering my Alpha. I couldn't take it like I did before, he wouldn't let me." Eshan continued speaking after a while, soft hiccups interrupting his words. "That is why Dewayne whipped me. 'A wolf who can't respect his Alpha deserves to die." Eshan mocked him, stretching the syllables to fit better with the way Dewayne spoke.

I whined again, lifting my head so that I could lick away the tears from his face. I wanted to hug him almost as much as I needed air to breathe. I needed to comfort him and be there for him, as support, as a human strong enough to defend him in the future.

The urge was so strong that in the end the wolf pushed me, initiated the change, and I was sitting in the arms of my mate, my face buried in his neck where the tears strayed. He gasped under the sudden weight of my body, but instead of getting angry or pushing me away, he surrendered.

His shoulders hunched, his arms reached around me for a better grip, and I felt a soft kiss pressed against my naked shoulder.

"I won't let them hurt you again, baby. We'll fight them together," I whispered, my fingers tracing the shape of his shaved skull.

Eshan sighed, a heavy breath leaving his lungs as he gave up more of his weight to me. I petted him, my hands enjoying the different texture of his soft and long hair, and the short, sharp hair on the sides of his head.

I don't know how long we were sitting there, his arms flexing around me, my breath tickling his neck, but eventually he calmed. The distress became a dull, even tone that was just bearable, and I could feel him physically relax against me.

"I need you." Simple words that could have been nothing more than a statement of fact, but the slight slip of the intonation told me exactly what he meant.

"How?"

"I need you to run," he said with a growl, his whole body suddenly tense, and I jumped off his lap, flinging myself forward, already pushing my legs straight into a run.

He was close behind, so close I could almost feel his breath at the back of my neck. I heard the jingling of the metal on his clothes, the rustling of leaves as they tangled against the cloth, and it only made the hunt more exciting.

It seemed like our favorite place for possession was always the forest. Taking each other raw and almost dry, like the animals we were, but I was looking forward to it. My heart was beating like an excited little drum, adrenaline was pumping through my veins, and I almost tripped purposely just so that he could catch me faster. It was the thrill of the hunt, and it wasn't any less exciting when I was the one hunted.

But being an excited idiot was never a good characteristic while running through the forest. The human form was not made for such things, and as I looked behind me for the fifth time since we took off, I did trip over a stinking branch that my wolf senses would have noticed if I had been in my other form.

I flew through the air, those ridiculous comedies flashing through my brain, and I would have laughed if not for the fallen tree trunk that softened my fall. I caught myself partially before my chest impacted too strongly, but then Eshan crashed against me, his weight slamming me against that trunk in a breathtaking blow. I felt my ribs crack on the left side and the extensive bruising that was already starting to form, but I was the hunted party, and in all fairness... I had just been caught.

His erection was between my ass cheeks already, pressing almost painfully. My cock was bent awkwardly so that the length of it, as well as my balls, were very much visible between my legs, despite my body being forced down. He pulled me up a few inches, exposing my ass to the elements and the warmth of his body. My cock scraped painfully against the bark, and I was just hard enough because of it to leak a few drops.

Eshan growled at the scent, his hips pushing against me, and I tried my last dominant move when I pressed my palms against the trunk and tried lifting myself up. That only made him growl louder, his palms shoving against my shoulder blades so that the last huff of air left my lungs.

"You will bend to my will now!" He growled it more than spoke it.

He had an unobstructed view of my ass in front of him as he moved his torso backward for a better look. I sensed the spit as it slid from the top of my crack all the way down to my balls and I shivered in excitement, my cock all but begging for attention.

There was something exciting in the fact that he was still dressed while I stood completely naked in front of him. The half-lowered jeans rubbing against my thighs, the feel of his gloved hands against my skin, the rustling of his jacket as he moved.

I heard the way he slicked himself—the sound of his hand stroking his cock was unmistakable—and all I could do was whine. My desire was almost greater than his, the weight in my balls unbearable, and all the blood that pumped into my cock left me dizzy with lust.

"You like that, bitch, don't you?" Eshan hissed as he pushed the head of his cock at my entrance.

I felt more spit as it fell on the tip entering me, and I wanted to cry, to beg him for more, to push inside me. I wanted to fuck myself on his smooth length, and it was as if a light bulb flashed in my head as I realized that there was nothing stopping me. I braced my legs in a better position, moving my whole body toward him, when he suddenly dropped on my back, holding me in place.

"You get only what I give you, bitch!" he growled in my ear, forcing me to stop in place and tilt my neck for the much-wanted marks of his teeth. What I got was a wet trail left by his tongue that forced me to shiver like a virgin on her wedding night.

He took hold of my hands and spread them from my body so that I was completely stretched, my nipples rubbing against the rough tree, sending shocks of pleasure down my spine.

"Now I'm gonna fuck you hard and you are gonna tell me what if feels like. If you stop, I stop." And with that he pushed that gorgeous cock in me, all the way to the hilt.

Naturally, I screamed, only this time it was more pleasure than pain. My body was already used to the intrusion, my hole trembling around him. Maybe I even blacked out for a moment, because the next thing I felt was just the tip of him in me, his control something to envy, and my body aching desperately for more.

He just stood like that, holding me spread out for him, his chest pressing against me as he waited. I was an idiot; of course, I'd already forgotten what he'd said just minutes ago. Who even talks during sex, for fuck sake?

"Please, give me more... fuck me, Eshan... please!" I moaned, my body squirming on its own.

But Eshan only circled with his hips, the tip of his cock teasing me cruelly. And I hurriedly spun the words he said in my head again, looking for a solution that would finally let me enjoy his cock as it was meant to be.

