

Chapter Six – Simon

Simon checked his watch and then his appointment book again. Lana was late. She had never been late to an appointment – always at least fifteen minutes early. She was possibly one of his favorite patients because of her punctuality. The fact that she wasn't there was cause for concern. His fingers tapped one side of his desk phone, waiting. Maybe she had been in an accident.

A knock on his door made him jump. Clint poked his head in. "Looks like she's late. You want to go for lunch?"

"She has two girls she just learned were shifters. I think a little leniency is deserved in this case," Simon responded, trying to look bored. "Five more minutes."

Clint's brows rose, but, fortunately, he didn't comment. Simon turned to his computer, trying to put Lana from his mind. It didn't stop him from looking at his clock again in another minute. Where was she? Had something happened? Or was she just managing her time poorly? He stood and grabbed his coat, determined to leave, then sat down again.

Katie was always late for everything. It didn't matter how much time he gave her to prepare. She was always just a little late and it drove him crazy. She'd be sitting at her dresser, putting on her earrings, telling him he needed to be less tightly wound while he stood at the door, tapping his foot and huffing impatiently.

A fond smile crossed his face. For the first time, thinking about Katie didn't open a giant, raw hole in his chest. Instead, the warmth of memories gave him some comfort. If she could see the way he ran his practice, she'd be horrified. He could almost hear her voice saying that everybody had their own things to deal with. Maybe he needed to completely reevaluate his policy about late patients. It wasn't fair for him to expect people to be able to predict everything that happened in their lives.

Maybe there were other things he could change as well.

He looked up Lana's information and called her. For some reason, nerves knotted in his stomach. He tried to ignore them. There was no reason to be nervous. He was calling a patient who was usually punctual to make sure that she was alright. There was nothing wrong with that, was there?

"Hello?" Lana's voice quivered, clearly indicating that she had been crying.

Every muscle in his body tensed, and his hands clenched over the phone. "It's Simon," he said. "Is everything okay? You're late for your appointment to discuss your surgery and—"

He cut off at the distinctive sound of a sob. Something inside him twisted, and his jaw tightened. Protocol be damned. There was clearly something going on with her, and he would be a cad if he didn't follow up. It didn't help that his Wolf started to whine and paw at his chest, demanding that he act immediately to soothe her. The words were out of his mouth before he even realized that he was speaking.

"I'm coming over right away. You're at 3892 on Bigelow Ave., right?"

"Yes," Lana sniffed. "Honestly, you don't have to come. I just forgot about the appointment. Can we reschedule?"

"I'm coming over," he repeated. "I'll be there soon."

Another sniff. "Okay."

Something inside him seethed, wanting to hurt whoever made her cry. He hurriedly stuffed his arms into his jacket and stepped out of his office. Clint, at a desk filing paperwork, eyed him.

"Five minutes are up," Simon said, knowing his friend would just take everything the wrong way. "I'm off the rest of the day. Go ahead and take the rest of the day yourself."

Clint's eyes narrowed. If he was wanting to dispell his friend's suspicion, clearly he had to do a better job at it. Before Clint could say anything, Simon gave him a rakish grin and began buttoning his jacket. There was one reason for him to be leaving the office in this big of a hurry that Clint wouldn't press.

"I've got an appointment with a hot redhead. Mindy something. Maybe Mandy. Or Margret."

The suspicion cleared from Clint's eyes, replaced quickly by disgust. He sighed and shook his head, but luckily chose not to comment. Simon made sure he kept his pace leisurely as he went out to the parking lot, even though his heart slammed into his ribs and his Wolf growled at him to go faster. Once he was on the main street, all bets were off.

It wasn't until he was at her house, climbing out of the car, that he really stopped to think about what he was doing.

Here he was at a patient's house. Not just any patient, though. No, it was a woman he had slept with. Before she was a patient, true, but what did that really matter? She hadn't even called him. He had called her. The sound of tears had brought him running, and now here he was. It was a stupid thing to do. And yet, he still slammed the car door and strode up to the house. He knocked at the door and waited.

It's because of the children, he told himself.

Lana wasn't a shifter, but her two little girls were. It was clear that she was overwhelmed by the responsibility. No wonder. As rich as she was (and she was rich, judging by the mansion she lived in), she was still a young single mother struggling with a potentially fatal disease and raising two children when she had no idea they were even shifters until a few days ago.

He just wanted to make sure she had the resources to give them the best care she could. It wasn't like there was anything inappropriate about that, was there?

Besides, these children were fatherless. He needed to have a life besides work and women, didn't he? Clint was always trying to get him to get a hobby. Well, maybe he was going to start helping out fatherless shifter children being raised by a single human mother. That might open him up to the same problems as having female staff in his clinic, but as long as he made a rule about not sleeping with the mothers, there was no harm in it. Even Clint would have to agree with him on that one.

