

Chapter Eleven – Lana

"But Mommy, I want to go back!" Evie wailed.

Lana stroked her fingers through her daughter's blonde hair. "I know, but we need to go home."

They had gone to the shifter cultural hall that morning to take part in a craft activity specifically geared towards shifter children and non-shifter parents. It had been a lot of fun, but after half an hour, Lana had started feeling sick. Half an hour after that, she had a pounding headache, her limbs felt weighted down and she had to call the girls and head home. There had been a few times where she feared she'd have to pull over and be sick but luckily she stayed steady. The girls had been noisily voicing their displeasure ever since leaving the hall, though.

"But I didn't finish my noodle art," Elaine complained. "And we didn't see Simon."

Lana flinched. Part of her had been hoping that Simon would be at the hall for some unrelated reason. Seeing him would have helped . . . She had to stamp that idea out quickly. Apparently, the girls were used to seeing him there, too, because they had started asking when he was going to arrive as soon as they got there.

Was it really fair for her to keep them separate? Even though they didn't know that Simon was their father, he was a fixture in their lives. More than she had realized, apparently, since they had whined about needing him there for the first five minutes of arts and crafts.

They would probably run into each other again. Simon would come to the cultural hall, and she wasn't going to keep them away from the shifter culture. Maybe she and Simon could work something out where he could spend time with them at the hall. It would be good for all of them, right?

"I wanna go back," Evie said, stomping a little foot.

"Mommy's not feeling good," Lana told them. "Why don't you find Peter? Maybe he would like to do noodle art here at home."

The twins joined hands and raced off. Lana sank into a chair, exhausted but grateful that they didn't force the argument. The last thing she needed right now was to have to deal with their stubbornness.

Two weeks. Two whole weeks before she could get her surgery. She rested her face in her hands. Why did it have to turn out like this?

She hated it. All of it. She hated still having this tumor inside of her. She hated that she kept thinking she needed to push Simon away, to keep a distance between them. She hated that she wanted to call him up, wanted to fall into his arms. Hated how tired she was, how exhausted she was of keeping up a brave face and not letting anybody see how terrified she was.

When she first got the diagnosis, she told herself it would all be fine because she was being proactive and nipping the problem in the bud. She was doing what was necessary in order to get herself better. At the time, she felt like she had everything under control. It was terrifying, yes, but she was doing what she could. She was getting her surgeon to take the tumor out of her; she was making sure things didn't get worse.

Now everything was falling apart. She didn't know how to stop it – didn't know where to start getting her life back in control.

Kari came into the room and Lana straightened, letting out a heavy sigh. It was going to work out. She just needed to keep treading water even if she couldn't swim. The surgery would happen. She could figure out whatever else was going on in her life later.

"Hey," Kari greeted her with a tight smile. "So, the girls were just telling me that Dr. Wolfe wasn't at the hall today."

Lana stood and pulled off her jacket. "I didn't expect him to be. They were disappointed, though."

Kari watched her for a moment. "So, what are you going to tell them the next time you go and he *is* there?"

A shrug answered her.

"Look, you made the right choice when you turned him down. You don't need a man like that in your life."

Lana snorted despite herself. "*A man like that?* What do you mean by that?"

"I mean a man that will leave a party with a girl half his age and—"

"I was the girl who left a party with a man twice my age."

Kari scowled. "You don't sleep around. From what you told me about that conversation you overheard with him and the nurse, he does."

"So?"

"So, I'm saying that you made the right choice."

Lana hunched over. This was yet another reason why she felt like everything was out of her control. In the past, she'd been able to talk to Kari about almost everything. Her older sister was somewhat more emotional than she was, but she was able to express her own feelings and work through her frustrations. Kari had decided that she didn't like Simon, though. That meant that it was hard to talk to her about him without her sister instantly going all fire and pitchforks.

"Where are the girls?"

"I put them in the reading room with Peter," Kari replied. "I told them that we'd do noodle art after half an hour. I set a timer – don't worry."

"Good." Evie wouldn't let the other two leave the room until the timer went off. A stickler for rules, that one. "I need to talk to you."

Kari sat down. "Of course, sweetie."

"I know that you don't like Simon and you keep saying that I made the right choice when I told him there wasn't room in my life for him. But if I made the right choice, why do I feel so terrible? It's like I'm skydiving and I cut the ropes to my parachute."