"It's teasing... I can feel you there, but only just. It's driving me crazy.... Please Eshan!" I almost wept.

But it was apparently the right thing to say, because his hips made that oh-so-welcome move and he pushed all the way inside.

"You're so big, so hard... I feel you stretching me, taking me...." He pulled out and pushed in again, harder this time.

"You're slamming in me... you're almost too much, but I love it! Please fuck me." I gasped this time, the force of his thrust leaving me without breath to spare.

"How does it feel, bitch? Can you take it?" he growled again, his gloved hands pressing my wrists painfully against the tree trunk.

"Yes! Yes! More! Please! You feel amazing! I love your cock!" I gasped out between breaths.

"You better!" he said just before he let go of my hands and pushed my hips down to better fit against his.

"Hold onto the tree and don't come until I tell you."

I did as he said, grabbing for every little protrusion on the tree, trying to spare my cock further pain, but it still rubbed against it, the base of it almost raw, the soft skin there pulled up almost painfully, but the very tip frustratingly untouched.

He held my hips down, pushing them against his cock, and with every thrust he hit my gland, forcing scream after scream out of me. It hurt this time, the angle spreading me wide, his tip hitting uncomfortably inside, but he rubbed me so good, tingling all my sensitive nerves, and it was almost as if the discomfort made it better, made me focus on every good sensation while still biting on the pleasure, until everything was just too much.

I was slowly losing my mind, my cock screaming at me to take it in hand, but I couldn't reach for it, couldn't do anything but hold on. I felt his balls hit mine with every thrust and I even saw stars, thinking how fucking Eshan was paradise, but him fucking me was bliss.

Then, suddenly, he pulled my body against his, slamming in me from underneath, and seeing stars wasn't a good enough expression anymore. I screamed, my hands going around his neck, and I wasn't even aware of my want once he whispered, "Come for me."

His fingers pinched my nipples as he spoke, his thrust almost lifting me from the ground, and his teeth found their way to that smooth, silvery skin between my neck and shoulder that was already marked as his. I felt them

## Sebastian's Wolves | Valentina Heart

#### 134

breaking the flesh all over again with the same ferocity as his cock impaled me, and I couldn't do more than gasp.

I came in bucking spurts, my body a mess of convulsions that seemed never-ending, and my mouth gaped as I desperately fought for breath. His teeth were very real, embedded in my neck, sucking on the blood, his spasming cock pulsing in my tender hole as he filled me with his heat. I felt completely owned, safe in the hands of my mate, wanted and loved. I was fucking happy.

# **Chapter Twelve**

SITTING on the steps of the porch, I had my tools in hand and was completely immersed in my work. The pillars were carved halfway to the top, the trees stretching around the naked ladies as if telling an erotic story. I was quite pleased with it, and Madoc wasn't complaining either. He still sat next to me every chance he got, his fingers touching the shapes every time he thought I wasn't looking.

I was spinning the last two months in my head, like a video of events and memories. The way Eshan and I became closer after that first night, how our bond blossomed, and how we both found our happiness in the West Pack.

The pups adored him, which was surprising when you considered his unconventional appearance. But the kids thought it fun, the way his hair changed every month and how he always wore something colorful or funny. I was initially surprised when he said he worked as an elementary school teacher, but once I saw him with the pups, I completely understood. There was certain joy in his words when they were around, a glow that made people stop and watch. And the kids took it all in like a sponge, rarely letting him out of their sight.

There was no word on Dewayne, but Stone was faring nicely in his new pack. Positive impressions were coming Konner's way daily, and when he was happy, it was very hard to ignore it.

Both Eshan and I took to the training schedule pretty seriously, avoiding mutual conflicts after a few shocking public displays where the first contact ended up with ripped clothes and raging hard-ons. But after those few glitches, it was only a matter of choosing the right partner. The pack was full of those, and soon the training hours also became the teaching hours as the kids took to the moves like little experts, tirelessly copying Eshan.

Madoc and Roisin still danced around each other, their shy looks drawing out laughs as they stayed blissfully oblivious. All was truly good and well in our little family, and it was refreshing to wake up every morning with a smile.

"You're flirting with my mate again," Eshan suddenly growled from the door, his shoulders pumped, the red tips of his hair catching the sun in a way that was almost demonic. He took a step forward with a snarl and poor Madoc froze in place, his eyes big, round orbs of shock, his skin suddenly drained of all color.

Eshan then ran forward, tackling Madoc over the steps onto the freshly cut grass, not giving him a chance to scramble away. They rolled over each other, Eshan letting him move as he tried not to make Madoc panic too much. He was already breathing fast, spurting excuses that made no sense.

Madoc was almost afraid of his own shadow, and what Eshan had just done probably gave him a small heart attack.

"I'm only playing with you," Eshan eventually said, but Madoc was still fighting fiercely, apologizing for things he had never even done, and in a moment of pure inspiration, Eshan ripped the shirt off Madoc's chest, making the smaller man still with fright.

"Prepare to be tickled to death!" Eshan suddenly screamed, breaking the silence and causing half the gathered crowd to laugh.

His fingers found the sensitive sides, and before Madoc even realized what was happening, he was thrashing on the ground in futile attempts to escape, his breath caught in his throat as laughter wiped out all capability of speech. To the shock of all present company, it was Roisin who silently crept behind Eshan's back and pushed him to the side.

Madoc looked up then, his eyes connecting with hers, and there was something very much like awe on his face as she shyly extended her hand toward him. Of course, Eshan lost his usual tactfulness in the wake of defeat, and he jumped at Roisin in his full male glory.

