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MARLOWE



“*Best pancakes in the world,*” I read aloud, looking over the sticky, laminated menu. “Do you ever wonder how restaurants get away with those claims? Legally speaking, of course.”

Elias laughed, leaning back in his seat, an adorable dimple coming to life on his left cheek. “I can’t say that I have. But how do you know it’s not true?”

“Hmm...” I ran my finger down the exhaustive list. “I guess I’ll have to order a stack and find out. I’m sure you can expense this, right? It’s for research, after all.”

He lifted his hand to signal the waitress. “My favorite kind of research.” His green eyes twinkled mischievously and his voice lowered. “Tell me, Ms. Linden, do you have a sweet tooth?”

The look he gave me was ravenous and disarmingly charming. As an engaged woman, it was inappropriate for me to flirt back, but he was way too cute. And the vibe I got from him seemed much more harmless than the counselor at the hospital. He felt like a safe person to joke around with. Someone I could trust.

Damn, he must have been a successful lawyer. I couldn’t imagine trying to argue against this guy in court. He probably had all the judges wrapped around his finger. Good thing he was working for me at the moment.

“The sweetest,” I answered, giving a small wink.

He grinned, and the scent of his cologne wafted over the table, making my mouth water more than the bacon sizzling in the kitchen. I needed to ask him what he was wearing without sounding creepy so I could get a bottle for Mike for Christmas. Notes of bergamot and pepper, if my nose was correct.

“What can I getcha?” asked the waitress, leaning hard on her hip to pop out her leg.

“We’ll take two cups of coffee, a short stack of your buttermilk pancakes, a short stack of your blueberry pancakes, another of your apple cinnamon...”

My jaw fell open as he continued ordering.

“Let’s see, and then we’ll do two orders of the carnivore platter... Wait.” He paused and looked at me. “You’re not on some hippy, Californian diet, are you?”

I rolled my eyes. Why did everyone from the Midwest always assume people on the west coast were all gluten-free, vegan, health nuts? “Extra sausage patties, please,” I added, turning to the waitress. She blew a bubble with her gum as she jotted down the rest of our order, taking our menus and heading off.

I watched as the doors to the kitchen swung shut and whistled. “Well, I certainly will need to be on a diet after all this food. I think you ordered close to 10,000 calories.”

Elias waved off my concern. “I’m sure we’ll burn it off pretty quickly.”

My face heated. Maybe he wasn’t so innocent? He leaned forward, speaking quietly. “Reading wills is quite the workout.”

“Oh.” I chuckled nervously. “Right.” I had to stop reading so much into things.

We got our coffees and I poured three packets of sugar and four little containers of half-and-half into my cup while Elias watched in horror. “You weren’t kidding about that sweet tooth,” he said.

“Are you sure that even counts as coffee anymore?”

“Ha ha,” I replied sarcastically. “Sorry, I don’t hate myself enough to drink it black. Blegh.”

The snow was coming down harder now, and while I should have been disappointed that I likely wasn't making it home anytime this weekend, part of me was enjoying the coziness of the moment. Who wouldn't want to eat their weight in pancakes sitting across from one of the hottest guys they'd ever met?



There was no reasoning to explain how I'd managed to finish half of everything Elias had ordered and not explode – sometime between the shock of yesterday and this morning, my stomach had turned into a black hole, devouring whatever was in its path. Perhaps being in the cold again had my body convinced I needed to prepare for hibernation.

Elias's satellite office wasn't too far from the diner, but the roads were getting slick and I hoped the trucks would finish salting everything by the time we were done.

The address he had entered into my phone led me to an old Victorian house that had been converted into commercial property. On the first floor, I saw signs for a notary and a small dentistry, while Elias's office was upstairs. The building was closed for the holiday and the heat turned off. I shivered as Elias fiddled with the keys.

"California has made you weak," he joked, seemingly unaffected by the low temperature.

"Nah, I've always hated the cold," I replied through my chattering teeth.

