

Prologue

IT WAS a gorgeous night for a run, which had been the reason for me slipping out. I'd been seduced by the snowfall twinkling like diamond dust in the moonlight, the deep blues of the shadowy forest that bordered the estate, and the smells carried on the crisp December air. I roamed far, crossing over the meadow, where I should not have gone, simply because the animal in me craved speed. Above the tree line I was safe, but I couldn't run, instead only making slow progress through the deep powder. The craving to feel the wind in my fur was impossible to deny.

I hadn't counted on the hunters being out, but I should have. Some prize Merino sheep and one alpaca had gone missing from a nearby farm. The fleece from the animals was worth a lot of money, so the owner had put a bounty on the head of whatever was responsible, promising a sizable reward to whoever caught and killed the predator or predators.

I picked up the trail of the feral dogs easily, but they had headed back toward town, and I was returning to where I would be safe, on the grounds of the château. No hunting, or even tracking, was allowed on Roman Howell's land. He didn't believe in the practice. So once I crossed the stream, I would be safe. The only way to reach the forest preserve was to cross the estate, so either way, sanctuary was mine.

My proximity to safety didn't stop the sound of bullets whizzing by, sending up puffs of snow, or from splinters of bark flying in all directions. Some were in jeeps, others on ATVs, and they would have caught up with a normal animal and maybe even an ordinary pack member eventually. But I was neither of those; I was an alpha. And even though I had stepped aside, had never led the pack, there was no escaping genetics. I had been born to lead, and because of that, they had no hope of catching me.

As I ran onto the land I knew, disappearing in the thick underbrush, I heard the posse stop at the edge, frightened of the private security and the fines that could follow. I would have to remember to tell the police chief about the dogs the following day and move the suspicion away from something larger. The hunters explaining that they had tracked what appeared to be a huge wolf onto the grounds of the château would sound mad once the real culprits were caught.

I would make sure of that.

Chapter One

IT WAS sad, really. Ever since Roman Howell had been orphaned at age twenty-one, his prep school buddies, college frat brothers, and even his godfather, Vinson Whitmore III, had been waving hot boys under his nose. They were all hoping to find the one person he would fall for and thus control him. It was despicable, and I was glad that so far the young steel mogul had been smart enough not to get caught in a trap.

The most interesting thing about the situation was that because Roman's parents had accepted the fact that he was gay when he came out to them, the entire burg of Corbett,

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Maine, had gone ahead and followed their example. Usually when one thought of the population of an insular community, the assumption was that narrow-mindedness was par for the course. And while it was terrible to make snap judgments, it was the reputation of small towns. But because Roman's parents had basically owned the sleepy coastal hamlet, and their son was gay, it had become an open and friendly place and had never seen one incidence of a hate crime in the eleven years I had been there. That part made me happy; seeing men Roman knew barrage him with suitors did not.

"Oh, good morning, Roman." Hollister Ashcroft, son of Livingston Ashcroft, owner of the yacht club, chairman of the board of directors of the country club, and head of the historical society, greeted my boss. "I didn't know you were here for brunch."

The Calico, a country diner on Main Street, was in fact our favorite breakfast place. Roman loved their Eggs Benedict, and I was a fan of the spicy Denver omelet. All that information could have been relayed to Hollister if Roman had spoken to him. But he had, as of yet, not opened his mouth.

Moments ticked by.

No response.

Nothing.

I kept reading the sports page so I wouldn't actually have to see Hollister. Poor bastard. It must have been really hard to be all breezy nonchalant, "fancy meeting you here, isn't this just serendipity," when the whole scene was lost on the other person. Worst of all, it appeared stupid.

The epitome of lame.

Hollister cleared his throat.

I could tell Roman was fucking with him. The reports of his injuries from the accident had never been publically updated, so everyone thought the loss of hearing in his left ear that Roman had suffered right after the collision was permanent. But that was not the case. The man could hear a sneeze on the first floor when he was outside on the second-floor balcony, and that was no easy feat. So the fact that he was ignoring Hollister was kind of funny. I would make sure to lecture him about it later. I took it upon myself to make him a better person at every opportunity. Because I was forty-six and he was twenty-seven, he had to listen to me. I reminded him often that one had to listen to, and respect, the wisdom of one's elders. When he was younger, much eye-rolling had followed my pronouncements. Lately, all I heard from him was that I was nowhere near old. Why it mattered, or needed to be mentioned, I had no clue.