She yelped in distress, not seeing him at all with Madoc in front of her, and they were on the ground together in a flash. The speed with which Madoc reacted to that was simply stunning. He was nothing more than a red ball of fury as he jumped on Eshan's back, his arm around his neck and a deafening growl cracking through the air.

His claws were fully extended, his eyes those of a wolf. You could almost see the hairs at the back of his neck standing on end as instinct overwhelmed him with the urge to protect his mate.

Even Eshan had trouble kicking him off his back, but once Madoc slammed his fangs in Eshan's shoulder, all hell broke loose. I could see his own claws getting longer and the way he moved back on his knees was a testament to his extensive training in the last couple of months. I already saw what he was going to do, and I started running toward them, screaming a loud "No!" as I closed the short distance.

Of course, I was there just to see Eshan throw his hands backward, his claws digging painfully into Madoc's back as he tried to defend himself. He gripped the flesh hard with a powerful, sharp squeeze and flung Madoc over his head to the ground, nine feet away.

His stance was still that of a fighter, crouching low on the ground, staring at his opponent, but it only took him a second to realize who exactly he had thrown away and then he succumbed to the pain and blood loss. His shoulder was completely torn, one side of his chest marked with four deep gashes that bled profusely, soaking his whole front side.

"Shift, damn it!" I screamed at him as I kneeled by his side, worried out of my mind.

I knew I should be worried about Madoc, who was smaller in build and not as strong as Eshan, but my mate was bleeding to death in front of me and I just didn't have it in me to care about someone else.

Eshan let the change sweep over him, and suddenly I stared at an almost black wolf whose fur was edged with that same red color that touched the tips of his hair while in human form. The wounds were still deep and bleeding, sticking his soft fur to his skin.

"Shift again!"

And he did. Barely able to keep his head above ground, he wobbled on his arms, breathing hard. The wounds were still bleeding pretty badly, and even though it took too much strength, I knew he had to shift at least once more.

"Come on, little wolf, you can do it. Just one more time." I softly touched his head as I leaned over him, checking the wound on his chest.

A deep moan followed his change this time and he collapsed on his paws, unconscious. The wounds were still raw and nasty looking, but the bleeding had stopped and the next shift would heal them to bruises.

I continued touching him, whispering soft nonsense as I vaguely heard Konner arrive at the scene of the crime.

"How is he?" He crouched next to me.

"He shifted the second time and passed out. It will heal, I think, once he changes back. How is Madoc?" I asked, concerned for the little guy.

"It looks like he shifted right away. He lost less blood because of it. The wounds are still open, but he's not bleeding anymore. Can you tell me what happened?" I lifted my head to look at him, noticing the dispersed crowd and a couple of wolves helping to carry Madoc inside. Somehow, there was no one else around for him to ask. Chickens.

"They were playing. Eshan was tickling Madoc, pinning him on the ground, and as shocking as it may seem, Roisin interfered. She pushed Eshan off him. I think he was just reacting on instinct when he tackled her on the ground next, but Madoc saw this as a threat and he jumped on Eshan's back. He attacked right away, didn't even stop to think. Eshan didn't really react like he was in danger, otherwise he would have probably thrown him off sooner. Instead, he was already cut and bitten by the time he used his own claws to move Madoc off his back. They were just playing, it shouldn't

have ended like this." I was half in shock myself, looking at my wounded mate next to me.

"It's my fucking fault. I've been letting them play around instead of forcing them to mate. He's reacting like he's already mated—only without the bond, he sees everyone as a threat. I am truly sorry, Sebastian," Konner said softly with his head bowed in regret.

"Come, let's take him inside."

I gently picked up Eshan from the ground, his wolf form not as heavy as his human one, and took him to our room.

HOURS later, I had my love next to me again, his skin pale and sweaty. The wounds had knitted themselves back together once he had changed form that last time and now he had an array of colorful bruises marring his chest, shoulder, and neck.

It was a stupid mistake Madoc had made, but not all that unusual with a pack of shifters. Children got into similar conflicts all the time, which ended with more blood than they knew could spill. No one considered Madoc much more than a pup, and I wondered how the mating might change him.

I traced the deep scars on Eshan's neck, relishing in the feel of him next to me, when he stirred slightly, his gorgeous blues opening and almost lighting up the room.

"Sebastian .... What happened?" he mumbled, his hands lifting to his face right away.

"Madoc went a little crazy on you, but you're fine now," I said as I rested my palm on his exposed belly.

"I hurt ...." he whispered back, his hands falling back to the bed.

"I know, little wolf. The wounds are healed, but it will take some time for the ache to pass."

Eshan nodded his head slightly, those beautiful eyes searching for mine again.

"Can we stay like this for a while?"

"Yes, we can. Don't worry about a thing." I smiled at him sweetly, thinking just how much he reminded me of a child in those moments.

The silence between us was long, my hands touching his skin in nothing more than random caresses, and Eshan was almost purring under my gentle fingers. He kept his eyes closed, but every once in a while he would peek at me, a contented expression painted over his whole face, and a flash of white teeth would shine at me with every slight curve of his lips.

I was touching his neck again, never quite straying from the scars when I asked, "How did you get this?"

The sudden stiffness of his flesh was more than obvious, but Eshan made no move other than that, his eyes still peacefully closed, his body resting in the exact same position it was a few seconds ago. To tell, or not to tell.

"When I was young and extremely stupid, I had this crazy notion that if only we had a different Alpha, our life would be different too, better. I mulled over the idea for months, secretly training my slim body, watching Dewayne's

moves like a hawk and waiting for my golden opportunity. Like I said, I was an idiot. There was no way in hell I could have kicked Dewayne's ass. I can't do it today, and I'm at least twice as big and strong." Eshan paused, as if remembering what happened next.