"Hm, I bet." The richness of his voice sent another shiver through my body. "Let me guess, you're the type of woman who lives most of the year under a pile of throw blankets with a mug of hot chocolate."

Something about how he had me pegged made me a little mad, but he wasn't one hundred percent right, and I haughtily corrected him, "No, I prefer Earl Grey tea, thank you. And let me guess, you spend most of your time drinking cheap beer on a cracked leather sofa, getting pissed off because the Bears are losing again?"

He let out a deep laugh. "You're almost there. I like to spend my time drinking *craft* beer on my *immaculate, full-grain* leather sofa, celebrating another Packers win."

The door finally opened and Elias led me into the tastefully decorated room.

"At least until they choke in the playoffs," he sighed bitterly.

The hardwood floors were polished to a warm gleam, and an ornately decorated Persian rug sat under a pair of damask upholstered armchairs in front of a dark mahogany desk. Built-in bookcases were filled to the brim with law texts.

Elias gestured towards a fireplace. "I have no idea if that actually works, and I don't control the thermostat for the building, unfortunately. But here." He took off his puffy, down jacket and placed it around my shoulders. "I wouldn't want you freezing to death."

Another blush crept up my cheeks, his enticing scent and lingering heat enveloping me. "Oh, thank you. Are you sure you don't need it?"

He walked around and sat in his chair, turning on his computer. "Not at all. I run pretty hot."
You sure do.

Elias gestured towards one of the armchairs. "Please, have a seat and we'll get started. Your father's business partner should be here soon. He was also named in his will."

That's right. Oliver had mentioned my dad had a business partner. But in what? "I have so many questions, because honestly, all this talk of my dad being some upright pillar of the community slash business owner slash devoted husband until the end is really confusing me."

Elias rubbed his thumb along his lip as he listened. Something about his gaze seemed calculating and predatory. Combined with his intoxicating scent and the nice coat, I was getting pretty warm, and I crossed my legs subconsciously.

His eyes darted towards the movement and his expression glazed over for a second, as though he could sense how inappropriately turned on I was.

Ugh, I wasn't normally so horny for strangers like this. He was probably exhausted. He'd just driven up here from Chicago, and I needed to stop thinking about sex.

"I don't know if I can answer all of them, but I'll certainly do my best," he replied. "Why don't we start with his business? Your father owned a large construction company with another family, the Wolcotts. They're responsible for most of the new buildings in the Chippewa Valley, and employ close to 500 people. Wolfcrest Construction is also one of the largest corporate donors in the area. You can't go to a local event or high school game without seeing their name plastered all over everything. He didn't request a large funeral, but I'm sure the service will be well attended by the community."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Who the hell was my dad? All those years, not a single peep. He didn't even seem to care when his own son had died, but he could buy new uniforms for the school's football team? Could sponsor a Veteran's Day parade?

Elias watched me intently, his body still as he gauged my reaction. "This comes as a shock, I take it."

My tongue ran along the bottom of my teeth, and I looked out the window as the storm progressed. "I haven't seen him for twenty-two years. No cards, no letters, no phone calls. He's as good as a stranger to me. I suppose any news of the type of life he led would be a surprise. Although honestly, with the lack of contact, I'd always assumed he just led a sad, simple life. I gotta say, it hurts a bit to know he was so successful and put together yet couldn't be bothered to maintain a relationship with me."

He let out a deep sigh, a pained expression falling across his handsome face. It looked like he was trying to hold himself back from saying something, some secret information that would help me understand why my dad had abandoned us that would help it all make sense.

But I was probably reading too much into it. How could he know what my dad's motivations had been?

Elias let me sit with the news for a few minutes, and I tried to come to terms with it all. But for some reason, my mind kept wandering back to the meeting with Oliver.

"Why isn't it safe for me to go to his house alone?" I finally asked, breaking the silence.

Elias stiffened in his chair. "Who told you that?"