"Roman!"

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I jolted, which amused the hell out of my charge, as evidenced by his snickering laughter and his hand on my thigh, petting me.

“My apologies.” He sent a fake smile up at Hollister. “I hadn’t realized you were there.”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” Hollister said, deferring to him. “I just wanted you to meet my friend Brendan Reynolds, here visiting for Christmas with his family.”

Roman turned, focusing on Brendan, and in that split second, I saw the other man flinch. Apparently Hollister had not prepared him as well as he thought he had.

A lot of the guys that Roman’s “friends” brought to meet him were startled by his appearance. Most of his face resembled melted wax, and the skin that didn’t was cratered and thick in some places, stretched thin and reddened in others. At first glance, people were still surprised, but to me, he was simply Roman Howell, my boss, who I had met as a boy of sixteen and watched become a man I both respected and admired. Now, the pictures of him before the accident were what caught me off guard. What could have been an ordinary face had been transformed, to me, into a visage of resilience and power. But poor Brendan didn’t have my eleven, almost twelve, years of studying the man beside me, and so seeing Roman with fresh eyes had been disconcerting.

“Are you all right?” Roman teased me, his eyes infused with playfulness, his lips curled into a smile.

“He yelled,” I pointed out.

“I know he did, dear,” he said, placating me.

I glared at him. “What did I say about that?”

“About what?” he queried, all wide-eyed innocence.

“Sayin’ crap like that,” I grouched, going back to the paper. “Knock it off.”

“Sorry,” he lied under his breath.

“And move your hand.”

“Stop your grumbling.”

I ignored him.

He bumped my knee with his under the table instead, and I growled, which made him snort out a laugh. Apparently I was very amusing.

“Roman?”

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I studied him out of the corner of my eye when Hollister said his name and took the moment when his attention was diverted to allow my gaze to map every inch of the man's gorgeous frame. It had been happening a lot lately, and soon—not quite yet, but shortly—I would have to make a change. The problem was, I didn't want to leave him or my life, but since he was now starring in every hot, carnal dream I had, something had to give.

Days had rolled into months, and I could not get a handle on my desire. No amount of guilt or sense of obligation snuffed it out anymore, so I really only had one alternative: it was time for me to leave Roman Howell's side and let someone who didn't want to bend him over the dining-room table take over. The thing was... no one cared about him as much as I did. No one else had been with him since before the accident, since before his parents died; I was the only one. So I was loath to abandon him. But it was getting harder and harder, with each passing day, to banter with him, tease, and stand obediently at his side.

I tried to will my mind back to the place where I didn't notice his lean, defined build, the play of muscles under his clothes, or the way his silvery eyes sparkled when he smiled. The lengths I went to for diversion—the nightly runs over miles, simply to stay out of his way—were becoming glaringly noticeable for my absence. But keeping my hands off him, except in the performance of my bodyguard duties, was almost impossible. I wanted to touch him all the time. Once I did, though, once that line was crossed... there would be no going back.

The scariest part was that he might even want me for a night, a dalliance, a curiosity that once sated would not last, and we would be left with nothing but regret between us. And that one moment of passion would cancel out more than a decade of friendship and camaraderie. Even worse, he might convince himself he loved me, a feeling born out of gratitude and nothing more. I would not allow him to confuse indebtedness with love.

Just because I desired him—desperately craved him—was no excuse to let Roman miss out on the real thing with his own Prince Charming. And truthfully, I didn't want *me* for him. I wanted more. Wanted the world for him, because it was what he deserved. My dream was for Roman to meet the perfect guy his own age and get married and have kids. I had big plans for him that did not include me, an ex-army sniper who was already all used up before I even met him. He deserved the fairy tale.

“Quade.”

My mind had been drifting, but my gaze met his at the sound of my name.

“What has you so deep in thought?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

He was studying me, and as he did, he grinned slightly. Softness infused his eyes, and the expression on his face told anyone watching how much he liked me. Every thought, every

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emotion, was always clearly visible. It was part of the problem, the seeming drugging effect I had on him that could be mistaken for desire if I didn't know better.