"You challenged the Alpha, I'm guessing?"

"You bet! I walked right up to him and told him so. His seconds laughed their asses off, but Dewayne had nothing but a small smile on his face and this chilling, calculating look. I was too young to understand his games then. I thought that the worst thing that could happen to me was death. But you know as well as I do now, that death is only the best you can hope for. With our healing abilities and alternate form, possibilities are countless. Still, Dewayne wasn't as cruel as he could have been. He just taught the kid a lesson. Believe me when I tell you, I still remember it vividly."

"Did you hit him at all?"

"No," Eshan said and shook his head in negation. "He made it public, then toyed with me. Never striking hard enough to break bones, but teasing well enough to bruise. Maybe he was a softer person back then, because I know for sure no one would get off that easy if they challenged him today. Anyway, when he had had enough fun, he split my chest and neck in just one calculated move—he didn't want to scar my face—and then he knocked me out. I remember the hot pain later when he chained me in the basement to prevent me from shifting. The chains held me so firmly that my bones couldn't rearrange themselves and the wound on my neck had to heal on its own. Dewayne wanted me, as well

as all the others who were there, to remember that day. It had the desired effect. No one challenged him after that."

I swallowed my growl, not wanting to make him feel even worse for something that happened years ago, but I had to ask, "He rapes others in his pack, regardless of the gender?"

"Yes. He didn't before, when I was younger, but he does now. Don't other Alphas do that?" Eshan looked at me in surprise.

"Not that I know of."

Eshan pressed his lips tight, his eyes cutting into slits. "So it is just another form of humiliation for him. Son of a bitch."

There was a knock on the door then, and Konner pushed his head inside through the opening he'd made. "No sex. Good." And he entered the room with a bright smile, Madoc trailing after him.

He gave the wolf just one pointed look and Madoc lifted his head from the floor, eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry, Eshan, I really didn't plan on attacking you. I don't know what came over me. Please forgive me."

Eshan sensed his distress, as all of us did, and he moved to get out of bed, but instead just moaned and plopped back down on his pillow. "It's okay, Madoc, I'm not angry with you. Just don't do it again." He tried a weak smile, but his body was still protesting against the abuse and it ended up looking more like a smirk than anything else.

"I won't, I promise. I'm so, so sorry." Madoc's eyes suddenly became too big for his face and the redness of his

## Sebastian's Wolves | Valentina Heart

#### 144

cheeks came into full view, with his head held up straight. He actually looked like a little red-haired angel that was missing its wings.

"Good. Now that that's settled, I have one more thing to say. Madoc, I don't care how you do it, or if it takes you the whole weekend. This annual run, you're claiming Roisin as yours." With that Konner marched out of the room, leaving Madoc as white as a sheet, his jaw hanging loose and his body trembling like a leaf.

Eshan and I ended up howling with laughter until the poor pup fled the room.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

FRIDAY morning found the two of us on the front porch. All procrastinating wolves were banished from the house as the final preparations were made for the annual hunt. Females slowly kept coming in for the whole last week, helping with the food, preparing the sleeping quarters and ensuing entertainment, while Konner bossed around the house, pointing at things that needed to be done and being very annoying about it. Since the kitchen was off limits until the evening, the poor suckers that were left outside the house were grouchy and annoyed, plus they needed to listen to Konner's limitless meddling in every single thing.

I worked on my designs, staying away from the others and insistently ignoring the noise while Eshan kept me company, lying on the wide fence above my head, one leg swinging from side to side.

He sighed, as if suffering. "We need a TV."

"No shit, Sherlock," I mumbled, seriously annoyed by that fact. I'd been trying to smuggle a television set into the house for weeks, but it was an impossible task because there was always someone inside.

"I'm bored," he sighed again.

"You wanna fuck?" I asked emotionlessly.

His head popped up and he almost slipped from the edge of the fence.

"No." He lay down again. "We can't, there's too many people around. Even in the fucking forest. They'd just line up around us and watch." He sighed again.

It was actually funny to listen to him.

"How about you help me with something?"

"Depends on how interesting it is. I'm not sweeping after you. Or holding anything while you're playing there." He gazed at me sideways.

"I was thinking that we could borrow Magen's truck and go pick up the TV. I've had to return it to the shop so that Konner didn't find it. And then tonight, when everyone is by the fire, we could sneak inside and hook it up on the wall in the pack room."

"Ohh, an adventure! I'm in." Eshan jumped off the fence down next to me. "Why do you think Konner won't order it to be taken down?"

I snorted. "Please—there is no one in this pack that doesn't want a television in the house. If we put it on the wall, there is no way Konner is gonna get close enough to it to take it down. He'd be risking mutiny."

Eshan grinned then, his eyes shining with mischief, and I knew we were on the same wavelength.

I swept the wood dust from the steps and sorted my tools before putting them away. "Ready to go?" Eshan was almost bouncing next to me.

I pulled him close, pressing my lips against his in a sweet little kiss, before throwing my arm over his shoulders and walking him toward the crowd. Wherever Konner was, Magen was close by. Being a Beta also meant that you had to suffer through the Alpha's ludicrous demands, only Magen did it with his recognizable charm.

"You can't arrange the firewood that way!" we heard Konner scream as we got near.

"Oh, all-knowing and mighty Alpha, please do show us the right way. We would shrivel and die without your impeccable guidance," Magen shot out, not even looking at Konner.

There were snickers all around them, some laughing to the point of tears, but none really expressing it loudly. You didn't want to get on your Alpha's bad side. Konner, on the other hand, looked at Magen in a way that gave a whole new meaning to the statement "if looks could kill."

