**LION SHAPESHIFTER**

**BILLIONAIRE**

**BBW ROMANCE**

**SYNOPSIS**

*She groaned at the feel of his rippling muscles through his t-shirt, wanting to feel more.*

*Billionaire, playboy, and thrill seeker—Brad Waldon has it all. He does whatever he wants, whenever he wants and that works just fine for him.*

*However, with his father’s retirement looming there’s pressure for him to take over the family business. He knows he doesn’t want to work in an office, but matters are complicated further when beautiful reporter Annie Martin is assigned to interview him.*

*Annie has always been devoted to her career so she accepts the assignment without hesitation, even though she has no interest in the heir to Waldon Corporation. Brad’s complete lack of direction disgusts her, and his attitude doesn’t help. She can’t deny her attraction to him, but she knows better than to give a bad boy her heart.*

*Brad can’t fight the feelings she stirs in him and his lion’s pull toward her, but he doesn’t want to acknowledge what it means. She’s a pain in his side and it is obvious how her low opinion of him is, but he doesn’t want to think of what will happen once her assignment is concluded.*

*When Annie stumbles on his secret, can he trust her with more than just keeping the secret, but his heart as well?*

***A standalone BBW paranormal alpha lion shapeshifter romance.***

***Around 20,500 words. No cliffhangers!***

***KEYWORDS:***

*lion shapeshifter romance, bad boy shifter romance, mate to order, mail order bride romance, short stories, bbw shifter romance, quickie romance, mail order mate.*

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# Chapter 1

“What do you mean you don’t want it?” David sputtered, staring incredulously at his son. Brad shrugged and turned a cold shoulder to his father. He turned back to the coffee brewing, the delicious fumes filling the kitchen.

“We’ve had this talk before, I’m not interested in the company.” Brad said, refilling his mug with the fresh brew. He turned back and looked into a pair of blue eyes which mirrored his own. His father was glaring at him with a mixture of confusion and disappointment. It was a familiar glare he didn’t much care for.

“But it’s my legacy, our *family’s* legacy. It’s your birthright!” His father argued.

“Why do you want me to run it, anyway? I’ve *never* taken an interest in the company.” Brad replied. His father let out an angry huff, obviously not liking the direction the conversation was going.

“You’re my son, I guess I always assumed once this rebellious phase was over you’d follow in my footsteps.” His dad said, his large shoulders drooping in defeat. Brad scoffed and patted his father on the shoulder.

“I’m thirty-six years-old, Dad. It stopped being a ‘rebellious phase’ ten years ago. Now it’s just a lifestyle.” Brad said calmly, setting his empty cup in the sink. “I hate to cut this delightful visit short but I have a prior engagement. Always good to see you, Dad. Lock up behind you.” Brad said, patting his father on the shoulder again and zipping up his leather jacket. He grabbed his motorcycle helmet off the chair beside the front door to his penthouse apartment and left, not caring that the heavy metal door slammed behind him. David shook his head and finished off his cup of coffee.

“His mother is not going to like this.” David groaned to himself and showed himself out of his son’s apartment, locking the door behind him.

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Brad sped down the road toward the location he was meeting his friends. He still felt a dull rage rolling through him and swung around a bend in the road. He couldn’t believe his father. Not only did he drop by unannounced, (Brad said a silent prayer of thanks that it was late enough in the morning when he did so that he didn’t run into the girl he picked-up at the bar last night), but he brought up the same old conversation about the business.

Brad gunned the engine around another bend and leaned hard to one side to counter the weight so that the bike didn’t topple. He had told his father *years* ago he had no interest in the business. Him, a CEO of an investment firm? Yeah right. Sure, he had the degree and education to do it—his father had been grooming him for this day his entire life—but it was so boring.

Brad zipped around the car in front of him and continued to zoom to his destination. He liked adventure, excitement. Not a cubicle.

Brad pulled up to the clearing on the hilltop and stopped his bike. He saw the familiar faces of his friends and the camera men that filmed his stunts. This was how he made his money. This was how he wanted to spend his life. He removed the bulky helmet and strode over to a tall, bald man wearing black board shorts and a gray T-shirt.

“Hey Henry, how’s it going?” Brad greeting, clasping hands with the man. Henry smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Hey man! Glad you could make it! I was worried that after all that partying last night you’d be too worn out to do this today.” Henry said, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. Brad laughed and removed his jacket to don the necessary padding.

“Nah, never too tired for this!” Brad replied. Henry shook his head and gave Brad a nudge in the ribs.

“Yeah, but what about that hot chick you were chatting up? You took her home, didn’t you?” Henry asked. Brad smirked and checked that his padding was secure.

“Yeah, but she wasn’t good enough to make me miss today. Still a fun time though.” Brad said, accepting the helmet that another friend was holding out to him.