"Roman."

"Yes," he answered absently, his face still lit up from looking at me when he lifted his head to finally give Hollister his attention. "Sorry. It's a pleasure, Brandon."

"Brendan," I corrected under my breath.

"Brendan," he amended, not missing a beat.

"I, um." Hollister hesitated and then said, "I just wanted to find out if it was all right if Brendan came with me to the party at your place tonight?"

Roman twisted his head back to me. "Is that on this evening's schedule?"

I grunted, which was my way of saying yes.

"And will you be traveling to Rockport?"

Funny he would ask, since he knew that was the plan. Going to Rockport was code for me getting laid. There were no gay bars in Corbett; there was, in fact, only one pub period, and so when I wanted to hook up for the night, I had to get in the car and drive. Roman himself never went in for one-night stands like I did. As far as I knew, Roman had had two liaisons in his life. I couldn't count mine. But he had actually been on friendly terms with both of his lovers; I was lucky to get first names. We had decidedly different agendas.

"Quade?"

His tone was suddenly sharp.

"What?"

"Are you or are you not traveling this evening?"

He never asked, he normally assumed. It was strange that he was prying,

"Answer me, please."

I coughed to hide my discomfort. "I always go when you have a party. Arman will be here in my place while I'm—"

He cut me off. "No. I'll need you to remain here."

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If he was telling me to forego what he knew I wanted, he must have had a good reason. I had never known Roman to be selfish. If he was asking me to stay, it wasn't on a whim.

"Are you listening to me?"

"I'll stay if you want." I squinted at him. "That's fine, but what's with you? Why would you even ask if you'd already made up your mind?"

He stared into my eyes like he was checking for something. "I need to speak to you about our trip."

"*Your* trip," I clarified.

"You're accompanying me."

"I go everywhere with you," I reminded him, lifting the paper to resume reading.

"Yes," he agreed, but then he did a strange thing and took hold of the bottom of my sweater, tugging it gently with his right hand, rolling the hem between his fingers. The action grabbed all my attention.

"You cold?"

He nodded.

Straightening from my slouch, I folded the paper and put it down on the table before pulling my heavy wool sweater up over my head. The T-shirt underneath rode up, and I felt him easing it back down, his hand grazing my bare abdomen.

"Here," I said, putting it over his head before leaning back. I wasn't nearly as small as him, six foot three to his own five foot ten, and whereas he was built like the swimmer he had once been, I was thick with hard, heavy muscle, outweighing him by easily seventy-five pounds. The sweater would swallow him.

"Roman?" Hollister wanted his attention back.

I returned to reading as Roman spoke to the annoying man, assuring him that of course Brendan was welcome, but that the party had, in fact, been moved to the country club.

"I'm sorry?"

Roman coughed. "I've decided not to host any more parties at L'Ange. It takes the staff days to clean up, and last time, even with the upstairs areas roped off, we still had people traipsing around on the second floor. If anyone had gotten to the third floor or higher... to the roof garden or the library or the solarium... to my private quarters, or Quade's...."

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“Yes, but the mansion is so beautiful,” Hollister argued from where he was standing because Roman had, I finally noticed, not invited him to sit. “Surely you want to show it off.”

“It’s a château,” he said tightly, and I knew why. His father, Sherman Howell, had always referred to it the same way. He had renamed it “château d’Ange,” or “house of angels,” for his wife and son, and in time it became “L’Ange” to locals and visitors. Apparently, before that, it had a grim name that I never learned; it was changed before I arrived. The château sat atop a heavily wooded hill, accessible only by a private road that overlooked the town of Corbett, Maine, and the sea beyond.

It was a massive structure, an estate house built before the Revolutionary War by an ancestor of the Howells, a French viscount. It had been passed down through the Howell family for six generations, boasting forty rooms plus the great hall, sunroom, grand salon, library, tapestry gallery, and the ballroom. I was used to living there after almost twelve years, so I didn’t really notice the substantial courtyard with the enormous circular drive anymore, the hundred acres the château sat on, the English garden in front, the pool house, the stables, or the arbor. It was simply home. And I didn’t own it, but I had a suite of rooms on the third floor that included a billiard room, a drawing room, an office, and my bedroom, which faced the front of the house, overlooking the sea. I would sit out on my large balcony, take in the stunning scenery—gorgeous, smooth turquoise water in the summer and slate-blue rolling waves in the winter—and realize that I was content. My life was not for everyone, and strangers, I was certain, wondered about me not having my own house or my own family. But I had never wanted children, and just because people were related, did not make them love one another. I had learned that firsthand when I came out to my parents and my sister. Being gay had rendered me a persona non grata, and I had left home and never gone back.