But none of it fazed Magen as he continued chopping wood with a couple of other wolves.

I waited for a few minutes until Konner found something else to bitch about, and got Magen's attention.

"Can we borrow your truck? We won't be gone more than a few hours."

He frowned, assessing me as if expecting guilt to start seeping from my pores and reveal my secret plans. "You're up to something. I can't smell it, but I know."

Eshan started squirming next to me, and I shoved my elbow into his side.

"Just tell me this, am I gonna like it?"

I grinned like an idiot. "You'll love it!"

Suddenly the keys were dangling between his fingers and he shared my grin. "Then by all means, be my guest."

I grabbed the keys and we were out of sight in a matter of minutes.

THE closest little town where most of us did our shopping, meeting friends, and other simple things had about twenty thousand residents and was small enough for most of the pack to be known on sight. They figured us to be a part of a cult, but never made an issue of it because we were always ready to help or share a nice word with curious old ladies.

We walked down the main street, standing next to each other but not touching, so as not to draw any unnecessary attention. The television was already in the truck, but we decided to grab an ice cream before we turn back.

"You should have bought a Wii instead of a PlayStation console," Eshan whined for the third time since we left the store.

"Then I would never get my turn at it. I love those guys more than anything, but I'm not planning on standing aside while they're kicking ass on the screen."

"One television isn't enough."

"Don't push our luck, Eshan. First we have to make this one a permanent part of the household inventory. Then we can talk about the rest." And it was the truth. I was fairly optimistic when it came to forcing the issue of a TV set, but there was still that little worm of doubt that fed on pure fear of Konner.

I could already see the shop we were headed to when I stopped in my tracks. There was an acrid smell of wolf in the air, a familiar smell, and when Eshan stopped too and all color left his complexion, I knew he had recognized it too.

Turning around in search of a visual confirmation was my next logical move, but before I could manage even a fraction of that move, a forceful blow connected with the back of my skull. The last word on my lips was, "Eshan ...."

ALL of a sudden I couldn't breathe, coldness covering my whole body, and I blinked my eyes open, realizing it was ice-cold water that had splashed my face. The wolf's first instinct was to crouch in an attack position, but as I tried to move, I noticed that my hands and legs were cuffed to a metal chair. I also had a thick chain going around my body, keeping me firmly in place.

Standing in front of me was one of Dewayne's goons. I recognized him from the pack house, grinning like a madman and obviously enjoying himself.

"Are you okay, Sebastian?" The question surprised me and I snapped my head to the sound of the voice.

Eshan was in the same position as me, tied to a chair and completely wet, his hair sticking to his face.

"I'm fine."

"You won't be for long." Dewayne's idiot grinned again, and in that exact moment, the door at the back of the room opened and closed.

"I see the love birds are awake," Dewayne drawled behind us. "Go outside, Claren. If someone comes looking for them, I want to know."

The idiot—that is, Claren—nodded and disappeared out of sight.

"Now imagine my surprise at finding my rogue little wolf here. You've been a naughty little pack member, haven't you? Hmmm?" Eshan made no move to acknowledge Dewayne; he just stared straight ahead.

"Maybe I should teach you another lesson in obedience."

I growled at that, already seeing in my head the beautiful vision of my teeth ripping out his neck.

"Oh, you're a feisty little one. Don't worry, a few hours with me will cure you of that." He grinned.

"What the fuck do you want?" I asked him then, not really in the mood for the ramblings of a lunatic.

"Well, not that I need to explain myself to you, but all we have is time. Knowing that you can't do anything about it will only make your suffering all the sweeter."

He pulled over a chair, scraping against the tiles with it. "I came here to appropriately relieve Konner of his duties. I could say that payback is a *bitch*, but I plan on making it a merciless, cruel cunt, just for his pleasure. Freezing all of my accounts and removing my name from every property deed I had was low even for him. With my money left the rest of my patience. I'm letting my wolf take the lead now."

Dewayne was so serious and visibly pissed off, but I couldn't understand how exactly he expected everyone to

accept his scams and just ignore the cruelty with which he gained his riches.

But I was also not in a position to question his motives. I had more important things on my mind, like getting away from his crazy ass. So I laughed with honest-to-God amusement. "Konner's gonna rip out your heart and leave you for the wolves to feed on. You have no chance whatsoever."

"Maybe not," he said seriously, his hand reaching to his waistline in the back, "But no one said I'll be playing fair." And he pulled out a gun and leaned the tip of the barrel against his lips.

Cold sweat washed over me as I saw all those pups currently at the house and remembered the image of Dewayne's claws around a child's neck, as it had been the last time I saw him. We couldn't let him take the fight back to the pack house.

"So you're not wolf enough to play fair?" I pushed a button.

Dewayne regarded me for a second, and I barely saw the butt of his gun heading for my cheek. The pain was excruciating, spreading from my head all the way to the tips of my fingers. I couldn't do more than moan, and when the ringing stopped, I had just enough of a composure to lean to the side and spit the blood seeping from the cut on the inside of my cheek.

"Not so smart now, are you?"

"No. Still smart, just having difficulty speaking," I shot back, fighting the throbbing of my jaw and looking him

straight in the eyes while shedding the cowardice from my wolf like clothing.

I could hear Eshan squirming in the chair next to me, but I could only imagine what the hit did to him. Watching your mate get hurt was worse than receiving the blow yourself. And that was precisely the reason why I was the one provoking. As long as his eyes stayed on me, Eshan was going to be all right.

Maybe we could even count on someone from the pack coming to look for us. Even though that wasn't really likely. We weren't gone that long yet. At least not as far as I knew. Hours could have passed while we had been knocked out.