"You are not parachuting," Kari said firmly. "Robert and I are here for you, and we've got all of our friends. You have a safety net. You don't need to cling to the ropes that . . ." She trailed off and shook her head. "You don't need him."

"Maybe not, but I want him." She wanted his strength, his calmness, his arms around her. "What if I made a mistake?"

"You didn't. It's the hormones."

"Hormones," Lana repeated.

"Yes. This situation is scary, so your hormones are all out of whack. Dr. Wolfe gave you confidence and stability as your doctor. That is what you are craving right now. You don't want him, you want what he can give you. Once things have calmed down, you'll see I'm right."

Lana was silent, unsure if she agreed with her sister or not. Maybe it *was* just hormones. She sucked in a shaky breath. She did crave the physical contact as much as the emotional support. The thought of Simon's body over hers, her ankles locked behind his hips while his mouth buried into her neck made her core squeeze. She closed her eyes for a moment, letting herself indulge in the fantasy.

Imagining his hand between their bodies while he took her like an animal nearly made her groan.

"After your surgery, you should start some real dating," Kari interrupted her daydreams.

Lana struggled to return to the present. "Real dating?"

"Yeah. Real dating. Going on multiple dates, doing activities with a guy. Not just one dinner or movie followed by saying there wasn't any spark."

Well, that was a familiar argument. Lana couldn't help but smile. "Maybe."

"It will take your mind off of *him*." Kari made a face and snorted. "And somebody should tell him that flowers aren't going to work."

Lana straightened. "Flowers? What flowers?"

"They're in the kitchen, but—"

Lana took off before Kari could finish the sentence, her heart in her throat and a strange tingling feeling in her hands. Her heart pounded as much as Lana tried to calm herself. It was ridiculous to react this way to *flowers*.

When she got to the kitchen, she saw a beautiful bouquet of roses – yellow roses. Friendship roses. She stopped right beside them and reached to touch their velvet petals. They were more fragrant than the usual flowers she saw in the store. The bright yellow color made the kitchen look all the more inviting. A card in a sealed envelope sat next to them with her name written on the front. She ripped it open as Kari came into the kitchen after her.

Dear Lana, the card started.

I just wanted to apologize again for my recent actions. I should not have presumed that you would want me in your life. I understand your trepidation, and I assure you that I have no intentions of pushing this further. I hoped that we could be friends, but you are right. I don't think that would be good enough for me.

She chewed her lip. Not good enough for her, either. Why did her heart have to beat so fast and her cheeks heat like this?

If you need me for anything, I will be there. If not, I will keep my distance.

Respectfully, Simon.

She sighed heavily as she dropped the card and looked at the flowers again.
"They're beautiful."

"They're a bribe."

"They're an apology. Here." Lana handed her the card.

"Lana—"

"I'm going to go lie down. I have this massive headache."

Kari looked a little suspicious but didn't comment. Lana moved slowly to her room, wondering what to do now. She couldn't just call up Simon, could she? No, not after the selfish way she had been treating him. In her room, she stripped off her clothes and pulled on a nightgown before crawling into bed. Her headache still pounded at her temples, but despite trying really hard to just clear her mind, Simon's smile kept floating into her mind.

With a low sigh, she grabbed her phone and dialed him.

"Lana?" he greeted. His voice was light and hopeful.

"Hi." She chewed her lip. "Thank you for the flowers. They're really beautiful."

"You're welcome. I almost didn't send them. I don't want to be pushy."

Lana sagged against her mattress, her eyes filling with tears. Seriously, why did she have to start crying now? "You're not. You're being really sweet. Too sweet, maybe. I'm sorry for reacting the way I did. I shouldn't have gotten so defensive. You didn't do anything wrong and I just freaked out."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not." She sucked in a deep breath as her voice shook. "I'm scared. Scratch that. I'm terrified. About relationships, about you, about this surgery. I'm just so scared." She sucked in another breath as he was silent. "I know that I pushed you away. I thought that it would make things easier if I didn't have to think about what our relationship was or what it meant to me. But I'm still scared."

"It's okay." Simon's voice was low and soothing. "You have every right to be scared. This is a scary surgery. But you're going to be fine."

Two tears leaked from her eyes. "Will you go in with me?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation when he answered. "I will be there. I promise."