"That weirdo counselor at the hospital. He said it wasn't safe for an 'unbonded' – whatever the hell *that* means – woman to go to the town my dad lived in alone. What was he talking about?"

His brows furrowed and a look of inner turmoil presented itself on his features.

Okay, maybe it wasn't in my imagination. What was he wrestling with?

He opened his mouth to speak when heavy footsteps sounded, coming up the stairs. Elias's office door burst open, and another large man stood there fuming. He had close-cropped dark hair and a short beard, his eyes piercing blue. Underneath a brown Carhartt jacket, he wore a green flannel with a cream-colored henley shirt. His jeans were stained with paint, his work boots scuffed.

Why was everyone in this city so hot?

"What the fuck do you mean his half is going to his *daughter*?" he boomed.

And such an asshole?

The inflection on the last word raised my hackles. I assumed this must be the aforementioned business partner – and wouldn't you know it, he was a misogynistic dick with a chip on his shoulder. Awesome.

Elias rose out of his chair quickly, his tone biting and volume increasing. “Camden, sit down so we can talk about...”

“I don’t want to talk. I want answers!” His voice was so loud it shook the walls, and it almost made me want to shrink in my seat. He pointed towards his chest, still only looking at Elias. “This has *always* been an alpha-run business! I don’t care who her daddy is. There is no way some inexperienced beta female can walk in and—”

This was getting to be too much, and I couldn’t help but snicker. His furious gaze finally landed on me, then widened in surprise as his nostrils flared wildly. He looked at Elias, who nodded curtly.

I stood up and gave him my most condescending expression, flipping my hair over my shoulder. “Beta? Alpha? Is this some kind of furry thing?” The man, Camden, took an intimidating step forward, but I held out my hand and continued. “Look, I don’t consent to being a part of whatever kink you have going on, and I certainly object to the use of ‘female’ as some derogatory insult. When Mr. Faulkner first told me I inherited half my dad’s business, I was already considering selling it if possible. But now?” I scoffed, crossing my arms. “I might just keep it out of spite.”

Camden’s chest began to heave, and he easily cut the distance between us with his long stride. I flinched, worried he might be the kind of guy who’d actually hit a woman half his size for “threatening his masculinity,” but instead he grabbed my shoulders and buried his nose into my neck, inhaling deeply.

Freeze. That was the only instinct my body wanted to follow, which annoyed me greatly. Before I found my voice and the courage to knee him in the groin, Elias ran around his desk and grabbed Camden off me. “Stop it, you idiot, she doesn’t know!”

Camden roared in response, his pupils fully blown, and he shoved Elias back. Elias cocked a fist and swung towards him, but Camden dodged and barreled into his chest, slamming him against a bookcase.

I watched in horror as the two men fought, backing up until I hit the wall behind me. What the hell *was* in the water here? What had guys turning into violent cavemen at the drop of a hat? Or a sniff of the neck, apparently. And what was it all these guys insisted I didn’t know?

My hand rested on my chest, and what was supposed to be a normal breath suddenly became a needy, high-pitched whine. The two men stopped dead in their tracks and rushed to my side, crowding over me with concern in their eyes.

The scents coming off them, bergamot and pepper from Elias and cardamom and cedar from Camden, invaded my lungs and made my vision hazy. My nipples tingled and my thighs clenched, while my fingers flexed with the thought of running them across their muscled chests. How could I be turned on right now? I was absolutely terrified and furious! Forget the water, there was something in the air making everyone extremely sexy, horny, and dangerously aggressive. I needed to get back to San Francisco. The sooner the better.

“Ms. Linden, I’m so sorry, I can explain...” Elias panted, his clothes disheveled.

Camden reached out to touch my face, but I pushed his hand away, pointing a finger at both of them. “I’m giving you one minute to tell me what the hell is going on before I walk out that door and call the cops.”

Elias nodded, knocking Camden out of the way with his shoulder. “Yes, of course, just please sit down.”