"You found yourself a real spitfire, Eshan. Do you want me to break him for you?" He directed his question to Eshan, but he never once took his eyes off of me.

"No, thank you. I like him just fine, attitude, balls, and all," Eshan said, and I could hear the chill in his voice. He wanted to kill Dewayne on the spot.

"That's too bad, because I've already had my fun with you and I'm always interested in new meat." Dewayne smirked, extending his hand down to my crotch and fondling my dick dispassionately.

It was not a kind touch, and definitely not an arousing one. I was blocking what he did to Eshan as best as I could, but my revulsion at his very presence was striking. I wanted him dead so badly that I silently wished he would get closer to me so that I could bite some part of him, to make him bleed.

"Not very impressive in the dick department."

"Well, we can't all have such a charming personality." Again, my mouth had a will of its own.

I got a fist in the gut for that one, but not even taking a second to blink, he had his fingers wrapped around my cock again.

"I'm thinking about throwing you on the floor right here and pushing myself deep inside. So far up your ass you can taste me. I would love to fuck your mouth too. I bet you're an amazing cocksucker. But that would require knocking out your teeth first, and I hate all the mess and effort that would take."

Eshan was softly growling next to me, the chair squeaking under him as he tried to get loose. I had similar ideas, because the last thing I wanted was Dewayne's dick anywhere near me.

"Would you like to watch that, Eshan? My dick up your mate's ass? I bet it's real tight."

Eshan flung himself forward at that, his teeth snapping over thin air. He was shifting in stages, his claws extending and retracting, his teeth long fangs one minute and straight human incisors the next. He was at his most dangerous, but I feared he still wasn't strong enough to take Dewayne on.

"Tsk, tsk, little pup. Don't make me discipline you again." Dewayne was serious all of a sudden, his eyes focused on Eshan, and I noticed a shudder pass down Eshan's body that instantly went very still.

It made me angry, the way he still affected Eshan, and I only hated him more.

"You're too much of a bitch to fight unchained and unarmed men. No wonder you always torture those weaker than you." I expected another blow, but instead he considered me, taking my measure by tilting his head slightly to the side.

"I suppose I could set you free. There isn't enough wolf in you to beat me." And to my utter shock, he kneeled next to my chair and uncuffed my left hand. Of course, the first thing I did was hit straight against his teeth.

The motherfucker grinned at me as he moved away a step. "Remember, you're still very much tied." Then he laughed like those evil bastards do on TV.

"But you look kind of familiar. Have we met before?" he suddenly asked, eyes on me as he frowned in concentration.

I could understand that he didn't remember me. I had only met him once and that was nine years ago. Still, it was on the tip of my tongue to introduce myself again.

"Konner is by the truck, Alpha!" Claren burst inside the closed shop we were sitting in.

My heartbeat jumped a notch, and I felt myself smiling in the sweet anticipation of victory. Dewayne had no chance against Konner. But I still wondered if his appearance had anything to do with a rescue mission or if it was just that someone had sent him on some foolish errand to get him out of their face.

"He won't smell us until he comes to the corner where we took them." His head pointed in Eshan's and my direction.

Then the third man opened the door and rushed inside. "The Alpha is coming this way!"

More and more it all looked like a crazy joke.

Dewayne jumped to his feet. "What do you mean he's coming this way? There shouldn't be any scents for him to follow!"

"Hmm... I kind of went to the truck to see what they bought ...." Claren mumbled with his head bowed, but it was loud enough for everybody to hear. I knew right away that he was an idiot!

You could almost see steam coming out of Dewayne's ears, and he took the two steps to Claren, hitting him hard enough with his fist that I heard a bone break. Claren slumped to the floor, bleeding, and Dewayne started cursing loud enough for the other guy to move two steps away from him.

Konner must have smelled blood on the other side of the door, because there was no caution whatsoever in his next move. He just barged inside like he owned the place, and Dewayne reacted with pulling the trigger. The shot echoed through the room, leaving a few seconds of stunned silence behind.

Konner's eyes widened as he saw us all inside, and it was only his highly developed reflexes that saved his life. He moved to the side in the last second, avoiding the direct hit of the bullet that would have struck his heart and taking it in his shoulder instead. The other guy jumped on him right away, a sudden spring in his step, but instead of subduing Konner, he fell to the side, gurgling with his neck wide open and blood freely gushing out.

"Motherfucker!" Dewayne screamed, planting a hit with his foot under Konner's jaw. It knocked him right out, and I watched as our hope for rescue bled to unconsciousness. Dewayne crouched next to his wounded sidekick and asked, "Can you shift?"

The man on the floor just stared at him, all pale and unfocused. His legs were kicking as he gripped his neck, but the blood kept gushing out and, in a matter of moments, he stilled.

"Son of a bitch!" Dewayne screamed again and kicked Konner in his middle as he passed him. He then asked Claren, "Are you better?" Claren only nodded, the swelling on his face substantial enough to hurt like hell.

"Good. Chain the Alpha then. He's just gonna be another dead wolf pretty soon." But then Dewayne swiveled on his toes, those smirking eyes connecting with mine.

"That's where I know you from. You're the mate of that dead wolf. What the hell was his name...?" He caught his chin casually between his fingers while my heart stopped in place.

"It was that damn lawyer that kept meddling in my business. The fucker almost caused me to lose that shipyard property on the grounds of some natural habitat bullshit. What the hell was his name? You remember, Eshan. That guy Claude offed on the highway!" Dewayne snapped his fingers, but I was trembling too badly to care about anything beyond my next breath.

Eshan gasped as if in pain, but I couldn't even look his way from the shock. "Tim," he whispered. His voice filled with deep pain.

"That's it! Tim! That fucker caused me so many headaches that I would have offed him myself. You should have been dead too, but no one could find you after he croaked." Dewayne tilted his head again, watching for my reaction, but by that time, I was too far gone to care about the image I presented and I couldn't do much but gasp for breath.

"Sebastian? Are you all right? Please speak to me, baby?" I mutely heard Eshan next to me, the concern in his voice touching, but not good enough to penetrate my shield of pain.

Tim's death wasn't an accident. He would have been alive now, if not for Dewayne. My love would have been alive and breathing, kissing my pains away, hugging me every night. I missed him still, and I remembered him still, but I also carried the pain of his loss deep in my cells. Finding out that he was killed for some property made me see red.

My mate bond was surfacing with a vengeance. As if in a haze I stood from the chair, the circle of the cuff hanging on my wrist. The chair was still attached to my back with the heavy chain, but my legs were free and I was walking toward Dewayne.

He was surprised momentarily, as I would have been if my mind had worked properly. There was no way I could have broken the cuffs. Konner might have, but without the adrenaline pumping in my veins, I couldn't have done the things I ended up doing.

Dewayne shot me, probably on instinct. The sharp entry wound burned in my thigh, but I kept on going, barely registering even that. He prepared for another shot, already lifting his hand for a torso shot, but I slammed the gun away from his hand and broke his nose with one blow of my other hand.

My claws extended without a conscious decision on my part and I crossed them in one swift move in front of me, cutting at Dewayne's chest. I saw the white of his ribs underneath all that blood, but instead of dwelling on his injury, I just reacted. My right hand combined my first move with a second one, forcing my claws into Dewayne's neck and pinning him to the wall behind him.

He was struggling like a trapped animal, his legs kicking at me, his claws scratching at my hand, my face, my chest. But I couldn't let go. There was no mercy in me, no wolf called Sebastian. I was pure instinct that screamed *death* from the top of his lungs as I avenged my dead mate.

I held him up and pinned until his struggles ceased, until his breath grew shallow and his eyes turned glassy and dead. I held him up until I could no longer stand and then I collapsed in a heap of dying flesh, my mind raped to the point of insanity and my will to live seeping away in the same streams as my blood.

## **Epilogue**

MY CONSCIOUSNESS was safely cushioned between an expanse of fluffy clouds, holding me like precious glass in a bowl of cotton. I was aware enough to know that I was still alive, but that was where all rational thought ended.

Alternation between exquisite sharpness and the dull, simple existence of my senses left me unable to distinguish my very being, and maybe for the first time since I was born, I felt completely safe and protected from every hurt and every pain.

With every moment spent in my perfect world of clouds, I felt better, my mind knitting itself together, even though I didn't know the reason why it needed to do that. I sensed that my time there was at its end, and I felt sad because of it. I wasn't ready for more hurt and I certainly wasn't ready for more pain.

Once I felt the unusual warmth emanating from my cloudlike supporters, I recognized the sensations as something real. Something substantial that pushed me over that line between dreams and reality and crashed me hard into my body.

There were no hospitals for shifters and none of us ever bother with going to a human hospital. If you couldn't heal on your own by shifting, no hospital was going to help you. So the first thing I saw weren't the white walls of a hospital room. I saw the familiar lines of my room at the pack house, but before I could take in the details, searing heat swallowed my lower regions and I gasped like a man drowning.

Just as suddenly, a head popped up from between my legs and I was faced with my gorgeous mate, looking as beautiful as ever but surprisingly ordinary. He had on a simple T-shirt and shorts and his hair was dark brown, reaching the edge of his jaw.

"Sebastian!" He jumped on the bed and threw himself in my arms.

There was no residual pain left in my body, and I only grunted as his weight pushed the air out of my lungs.

"I love you so much!" he whispered, his palm pressed against my cheek, and then he kissed me.

It was gentle and sweet and overwhelming, showing me all he felt at once. I lifted my arms to press him closer, to taste him harder, but there was no strength in my body for such an action. I was as weak as a pup and just that struck a nerve instantly.

"You're weak because of the shifting. You will be fine in a few hours probably, when your body recovers from the trauma."

"What do you mean shifting?" I whispered, then coughed, my voice not really my own.

"You've been shifting from one form to the other for a little more than a month now. You couldn't hold a change for longer than a few minutes—that is, when you didn't change every few seconds. Konner said that trauma causes that sometimes, protects the shifter's mind when the pain is too great. This morning was the first time you actually stayed human long enough for me to blow you." He grinned at me and I had to grin back.

"You actually woke me up from my coma with a blow job?"

"Well, I tried. I haven't finished yet, so I can't possibly take the credit."

I pulled him back down and kissed him. "I don't mind you refreshing my memory."

He slid down my body without a word, tracing the contours of it with his fingers. I shuddered under the memory and surrendered to the reality. His lips were like a furnace, burning me sweetly, swallowing me deeply.

My legs were shaking as if I was a beginner, the exquisite pleasure pulling all the goodness out of my dormant body. Eshan nipped at my length, his teeth mostly gentle, but giving a sharp pinch once in a while just for that extra spark. The suction made my toes curl and the grip he had on my balls kept me on that sweet, trembling edge. My hips kept lifting with his every suck, the sensitive skin begging for his touch. Like a mate who knew his other half, Eshan pushed all the right buttons and blew my mind in a matter of moments.

"Did you like that?" He grinned up at me, licking the corners of his mouth.

"Give me a second to remember how to breathe."

He flat-out laughed then, pressing his head against my chest and snuggling down affectionately. "I was so scared you were gonna die on us." I vaguely remembered that day, the pain consuming me and all the blood around me. The most vivid memory was the one of me wanting to die, and that wasn't something I wished to carry around in my head.