“Seriously? She was hot!” Henry said disbelievingly. Brad scoffed and strapped the helmet to his head.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t automatically make her a good lay.” Brad said, walking over to the side of the turnoff. The guardrail was about two feet from the edge of the mountainside, and below him was a 1,200 foot drop. He felt the familiar acceleration of his heart and the adrenaline pumping through his veins. This was what it was all about. He could feel the life literally pumping through him.

“I can’t believe you’re still playing that scene, man.” Josh, Brad’s other friend said. He began unfolding the jumpsuit and handed it to Brad. Brad gave him a wry grin and slipped the suit on, ready to BASE jump.

“Hell yeah, why would I give it up?” Brad asked rhetorically. Josh helped Brad finish zipping up the suit.

“Well I find it quite enjoyable to know that I have a loving woman waiting at home for me every night. God, I do not miss trying to pick girls up. The rejection really stung after a while.” Josh replied, handing Brad his goggles. Brad laughed—unable to completely get the bitterness out of it.

“And that’s one of the major differences between us buddy. I’m happier without all the bullshit.” Brad said, pulling his goggles down. He peered over the edge again and his stomach dropped with the familiar sensation of fear. Josh walked to his side, his brown hair blowing across his forehead. Henry brought over the parachute and slid it over Brad’s shoulders before walking over to the camera men to check their equipment. Josh helped buckle the parachute across Brad’s chest.

“You may be happy now,” Josh whispered, making sure his voice was low enough that only Brad could hear him.

“But our kind needs a mate. We’re lions, we’re pack animals. We can’t lone wolf it—so to speak.” Josh said, his brown eyes meeting Brad’s bold blue. Brad’s smile turned cold.

“I already tried that, remember? It’s better this way, leave it.” Brad said curtly. Josh shook his head and gave Brad a pat on the shoulder.

“You tried too hard, man. Don’t deny yourself the opportunity because you couldn’t force it in the past.” Josh advised before walking away. Brad took a deep breath in and pushed the frustration and resentment brought on by Josh’s comments to the back of his mind. He didn’t need that shit right now.

“Fuck it.” Brad whispered, climbing over the guardrail and walking the two feet to the edge of the Cliffside.

“Ready when you are, man!” Henry called behind him. Brad looked down, his stomach plummeting to his feet.

“Fuck it.” He said again and leapt off the edge.

# Chapter 2

“What are you doing?” A scolding voice said behind her. Annie turned around to see her boss standing behind her. Swallowing the large mouthful of muffin she had just taken, she brushed her hands on her skirt and swiveled around to speak to him.

“I’m working on that financial piece about college students and their lack of investment understanding.” Annie answered, holding her hand politely in front of her mouth so that she didn’t spew muffin crumbs on her boss’s expensive suit. He narrowed his eyes at her and pursed his lips in thought. Annie felt the nerves begin to rise and cause her palms to sweat. She had only been working in this department for six months and she was still trying to figure out what all Mr. Reginald’s silences meant. There was a silent fury, a silent ‘good job,’ a silent disappointment. She wasn’t sure which one this was…

“No. Not anymore. I have a new project for you to work on.” He said plainly. Annie was taken aback a little but nodded and pulled out her notepad to jot down her new assignment. *Finally, maybe this will be the break I’ve been looking for!* She thought to herself. She spent three years over in the fashion department for the magazine writing 500 word articles about lip gloss and lotions until she felt her brain melting out of her ears. She wanted to be a journalist!

When she managed to snag a job at *Exquisite* magazine she thought she was lucky to be at least in her job field. After three years she realized that “lucky” wasn’t exactly the word she would use to describe it. When a position opened up at the sister magazine *Expense,* she jumped on it. At least this job required her to research topics that mattered more to society.

“Yes sir, I’m ready for my new assignment.” Annie said, pen in hand.

“I want you to interview Brad Waldon. He’s the heir to the Waldon Corporation and I have it on good authority that his father—David Waldon—is planning on announcing his retirement next month. Let’s see if we can’t get the scoop.” Mr. Reginald said, his typically monotone voice tilting with a hint of excitement. Annie nodded, her shoulders slumping a little in disappointment.

“Yes sir. Do you have any questions you specifically want me to ask for your scoop?” Annie asked crestfallen. Mr. Reginald paused and pursed his lips again.

“Find out who will be taking over as CEO. There are rumors that it is expected to be him, but with his track record I have my doubts.” He said. Annie nodded again and jotted it down.

“Yes Sir. When do you need it? Will I be able to finish my college investment story first?” She asked, allowing herself a little hope. She knew it wasn’t the most impressive assignment but she had spent months gathering the data and for the first time in her career she felt like an actual journalist. Mr. Reginald shook his head and began to back away from her cubicle.

“No, no. Put that on the back burner, Brad Waldon has precedence!” He said, wandering away. Annie dropped her pad and sighed. She turned back to her computer and saved her current article, determined to pick it back up as soon as she conducted this interview.

“All right Brad Waldon, let’s see who you are.” She said to herself, entering his name in the search engine on her computer. Soon she would know all his dirty little secrets, then she would meet him.