I gave Camden as wide a berth as possible and settled into one of the armchairs. Camden took the other one, his eyes never leaving me while Elias made his way back across the desk. He cleared his throat, straightening his tie and smoothing back his hair.

“Have you ever heard of shifters?” he began, clasping his hands together.

I looked between the two of them, their attention suffocating. “Shifters? You mean... like *shapeshifters*?”

They nodded, Camden's knuckles turning white as his fingers dug into the arms of the chair.

I sighed, getting up and taking off Elias's coat. "Well, I'll just show myself out. You are both officially insane, and... yeah. I guess that's it. Do whatever the hell you want with my father's half. Peace out." I flashed an awkward V with my fingers and headed towards the exit.

Camden rushed up and shut the door in front of me before I could leave, leaning against it as he caged in my body with his massive frame. I turned around, his face inches from mine.

"It's true," he whispered. I swallowed nervously as the space between us continued to shrink. "Shifters exist, and you are one, just like us. Just like your dad. And not only that, but you're a pretty special shifter, one we haven't seen in a long time."

His hand cupped my cheek, and he lowered his face to sniff my neck again. "Mmm, pistachio and honey," he sighed, his nose grazing my skin. "You smell so sweet, baby. Like a dream come true."

My knees went weak, and I fought the instinct to melt into his touch. "Yeah, I know. I got it from Sephora."

He chuckled, his hand moving behind my head and grabbing my hair gently, wrapping a few strands around his finger. "Nah, this is all natural." He stepped closer, until our bodies were touching, and I felt his erection through his pants.

Whatever power he had somehow managed to wield over me broke, and I finally snapped back, shoving him away. "Jesus Christ, dude. What the hell is wrong with you?"

Elias moved in his chair. "Ms. Linden, I know it sounds bizarre, but your parents, Mr. Wolcott and I... we're all wolf shifters. Over the years, we've lost our ability to connect with our inner beasts, but we still retain a significant portion of our feral DNA. Specifically, our impulses and, how can I put this? Our *social structures*."

Camden still didn't move, and I side-stepped him so I could face Elias more directly. "Social structures aren't biological."

"They are for shifters," Camden replied. He licked his lips, his eyes raking over me from head to toe.

Elias noticed and growled, causing Camden to growl back. It was all way too much.

"Knock it off!" I snapped. They whipped their heads back towards me, and Camden shuddered in what looked like delight.

"That's the cutest bark I've ever heard. Do it again, baby," he groaned, his hand reaching for his pants.

I curled my lips in disgust. "You're gross." I turned back towards Elias. "Look, this is all making a bit more sense now."

"It is?" Elias asked.

"Yep." I nodded. "My mom refused to have me and my brother live in this weird furry cult, and my dad left us so he could play werewolf in the woods with a bunch of delusional LARPer who throw around words like 'alpha' and 'beta' as if they actually mean something."

Elias's shoulders dropped and Camden took another step towards me, desire seeping through his voice. "I can show you right now that alpha means something real around here." He grabbed my wrist and forced my hand onto his bulging hard-on.

I reeled back and slapped him as hard as I could, and he let me go while laughing.

"You're a fucking pig!" I yelled, my voice shaking with rage.

Storming down the stairs, I got back into my rental car and headed to the highway at a snail's pace on the slippery roads to get to the chain hotel I'd seen on my way over. I'd get a room, barricade the door from those freaks, and book the next flight home.

None of what happened in that office had been okay, but for some reason my rage was tinged with desire, and I couldn't deny how strangely turned on I felt, which frustrated me even more. I

shook my head to clear it, but my mind refused to let go of its thoughts of those two. Did they taste as good as they smelled?

I bit my lip reflexively, remembering the size of Camden's erection. The man was packing. There was no denying that. It was almost too much – would he even fit?

Goddamnit, stop it.

I turned the air conditioning on full blast and found a polka station on the radio to get my mind out of the gutter and back to the snowy road in front of me.