"What happened after I passed out?"

"I screamed. I couldn't get free to help you. But my screaming woke Konner up, and that idiot didn't chain him, just tied some rope around his wrists. He was there next to you pretty quickly, and I suppose he killed Claren. I wasn't really watching. Only, once he was next to you, you were unresponsive. So he forced the shift on you. You were all cut up and bleeding..." I felt Eshan's tears on my chest and I petted his hair in reassurance. I'm here, and I am all right.

"He forced you to change four times, Sebastian. And only then the bleeding stopped. But as soon as it did, you started shifting on your own, back and forth, never stopping. It was horrifying to watch. We even called a doctor to give you some sedatives to let your body rest. It was no use. They burned out so fast he couldn't even measure your blood pressure."

"But I am all better now," I whispered.

"Yes, you are. Come with me downstairs. I have to show you something!" he suddenly said, pulling me to a sitting position and pulling on a T-shirt over my head.

I understood his reluctance to speak of things that were behind us. He had lived through the month of my unconsciousness, worrying constantly about my well-being and fighting the helplessness of the situation. I was there with him now, and I think even me sleeping again felt too much like hanging between life and death.

"I'm too tired."

"Trust me, you don't wanna miss this." And before I knew it, I was at the entrance to the pack room, hearing the soft sounds of chatter and the blasting sounds of swords clashing, grunting and growling coming from the big-assed TV screen mounted on the wall.

My jaw went slack and I turned to face Eshan.

"I know! With you sick and all, Konner didn't have the heart to say no to the television."

Huh, I guess guilt worked even better than mutiny. I couldn't help it but grin.

I glanced around the room again; pack members noticed me standing there and kept nodding my way. Madoc was sitting on one of the chairs, Roisin poised conveniently in his lap, necking him, and there was that expression of ultimate bliss on his face that forces you to smile even if you'd never met the guy.

Eshan provided me with an explanation as soon as he caught the direction of my attention. "They disappeared into the forest for the whole weekend that you got hurt, and when they came out, you couldn't recognize either of them. They were covered in mud, leaves, blood, and God knows what else, but the new confidence in them was breathtaking."

I nodded back, both to Eshan to thank him for the explanation and to the members welcoming me back silently. I noticed the children playing on the floor, completely uninterested in the TV, and only then did I acknowledge the crowd standing around the seat of the one who was obviously the player, kicking it on the screen.

"Die mother... bad guy! Die!" someone sounding much like Konner screamed from the very front.

I stood on my toes, trying to see him, but there was nothing but the heads of the people standing around him and the very tip of the screen above them.

"He was against it for the first two weeks, but once he got hold of the controller, no one has been able to catch that seat. Only if he's sleeping, and let me tell you, that hasn't been very often," Eshan whispered.

"You're serious?"

"Yup. He's completely hooked!"

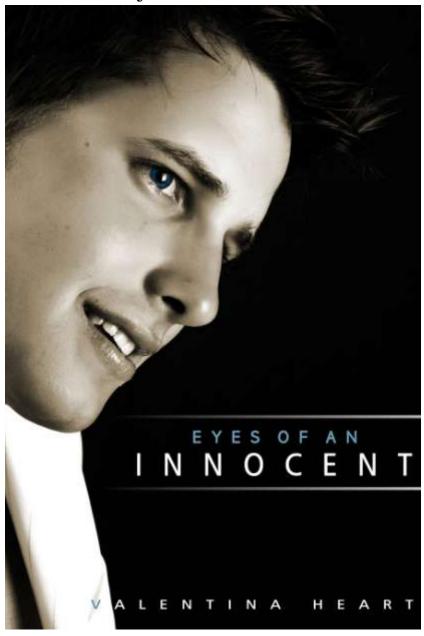
Just then the sound ceased and Konner jumped to his feet, his arms spread, the controller in his right hand, and screamed, "Who's the God of War now, motherfucker?!"

"Konner! The children!" Magen chided him from somewhere on the side, and I realized that nothing much had changed with the pack in the time that had passed. They were still very much my home.

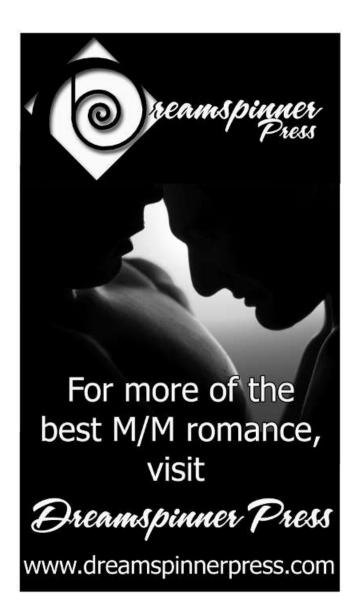
Eshan leaned closer to me, still holding me firmly against him, and pressed a kiss to the side of my neck, where his mark still stood proud. We were a part of a unit that would always stand by us. Be our support when we needed it, our comfort when we fell apart, and our insufferable in-laws when we least needed them. But above all else, we were a part of a family that would always love us.

VALENTINA HEART lives in Split, Croatia, a little tourist town by the sea, and has been writing for years for a small group of Internet fans. Much like reading or painting, it was nothing more than a hobby until she discovered the wonderful world of man love and found that she had a lot to say on the subject. In her free time, she enjoys free climbing, long walks by the sea, and yoga.

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Published by Dreamspinner Press 4760 Preston Road Suite 244-149 Frisco, TX 75034 http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/

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Released in the United States of America February 2011

eBook Edition eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-807-5