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Annie regretted telling her friends immediately. She wished she could take it back. Just cast out a line and pull her words deep in her throat so that they would never see the light of day. It had been five minutes and they were still squealing.

“It’s really not that big of a deal.” Annie said downing her drink. Her two friends gave her an incredulous look and scoffed at her. The bar they were sitting in was plenty loud but she could easily hear their squeals over the music.

“Yes it is! He’s only rated one of the top bachelors.” Her friend Stacy told her. Annie just gave her a vacant stare and went to sip her drink again but was disappointed to find it empty save for ice cubes.

“He’s freaking gorgeous! And you get to meet him!” Her other friend Diane squealed again. Annie shook her head and stood up from her stool.

“I need another drink if this conversation is going to continue.” Annie said, raising her empty glass in a sarcastic toast. Her friends chuckled and waved her off, gossiping together about her new assignment. Annie pushed her way through the crowd, growling at the random hand that groped her ass as she made her way to the bar. She squeezed her way to the counter and set her glass down, waiting for the bartender to turn around and take her order after he helped all the other screaming patrons.

“Wow that is an incredible skirt.” She heard a deep voice beside her moan into her ear. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled and she turned to give the guy a piece of her mind. She hated coming to this place but it was Diane’s favorite and it was her night to pick. She glanced over her shoulder at the guy and couldn’t contain her shock.

Brad Waldon brushed his black hair behind his ears and gave her a dreamy, weak-in-the-knees smile. “Your legs really do it justice.” He said, his startling blue eyes raking up her body and making her shiver. She glanced back at her drink to try and compose herself. She felt the smirk on her lips but didn’t want to give herself away just yet.

“Thank you, that’s nice.” She said plainly, only half-turning to speak to him. She gave him a forced smile and turned back to the bartender, raising her hand in an attempt to flag him down. Brad frowned a little, not used to being blown off like that, but his smile returned full force at the challenge.

“You’re welcome. Let me buy you a drink.” He said, moving closer to her and getting the bartender’s attention. Annie glanced back over her shoulder at him and smiled again.

“No thanks, I’ve got it. You look familiar, what’s your name?” Annie lied, already knowing exactly who he was. Brad smiled, this was his chance. Once he gave the name, all the girls gave up whatever hard-to-get game they were playing.

“The name’s Brad Waldon, perhaps you’ve heard of me?” He said, leaning forward and resting his forearms on the bar top. Annie repressed her smile, was this how he got all the women? By name dropping? How lame, she had higher expectations for a notorious billionaire playboy. She ordered her drink and turned to face Brad.

“Brad Waldon? No, I thought he was supposed to be the heir to a financial investment firm. You don’t look like a CEO to me.” She said. Maybe she could get some answers for her interview before it officially took place. Brad scoffed at her and took out some cash to pay for her drink. Annie slammed her own bills on the counter before he could and they were quickly scooped up by the bartender. Brad gave her a disapproving look but put his cash away.

“That’s because I’m not the CEO.” He stated. He brushed Annie’s dark blonde hair behind her ear and his calloused fingers brushed against her cheek. Annie felt those shivers again.

“Ahh, that makes more sense then. Tell me, Brad,” Annie said, taking a step closer to him and turning her face so that she could speak in his ear. “Has it really gotten so easy for you that you just have to objectify a woman by a part of her body and then drop your name and she’ll spread her legs for you in the back alley? How disgusting.” Annie said, her warm breath caressing his ear lobe.

She pulled back from him and gave him an unimpressed look. She grabbed her drink off the bar and turned to return to her friends. Brad watched her, his mouth open in shock and his eyes narrowed in offence.

“I had higher expectations for you. Oh well, I’ll see you around.” She said, spinning on her heel and disappearing through the crowd. Annie grinned to herself, oh yes this interview was going to be fun. Brad watched her leave and felt his lion rear up within him.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to attack her, yell at her, or just really give her a thorough kissing. Regardless, he took a deep breath to calm his lion; chances were slim he’d ever see her again. He glanced across the bar and saw a pretty brunette eyeing him. Besides, there were plenty more willing parties.

# Chapter 3

Annie took a deep breath and straightened her navy pencil skirt and white button-up blouse. She had picked her outfit very carefully to make the statement that she was a professional. She nervously raised her hand and knocked on the heavy metal door. After the club, she had called and spoken with Brad’s assistant to schedule an interview time.

He apparently approved her following him around and asking him questions for the next two days but she had a nagging suspicion that his mind might change once he recognized her from the bar. Perhaps it hadn’t been such a good idea to insult him, but it did make for an excellent introduction to her article. Annie smiled deviously to herself and waited patiently for the door to open. It took a minute or two but eventually the door swung open.

“Come in, have a seat I’ll be right with you.” Brad said flippantly in her direction, already turning away from the door and walking down a hallway. He didn’t even look at her. Annie rolled her eyes and followed his directions. *I can already tell these will be a miserable few days,* she thought to herself as she took a seat on the couch. While she was waiting for him to reemerge she set up her supplies.