“The mansion is lovely,” Hollister plodded on, insisting on using the word Roman didn’t like. I realized I had forgotten he was still talking. Roman had too, apparently; he seemed as surprised as I was that the man was still carrying on a one-sided conversation. “And the patio that overlooks the sea is—”

“No one wants to stand outside in thirty-degree weather this close to Christmas,” Roman said snidely, leaning back in his chair so we were shoulder to shoulder, his thigh plastered to mine. “And your father was quite thrilled to have me rent out the country club for the event.”

“Of course he was.”

Silence.

“So there it is,” Roman concluded. “Yes?”

“Yes,” Hollister relented. “And what time will you be there?”

“I’m not certain,” he said thoughtfully. “Whenever Quade and I finish dinner.”

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“I’m sorry,” Brendan chimed in, leaning across the table, extending his hand to me. “We weren’t introduced.”

“No,” Hollister ordered, pushing Brendan’s arm down, not that I had even made a move to take his hand. “That’s Quade Danas; he’s Roman’s man.”

“Man?” Brendan was confused.

“His bodyguard, his—”

“Man,” Roman repeated. “Yes. I believe that covers it.”

“Oh.” Brendan was still having trouble. “Then why is he sitting down with you?”

It was like I wasn’t there.

“Roman affords all his employees a strange familiarity,” Hollister explained.

I snorted out a laugh, and Roman exhaled sharply, suddenly tired of the two men being there, I could tell. He bored easily and always let people know when he found their company tedious. It was a terrible habit.

“Stop,” I cautioned him.

“If that’s all,” Roman said, raising his voice, “I’ll see you both at the party later. Thank you for stopping by to say hello.”

He did not invite them to sit down, and he did not offer to buy them brunch; he merely excused them. Once they were gone, I elbowed him in the ribs.

“What was that for?”

“You were rude.”

The disgusted noise in the back of his throat was particularly horrible.

“And you were an ass.”

“As though I care what Hollister Ashcroft thinks of me,” he scoffed. “Really, Quade, wherever did you get such a ridiculous notion?”

“I’m not saying you have to marry any of the guys your buddies keep throwing at you, but it might be nice to get laid.”

“I have no interest in entertaining strangers in our home,” he informed me.

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“Your home.”

“Our home,” he insisted. “You reside there as well.”

“Yeah, but I get paid to be there.”

“Oh, who are you kidding?” he volleyed back. “Where would you live if you didn’t live with me?”

“You owe me that lake house in Seattle,” I replied. “You promised. I’ll move there.”

He made a dismissive sound, and I jostled him with my knee again.

“But I get it,” I rumbled softly. “It’s the place you shared with your folks, and you don’t want strangers there. People think because it’s a historical residence that they have the right to be in it, but they don’t.”

“No, they don’t,” he agreed, lifting the collar of my cowl-neck wool sweater, which he was now wearing, to his face and inhaling deeply. “Only we do. We were the only ones who really knew them.”

“I didn’t know them very long,” I reminded him.

“You knew them a lifetime, and they were both particularly fond of you.”

Sometimes the things the man said confused the hell out of me.

“I miss them,” he said.

And sometimes they made perfect sense. “I know.”

He closed his eyes a minute, and I watched him pull into himself.

“They’re proud of you,” I offered as I reached out and gripped his knee hard.

“I hope so,” he said softly, opening his eyes, his smile wide.

“No doubt,” I promised, leaning back. “Finish your breakfast.”

He chuckled. “Yes, dear.”

I opened my mouth to chastise him but noticed him gazing off into space, obviously lost in memories of his parents, and so I let it go. Better to let him have a moment with warm thoughts of them and simply be there for him when his focus returned. It was what I always did.