He knocked again. This time, he heard a muffled 'come in' from inside, and opened the door. "Lana?"

"In here."

He stepped into the house and his eyes widened. Toys were strewn everywhere. Stuffing from pillows lay in globs here and there. There was a patch of yellow liquid at the base of the stairs to the left. Teeth marks were etched into the banisters and claw marks tore into the walls. He closed the door behind him, shaking his head. If he didn't know exactly what pups could be like, he'd have thought that there had been a robbery.

He followed the mess into the living room to find Lana sitting in the middle of a disaster: toilet paper flung everywhere, cardboard boxes chewed in half, smashed vases, a grandfather clock laid on its side, its whole face popped right out. Tears poured down Lana's cheeks, her whole demeanor defeated. She was still in her pajamas.

Simon knelt beside her. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss away her tears but held himself back. He had to maintain some professional distance.

"Where are your girls?" he asked. Given the destruction, he wouldn't be surprised if they were passed out from exhaustion. He had been known to destroy a house or two growing up, but never anything like this.

"At the park. My sister took them to burn off energy." Lana sniffed. She took a deep breath, clearly trying to pull herself back together – and burst into sobs again. Simon reacted on instinct, embracing her, and she clung to him. Her whole body shook as she buried her face into his shoulder. "I'm a terrible mother. I don't deserve them. They need a mother who is better than I am. Someone who has patience. I don't know what to do."

He was reminded of all the times when Katie would burst into tears when they were newlyweds, declaring herself a terrible wife. At first, he thought that it was something that he did that triggered it, but learned it was just her insecurities about what she perceived she was supposed to be versus what she actually was. In time, he learned exactly how to reassure her.

Patting Lana's back softly, he let her cry until her sobs had subsided, then moved her to the couch and got her a glass of water. After she had drunk some, he continued to rub her back.

"Tell me what happened."

Lana shuddered. "They both had nightmares last night and came into bed with me. Sometime during the night, they shifted. Their pull-ups fell off and both of them wet the bed. So it started off pretty nasty. Then, I was trying to get them to shift back so they could eat their breakfast and they wouldn't. They started racing all over the house, breaking things, chewing on things, peeing on the carpet. I didn't know what to do. They've never acted like that before."

Simon sighed. "It's part of being a shifter. Take the energy that a normal three-year-old has and then mix it with the energy that a puppy has. Also, it will take a while for their brains to really gel the two sides together. For many shifter children, it's like there are these two halves of them that they don't really know how to react to."

"I yelled at them."

"Everybody yells."

"I said that I didn't want puppies for children and I wanted them to be little girls, not animals."

Her face buried deeper into his chest. Simon stroked her hair, making sure she knew that there were no judgments coming from him. "My mother used to tell me the same thing, and she was a shifter, too."

"It's different from me, though." Lana lifted her face. "I could see it on their faces. It was like I was saying that I didn't want them to be who they are. I didn't want

them to be shifters. And I couldn't help but think . . . is that what I really want? I know that they didn't change, that they're still my girls, but am I looking at them differently? What if I love them less now?"

"Shh." Simon kissed her forehead. "Shh. You love them. Anybody can see that."

"But—"

He pressed a finger to her lips. "No buts. You love them. You have to be patient with yourself, too. You don't know everything. Nobody does. As long as you are teaching yourself more about shifters and how to help your girls, it's going to be okay."

Lana's green eyes looked up at him hopefully. "Really?"

"Yeah." He smiled. "You can't expect to be supermom. You're allowed to be emotional. Just for now, though, maybe put the family heirlooms in a box in the attic. Hire a maid and a nanny. Maybe two. It will do wonders. Shifters traditionally raise their young communally. In my home, I had my mother, father, two unmarried uncles, an aunt, and both sets of grandparents, yet I still destroyed the house. You can't suppress instinct, but you can minimize its pressure on you. Oh, and lots of physical games and exercise."

"Is that your medical advice?" she asked with a teasing lilt to her voice.

Simon nodded. "As your doctor, I prescribe you a maid and a nanny. To be used whenever you need them."

She laughed and rubbed at her eyes. "Thank you. And here I am, a complete mess."

"A beautiful mess." His gaze flickered to her lips without even meaning to.

Her eyes heated, and Simon had kissed her before he meant to. Her warm mouth eagerly accepted his and her hands curled around his biceps. Heat flooded his body, making his skin tingle and loins tighten. Lana closed her eyes, leaning against him. Her body molded perfectly against his, and he found himself reaching under her top. The kiss deepened and he laid her back in the mess, holding her close while her eyes fluttered shut.