She pulled out her digital recorder, a pad of paper to jot down notes about his answers, and her folder of research and interview questions. She waited silently for more than just a few minutes while Brad was doing god-knows-what. Eventually, he reappeared, his hair wet from the shower and his white t-shirt clinging to his damp and sculpted torso. Annie gulped and crossed her legs. He *was* gorgeous, she had to give him that. A complete ass hole, but definitely a gorgeous one.

“Sorry about that, I had a bit of a late start this morning.” Brad said, grabbing a cup of coffee off the granite counter in the kitchen and taking a seat across from her, still not looking in her direction at all. Annie frowned but wasn’t totally surprised by his behavior. Of course he would treat her as he saw her: of very little importance in comparison to him. He probably didn’t even care about the article or his portrayal. Well, he might change his mind after the accurate picture she was prepared to depict.

“That’s all right, it gave me time to set up.” Annie replied professionally. Finally Brad looked at her and she relished in delight at the shocked expression on his face. So he did recognize her, she wasn’t so sure he would since it had been two nights ago and he undoubtedly has had many other admirers since then.

“You!” He said accusingly. Annie smiled and leaned back against the chair. Yes, he certainly *did* remember her.

“Yes, Mr. Waldon. It’s a pleasure to see you again, shall we get started?” She asked, trying to get him to topic. She already had to spend the day with him, she was hoping that she could gather what she needed so that tomorrow could be a quick wrap-up. Brad scoffed and glared at her.

“So you lied at the bar, then?” Brad said curtly, his expression going blank as he relaxed in his chair. Annie frowned and lowered her pen.

“Lied?” Annie asked. Brad smirked at her but took his time to reply.

“You said you didn’t know who I was, am I to believe that you’re the type of reporter who doesn’t research their project first? If that’s the case then I think perhaps I should have a word with your editor and have a professional assigned to me instead.” He said, his tone sharp. Annie glared at him and picked her pen back up.

“Fine, I lied. I had researched you prior to our chance encounter at the bar.” She admitted. “Now, let’s get started.” She repeated. Brad shook his head.

“I’m confused, how did lying achieve anything at the bar?” Brad said, tapping his fingers in controlled frustration. His lips were still twisted in an ambivalent smirk, but he was actually quite curious. If she had told him she was the reporter who had called his assistant earlier, he would have just upped his game. Annie sighed and crossed her legs. Brad’s eyes flicked to her long, curvy legs and then back up to her steely hazel eyes.

“It allowed me to get a better understanding of your character. Now, if you please, I’d like to move on.” Annie said, not missing the way he checked out her legs. Perhaps the pencil skirt was the wrong way to go, it just made her curvy figure look amazing and she wanted to feel completely confident going into this interview. Brad leaned toward her in his chair, bracing his arms on either knee.

“And what did our encounter reveal to you about my character?” He asked. Annie pushed down her groan and the urge to shake him in frustration. Who was conducting the interview here? Because it sure as hell didn’t feel like it was her.

“Only that for once, the tabloids seem to be right. You are a womanizer with little respect for the opposite sex other than what they can provide for your bed and libido. Moving on, you mentioned that you’re not the CEO currently, do you have any intentions in the future for filling your father’s role at the company?” Annie asked, tired of this game he was playing. Brad smiled and leaned back again. She wasn’t getting out of this that easily. No one lied to him.

“I haven’t decided on that yet. You’re here to shadow me, right?” Brad asked, brushing her question off and standing up. If it’s the future of the company she was after he would dangle it over her until he was done with his fun. Annie frowned in confusion at him and watched him start to walk away.

“Yes, I am. What are you doing?” She asked, standing up to follow him. He walked over to a closet by the front door and pulled out two motor cycle helmets.

“All right, good. I have a meeting to attend. Hmm, I’m not sure you’ll be able to ride in that skirt…” He said, raking his eyes up and down her body. Brad’s lion roared within him and he had to take a deep breath in to keep from pouncing on her. She was freaking gorgeous. A pain in the ass, but a sexy one. She was curvy in all the right places with a heavy bosom and wide, sensual hips.

He smiled when he noticed that she had to wear a tank top under her button-up shirt because her breasts looked like they could pop the button right off if she attempted to button it. As it was, she left the top three buttons undone to show the pop of bright pink. This was going to be fun. “What size are you?” He asked suddenly. Annie was taken aback and immediately crossed her arms over her chest.

“What? Why do you need to know that? It’s none of your business.” She said furiously. Brad rolled his eyes and walked toward her. He stopped a few inches away from her, forcing Annie to look up at his imposing height. Her blood started to pump faster through her body and she felt a blush rise to her cheeks. Stubbornly, she glared at him—refusing to let him see that he was getting to her.

“I’m asking, because I think I might have something more suitable for you to wear.” He said softly. Annie felt a shiver go down her spine at his proximity and shook her head.

“I’m not wearing anything left over from some skank you took home.” Annie spat out. Brad rolled his eyes and took a step back.

“I’m pretty sure if one of my ‘skanks’ left their pants there’d be some problems.” He said over his shoulder as he walked down the hall to a bedroom. Annie remained standing in the front room, her arms still crossed over her chest defensively. He came back out after only a minute or two holding a pair of jeans and a solid black, sleeveless shirt. He held them out to her and Annie eyed them wearily.

“They’re my sister’s. She will crash here sometimes when she’s out late partying and it’s not safe for her to drive all the way home. You look to be about the same size as her.” He jiggled the clothes in front of Annie, prompting her to grab them. Annie sighed and took the offered clothing.

She had no idea what the hell he was planning but if he was trying this hard to get her out of the skirt and into something more casual, (and thankfully not revealing), then he probably had a good reason. She looked at the label and realized he was right, she was the same size 18 as his sister. She eyed him apprehensively again.

“You don’t have a creepy camera set up somewhere filming me as I change, do you?” She asked. Brad chuckled and shook his head, leading her toward the bathroom.

“No, I don’t need to use technology to watch a woman strip for me.” Brad pushed her back against the closed door and braced one of his arms beside her head as he leaned in close to her. Annie’s breath stopped and her eyes widened. She was terrified he was going to kiss her, and disappointed that he wasn’t. He paused when he was close enough that the tips of their noses touched. He reached up his other hand and grazed her side.

Annie felt a rush of sensation where his hand had brushed her and took a sharp intake of breath. “If I watch a woman remove her clothes, she’ll be willing and begging me to do so.” He whispered, his warm breath caressing her lips tauntingly. Annie looked down to his lips and then back up to his blue eyes. Brad smiled and just as she thought he was about to lean in and kiss her, he opened the door she was pressed against and Annie stumbled into the bathroom behind her, trying not to fall.

“Don’t take too long!” He said brightly and closed the door before he left. Annie stared at herself in the mirror, confused about what the hell had just happened. She almost let him kiss her! She was horrified. She began to change and just before she walked out another realization hit her that made her furious. He was playing with her, making her want him just to get back at her. Annie checked her reflection and pulled the sleeveless top down a little further to show off just a bit of cleavage. *Well two can play at that game*, she thought.

# Chapter 4

Brad smiled to himself at the tight grip Annie had around his waist. Oh she had caught on to his game well enough, which was evident from the moment she came out of that bathroom looking stunning and sexy. He almost lost it then and there and had to remind himself that to win at this game was to make her want it more than he did.

Annie pressed against him tighter as he took another turn on his motorcycle and her breasts pressed into his back. Brad groaned, lucky that it was muffled by the engine. He wanted her *bad*. Brad sped around the mountain curves—taking a slower speed than he usually did when it was just him out of concern for her safety, but she didn’t need to know that. It would do him no good to kill the reporter before the article came out.

Annie closed her eyes. She couldn’t believe she let him talk her into this. She could have easily drove separately. Her stomach lurched as they took another corner. It was exhilarating, she’d have to give him that. And if she was totally honest, being so close to him had its advantages. He was warm and she trusted him and his abilities to get them where they were going. She hated that she trusted him. Eventually, they came to a stop. Annie peeled her eyes open and stared at the turn off. It was beautiful.

The mountains were stretched before them and there was a wide, gravel scenic turn off that had the perfect view of the range. Annie took off her borrowed helmet and climbed off Brad’s bike with unsteady legs. She walked over to the guard rail and peered over the edge. Below them was a steep drop off a cliff side. Turning back, Annie pulled out her recorder that she had the foresight to pack and stood in front of Brad.

“So what are we doing here on the side of a mountain, at a cliff’s edge?” Annie asked, looking over her shoulder at the ominous drop. Brad smiled at her and turned the engine off, removing his own helmet.

“We are here because I came to BASE jump off this edge a few days ago. The other guys will be meeting us soon with the footage and we will review it.” Brad answered easily. Annie nodded and then frowned as another vehicle pulled in.

“Why not review the footage in a studio?” She asked. Brad greeted the large, bald man that climbed out of the truck, ignoring her question. The man noticed her and held out his hand in greeting.

“And who is this beautiful lady?” He asked, his eyes twinkling in kind mirth.

“Annie Martin, I’m a reporter with the Weekly Press. I’m doing a story on Mr. Waldon.” Annie answered, taking the man’s hand and shaking it firmly. She wanted no mistake regarding her presence here.

“Oh. Well that’s new. I’m Henry, but you can call me Hank if you’d like, and it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Henry said politely. Brad wandered away to greet the van that had showed up with about three other guys in it and all sorts of video equipment in the back.

“Uh, Hank, Brad said we are here to review the footage from his previous jump?” Annie started. Henry nodded and waved at the other guys.

“Yup. We always give it a couple of days to go through editing and the like before reviewing it.” Henry explained. Annie nodded, still watching Brad out of the corner of her eye.

“Okay, well why not watch it in the studio? Why review it out here? It seems counterproductive with the inadequate lighting and road noise.” Annie pointed out. Henry smiled at her and laughed.

“We do it out here in case we need to reshoot anything.” He said as if it was obvious. Annie’s eyes widened.

“Reshoot?” She asked. Henry nodded and started walking over to the group of guys by the van.

“Alright, let’s have a look at this!” Henry said enthusiastically, ignoring Annie’s question. Annie took a spot beside Brad, staring at one of the monitors hung up in the back of the van.

“Play it, Josh.” Brad said. The man named Josh pressed button and the video came on the screen. It showed Brad getting ready and then peered over the edge of the cliff. Annie’s breath caught in her throat. He wasn’t really going over the edge of that was he? A minute later the man on the video proved that yes, he was going over, as he took a leap and jumped over the edge. Annie gasped as the camera cut to over the edge as he fell a few hundred feet before deploying his parachute. Annie looked over at Brad. He wasn’t just a player but he was freaking *insane.* His brow was furrowed in concentration as he reviewed the footage and shook his head.

“I think it would be better if we shot it from the right instead of the left. See how the wind catches the chute and you can’t see anything at all. The studios won’t like it. Let’s redo it.” He said, stepping back and allowing Josh out of the van. Henry ran over to his truck and pulled out a bag with Brad’s suit, pads, and parachute.

“No problem. We’ll take it again and we can submit both pieces of footage to the studio for their approval.” Josh said, handing Brad his pads as Henry pulled them out of the bag.

“Wait, what? Are you seriously going to do *that* again?” Annie asked flabbergasted. Brad just gave her a smirk and continued to put on his equipment.

“Don’t worry, this isn’t his first time. He’s a pro.” Josh said, coming up to stand beside her while Henry helped Brad into his suit. Annie’s jaw hung open and she stared at him incredulously.

“Why does he do this?” She asked. Josh shrugged.

“He gets paid by film studios to do stunts for them. Sometimes they just air the clip as is, sometimes they fit it into movies where the stunt was required.” Josh explained. Annie shook her head and watched Josh step forward to buckle on the parachute straps over Brad’s chest.

“So who’s the girl?” Josh whispered. Brad smirked and looked over his bent head at Annie who looked positively terrified. *Bailey would have been thrilled to see this*, he thought to himself.

“She’s just writing an article on me.” Brad answered vaguely. Josh looked up at him and scoffed.

“Sure. Well she seems nice.” Josh said, a small smile on his face. Brad frowned, his lion flaring with jealousy.

“You’re married.” Brad reminded him coldly. Josh’s eyebrows shot up in surprise but his smile grew.

“I know I am, happily so. Doesn’t mean I can’t observe that she’s nice, or very pretty.” Josh said, tightening the straps. Brad growled. He didn’t know what had come over him, but he didn’t like Josh noticing anything about Annie. Josh just gave him a knowing smile and walked away, not saying anything else.

“Ready?” Brad asked, slamming his helmet on. Annie took a step back to stand beside Josh and Henry on the sidelines. The two camera men ran to Brad’s right side and gave him a thumbs up. Brad walked over to the edge and without a second thought flung himself off of it. Annie gasped and clutched onto Josh’s arm as they ran over to the guardrail to watch his decent.

“He’s insane! Why would he want to do that?” Annie repeated. Josh just smiled at her and nodded.

“He is, but I think it’s because of something animalistic inside him looking for an outlet.” Josh said. Annie frowned and looked over at him but he was watching Brad. *What a strange way to phrase that,* Annie thought. Her mind instantly went back to an article she had researched for her first job at her college paper. The article never ran because there wasn’t enough solid evidence, but could it be? Annie looked over the edge as Brad glided to a safe landing. *Animal within?* She would have to look into that more.

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Annie rode with Henry in his truck—Brad’s bike strapped down in the bed—as they made their way down the mountain to meet up with Brad. It didn’t take long to find him and Henry immediately began to get to work unbuckling him from his tangled straps.

“Whoa, that was awesome! Did you get the shot?” Brad shouted, his face in a huge grin that made him look younger and almost boyish. Annie stared at him, her stomach doing flips at this new side of him. If he was attractive before as an asshole, he was breathtaking now. All the pretense seemed to momentarily be gone and Annie took out her pen to jot down a few notes.

“Yeah man, we got it! We’ll take it back to the studio and do our edits. I think we have it this time, though!” Josh said, slapping Brad on the back.

“That’s great. I’ve got to go for a run. I’ll be back.” Brad said, stripping himself of the suit and pads. Annie watched him confusedly as he took off. She looked over at Josh as he began repacking the chute.

“He’s going for a run?” She asked. Josh smiled at her and nodded.

“He always does, provided he didn’t break his legs on impact. He needs to expel all the adrenaline.” Josh said. Annie nodded and watched where Brad had disappeared curiously. Josh looked over at her out of the corner of his eye. Brad could deny it all he wanted, but Josh wasn’t blind.

“He usually ends up at a lake deeper in the valley. It’s a little harder to get to, but I can take you there when I go to pick him up.” Josh offered. Annie smiled at him and nodded. He was the only one allowed to go pick Brad up, but he had a feeling it might be good if Annie was there with him. She was Brad’s mate after all, regardless whether or not either of them saw it.

“Okay, let me finish up here and then we can go.” Josh said, putting the re-packed parachute back in Henry’s truck. Josh got the keys from Henry and gestured for Annie to join him. Annie climbed in the truck and rode in silence.

“Sooo, why doesn’t Hank get him if we’re just using his truck?” Annie finally asked. Josh chuckled and took a turn down a dirt road.

“Brad only likes to see family when he’s coming down from an adrenaline high.” Josh said. Annie nodded.

“So you and Brad are related then?” She asked. Josh nodded and took another turn down a dirt lane that just had flattened tire marks in the long grass.

“Yup. He’s my cousin. We come from a big and close family.” Josh explained. Annie nodded again, grabbing hold of the handle above the widow for support as they drove over the bumpy terrain.

“I see. So why does he only like family when he’s ‘coming down’ as you put it?” She asked. Josh shrugged.

“It’s a personal moment for him.” He replied. Annie pursed her lips as Josh pulled the truck to a stop at a turn off. There was a pile of clothes left on a rock and Annie raised an eyebrow.

“Then why am I here?” She asked softly. Josh just turned off the truck and said nothing. Confused, Annie climbed out of the truck and walked around. The clothes definitely belonged to Brad, which meant he was running around naked somewhere. Annie smiled mischievously at the thought and began to walk around the lake. Josh remained in the truck and Annie was grateful for some time to herself so she could process everything.

It was obvious that Brad had no intention right now to take over the company—any man that would prefer jumping off a cliff to an interview over a cup of coffee was not ready for a desk job. But clearly, as he displayed with his critique of the first video, he had an eye for directing business. Annie stopped when she heard what sounded like a large animal. Unsure, she turned toward the tree line and peered through the branches. Suppressing a gasp, Annie took a step back and put her hands to her mouth to muffle her breathing. *What the hell is a lion doing in the mountains?* She wondered. The beast in question didn’t seem to have noticed her presence, and for that she was thankful.

He shook his head, making his mane stick out at odd angles, and snorted. He rolled down on the clearing floor and stretched out. Annie froze. She wanted to turn and run, but she was hypnotized by the serenity of the animal. It didn’t seem lost or confused—it seemed at peace.

She watched it a few moments longer, lowering her hands and taking a step closer. She stepped on a twig and the breaking of the small branch seemed magnified by the silence surrounding them. Annie’s eyes went wide and she stared at the lion in fear. The lion tensed and perked up, obviously hearing the snap. It searched the surrounding trees but didn’t seem to see her.

Before her eyes, the lion shifted shape and where a lion had been lying in the grass, now Brad sat there in a crouch. Brad peered around cautiously before standing. This time, Annie did gasp. Brad swung around and finally saw her somewhat stooped in the tall grass.

“Shit.” He said, his eyes going wide. Annie smiled to herself.

“I knew shapeshifters were real.” She said quietly. Brad’s eyebrows shot up in shock and his normally confident face drained of all color.

“Oh shit.” He said again.

# Chapter 5

Brad didn’t move. He was gloriously naked but he couldn’t bring himself to move from his spot across from Annie. If he didn’t move, then maybe he could still wake up and pretend this wasn’t happening. Pretend that a reporter didn’t just find out his family’s biggest secret and pretend that she wouldn’t expose him and the entire shapeshifter community in her article.

Annie took a step back and grabbed his clothes off the rock. She walked up to him and held them out, a soft blush rising to her cheeks as her eyes boldly took him in. She knew she should look away for his modesty—not to mention because she had clearly intruded—but she was unable to do anything other than stare at his sculpted body in hunger.

Brad growled and snatched his clothes from her, making her momentary arousal dissipate rather quickly. Annie glared at him and took a step back. *He’s entitled to be upset, he wasn’t expecting you and this is obviously a secret since only Josh is allowed to pick him up,* Annie thought to herself. Annie’s head whipped around and she looked back at Josh, still seated in the truck watching them out the back window.

Josh gave a little wave and a childish smile making her frown. Clearly, he had done this on purpose. But why? And since they were related, did that mean Josh was also a shifter? Annie shook her head, too many questions were running through it for her to get any clear train of thought.

“What are you doing here?” Brad asked tersely once he was fully clothed again. Annie glanced back at Josh and gave a small shrug.

“Josh invited me to come with. I had no idea that you… I mean…” Annie trailed off, unable to find the appropriate words and judging by the look on his glowering face, she was doing a rather poor job of trying.

“Oh he did, did he?” Brad said, stomping over to the truck and banging on the driver’s side window. Josh just shook his head and locked the doors.

“Open up! You have some explaining to do! What the hell were you thinking?” Brad yelled, emphasizing each sentence with another fist-pound on the window. Josh didn’t even seem fazed. He simply leaned the driver’s seat back and propped his feet up on the dashboard at an angle. Brad was fuming and Annie just stood off to the side watching the exchange.

“She’s a fucking reporter, Josh! Do you know what this will do to our family? To the community?” Brad kicked the door and stormed off away from the truck. Josh just watched him and took his feet off the dash. Annie pursed her lips and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She honestly hadn’t thought of that. The notion of exposing him by including this new-found information in her article hadn’t occurred to her, but neither had the repercussions of such an action either.

“What would happen?” She asked softly. Brad turned around, his face red with anger and he paced back and forth in the tall grass.

“What would happen? My family would be exploited like circus freaks, our business would be taken from us if we didn’t go bankrupt first from all of our clients jumping ship because they don’t want to do trading with ‘unnatural’ people, and everything my family has built up for *generations* will be lost.” Brad yelled. Annie nodded and bit her lip, wanting to ask more but not certain it was a good idea.

“What would happen to the ‘community’, as you put it?” She eventually ventured. Brad stopped, his anger cooling to a frightening display of fear.

“They wouldn’t rest until every last shifter was exposed and then who knows what. I can’t imagine it would be good— history shows that humans don’t do well when their claim to dominance is perceived to be threatened, nor do they do well with anyone different from their ideals of ‘normal.’ It could be nothing, or it could be the end of our species. Either way, it is a risk I never want to take.” Brad said coldly. Annie’s eyes widened with the seriousness of the situation.

She had been wrapped up with her initial feelings of surprise and satisfaction that she had been right all those years ago when she first began research into the matter that she hadn’t gotten to the bigger picture until he explained it. Brad watched her closely, concern etched onto his face. Annie took a step toward him, wringing her hands nervously as she did.

“I want you to know, I have no intention on exposing or including this information in this or any other article. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for any of what you just said and I respect your choice to keep this a secret.” Annie said confidently, meeting his eyes head on so that he would know she wasn’t lying. Brad regarded her a moment, not sure what to believe.

“Really?” He asked, taking a step toward her. “How can I trust you?” He asked. Annie shrugged and dropped her hands to her sides.

“Despite whatever animosity there is between us, I’m not a horrible person. I would never do anything to propel my career forward or for some kind of vengeance that would ruin a peaceful group of people’s entire existence.” Annie said. Brad took her statement in, still gazing at her critically.

“You swear it?” He said. Annie nodded and raised her right hand.

“I swear.” She repeated. Brad nodded, still hesitant.

“Alright.” he said, turning calmly toward the truck. Josh unlocked the doors and waited for them to climb in, starting the engine up. Brad opened the door and paused, turning back toward Annie. “Thank you.” He said curtly and climbed into the front seat. Annie nodded and climbed into the back, deciding not to give him crap about the fact that he didn’t offer her the front.

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“What were you thinking?” Brad asked Josh seriously. After they returned to the site where the guys were waiting, he wasted no time ushering Annie onto his motorcycle and taking her back to his place so that she could change and be on her way.

They didn’t speak much after the lake, neither one of them having anything in particular to say. As soon as she had driven away, Brad called Josh and demanded he get over to his apartment immediately. Josh shrugged and sipped his beer.

“I thought it would be good for her to know.” He answered plainly. Brad scoffed and stood up from his chair to pace.

“Why on earth would you think that? Do you have no concern for our family?” Brad spat. Josh rolled his eyes.

“Of course I do. I have great concern and discretion when it comes to our family and the shifter community. That said, I stand by my decision.” Josh answered. Brad growled and continued his pacing.

“Why?” Brad asked. Josh smiled a little and took another sip of his beer.

“Just trust me. If I had thought for a second that she would have published that or exposed us I would have left her with Hank.” Josh said sternly. Brad frowned but nodded.

“Alright. I just don’t understand what game you’re freaking playing here.” Brad said gruffly. Josh smiled and sipped his beer.

“That’s alright, you will soon enough.” He said.

# Chapter 6

“Ready for day two?” Brad asked as he swung open his door to admit a startled looking Annie. Annie had barely knocked on the door when it was flung open to her surprise. Well at least he didn’t keep her waiting for ten minutes like the day before.

“What are we doing today?” Annie asked hesitantly, following him into the apartment. Brad gave her a wry smile and walked over to the kitchen.

“Coffee?” He asked, ignoring her question. Annie sighed and nodded.

“Sure.” She accepted the offered mug. They stood in awkward silence for a moment, not sure what to say to each other after the revealing encounter the day before. Annie pursed her lips and swirled her coffee in the cup.

“So… does it hurt when you shift?” She asked casually, keeping her eyes downcast and focused on her mug. Brad regarded her for a moment and set his empty cup in the sink.

“No, it doesn’t. It did the first time simply because of the stress it puts on the body. After that though, it’s just like blinking or breathing: totally second nature.” He explained. