

Chapter Fourteen – Simon

Four Months Later

Simon hummed as he finished up inputting data from his last patient, a wide grin on his face. Lana's chemo was finally over, shorter than it normally would be because of the positive results they had gotten from the shifter tissue implanted into her chest wall. All signs pointed to a healthy body.

Her hair was growing back, just barely long enough to brush, but it suited her. In the end, she only wore the wig a couple times. She looked and felt much better. From Simon's frequent visits, he knew she was much stronger as well. It wasn't often that Simon felt so unabashedly optimistic about a patient's recovery. Maybe it was because he wasn't technically her doctor.

He pulled his blazer on and left his office. Clint was locking up cabinets and turning off computers. Their relationship had improved drastically over the last few months, partly because Clint had to help him shield off a few angry women and husbands after Simon stopped playing around. It was like when they were young once again.

"You look happy," his friend mentioned.

"I am happy. I don't remember the last time I was this happy." Actually, he did. It was before Katie fell sick. He paused a moment. Katie would like Lana. He was sure of that. She would approve of his choice. "You were right. I was drowning my sorrows by sleeping around; I hadn't allowed myself to process my grief. At least not consciously. But I think I'm ready."

"Ready for what?"

Simon grinned. "Something permanent. Clint, I'm in love."

If he was expecting shouts of 'hallelujah' and for Clint to beam, he was in for disappointment. If anything, his friend looked alarmed, his eyes widened, stance rigid. Simon waited, saddened by this reaction. After everything that Clint said about needing to move on and being faithful to one woman, he was acting like Simon had just declared that he was going to sell the practice and move to California to take up a career in surfing.

"In love," Clint repeated. "Okay . . . Please don't tell me that it's Lana Flores."

"She's not my patient."

"Simon—"

He held up his hand. "Just listen to me, okay?"

Clint wrinkled his nose but nodded.

"Lana is strong. She is determined. She can be submissive at times, but when things really matter, she stands firm. She always puts the good of her children above her own. She's brave and smart." Simon smiled. "She makes me glad to be alive again. I can talk to her, and she knows what she wants out of life. She inspires me; she makes me want to be a better person."

"And the fact that you're pushing fifty and she's still in her twenties?" Clint narrowed his eyes. "You have to have some reservations about that."

Simon licked his lips, hesitating. "Yes," he finally admitted. "I have some hesitations. She is much younger than I am. I worried that she wasn't experienced enough. But she has children – my children – and she has been through tragedy. She's had romances. We've told each other everything. She knows about my . . . indiscretions."

"You told her?" Clint looked impressed. "About all of it?"

"Every woman. That I can remember, at least. She told me about her men, too. There were more than you'd think."

Clint sighed. "Okay. Okay, so you guys have thought this through. You're going to get a lot of looks, though . . ."

"We already do."

"So how does she feel? Does she love you, too?"

Simon almost winced. Whenever they were alone, she couldn't keep her hands off him. He thought she loved him, but she had never said the words. "We haven't discussed our feelings for each other. Not yet. I'm planning on telling her tonight. It's been long enough since the surgery that she will be emotionally better prepared for whatever might come next."

"And what if she doesn't love you?"

"Then I'll pull back. I'll go back to being just a friend, and we'll make sure that whatever time we spend together is with the girls – in groups."

Clint eyed him for a moment before shaking his head. He clearly repressed a sigh, then clapped a hand on Simon's back. "I hope it works out. I really do."

"Me too. And it will. No matter what happens, it will work out."

Lana wore a midnight-blue dress that went well with her blonde hair and stunning eyes. She smiled at him, chewing on her lower lip, as he pulled out a chair for her. The low-cut V in her dress gave him an eyeful of her cleavage, and he couldn't help but look longingly at it. The red scar from her surgery peeked out from the edge, and he wanted to kiss it.

"You look beautiful," he said, moving his gaze back to her face.

A knowing smirk was on her face, and he couldn't help but grin back. Had she worn this dress on purpose to make him have these thoughts?

"Thank you," she said as she glanced around. "This is a nice place."

The lighting was dim. Each table was screened with transparent curtains and gentle music played in the background. Simon hadn't been planning on such a romantic location, but he had asked Lana on this . . . date? meeting? . . . at the last moment. It was the only place that still had reservations other than some cheap fast-food place. Definitely not the mood he was going for. Better romantic than cheap.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" she asked, her brow raising.

Simon smiled nervously. He reached across the table and took her hand in his. "Well, we've talked about a lot of things. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"Do you?"

Simon nodded.

"Maybe I have something . . ." She twitched and shrugged. "Um . . . you go first."

"Okay." Butterflies fluttered in his stomach. "Well, I guess I've been alone and lonely for a long time. Ever since Katie died. These last few months have been . . . amazing. I've remembered what it means to be close to people again. You, the girls, even Clint. I'm living again, rather than just existing. And that's because I saw how strong you were. How determined you were to be there for Evie and Elaine."

She leaned forward, chewing on her lip. Her eyes were bright, and she squeezed his hand. The ring on her middle finger winked at him. It was her mother's, and Simon let himself muse on the fact that her eyes were the same color for a moment.

"What I'm trying to say is that you're important to me," he continued. "I . . . I want you to always be in my life. The more I get to know you—"

A shout cut him off. Both he and Lana turned together to the doors leading into the restaurant. Simon jumped to his feet, a growl in his throat as half a dozen people in black masks stormed in. They waved guns in the air and shouted for everybody to drop. The hostess squealed and one of them grabbed her and threw her to the floor. A gunshot – Simon started forward, thinking the woman had been shot, but plaster rained down from the ceiling.

Lana's hands grasped his arm. Her breath came in ragged pants. He put an arm around her, wanting to comfort her while the masked gunmen came in closer. Patrons and servers all dropped to the floor. The logical part of Simon's brain made him get down, too, although his Wolf growled and seethed, fighting to get out. The reaction surprised him. He wasn't a violent man.

"Phones, purses, wallets and jewelry," one of the men said, going to a table to their left. "Hand them over."

Simon pulled his phone and wallet from his pocket when another of them came towards him and Lana. He handed them over without complaint. Lana whimpered beside him. He put a protective arm around her, reminding himself not to growl at the gunmen. The best thing he could do right now was just to stay quiet and hope that nobody was hurt. He was insured.

The man stuck his gun in Lana's face. "The ring."

Her mother's ring. Simon stared at the gun pointed at his mate's face, and the growl he had been holding in erupted.

He acted without thinking. He swiped the gun away from Lana, then threw himself from his position on the floor. His clothes shredded as his wolf burst forward. He grabbed the gunman by the arm while Lana screamed. The others turned towards him. The man he held screamed, and he crunched down on the arm. His gun dropped as something snapped. Gunshots rang out; a burning pain flashed across Simon's hindquarters.

He released the man with a howl, then grabbed him again and swung him around. The man screeched an inhuman noise of pain. Simon threw him into one of the other robbers and lunged forward again. More gunshots. More pain. He stumbled.

There was a shout from somewhere behind him. He leaped on one of the gunmen just before the customers charged. More gunfire rang out, and then the customers were on the gunmen. They fought back using steak knives, chairs, anything that they could get their hands on. The gunmen shouted. Simon snapped the arm of the

closest one and jumped over the heads of the other customers to knock a third one over. His gun went flying, caught by another customer. The other gunmen tried to run, but Simon quickly helped the other customers blockade and subdue them as well.

Sirens wailed outside as Simon returned to Lana. He nudged her with his nose, whining, and she threw her arms around him. His Wolf retreated, and he wrapped his arms around her, checking her body to make sure that she was alright. When he saw blood staining her dress, his heart nearly stopped. He tore the fabric open, looking for the wound.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"You were shot!"

Lana shook her head. "No, *you* were."

He glanced down at himself. Blood poured from several holes in his side. "Oh."

His head started to spin. Adrenaline ran through his blood, and he pressed his hands to his injuries. Lana's eyes were huge, face pale. Her hands trembled as she ripped off the skirt of her dress to wad into his wounds. Simon glanced around, looking to see if anybody else was shot. It didn't appear that they were. Police were pouring through the doors. Simon allowed himself to lie down.

"Don't worry," he said, brushing his fingers against her face. "I'll heal. I'm a shifter, it'll be fine."

"You shouldn't have done that. You could have been killed."

"They wanted to take your mother's ring."

She shook her head. "It's not worth your life, you silly wolf. Do you really think I'd care more about a ring than you?"

"I couldn't let them take it. I love you, Lana."

Her eyes widened.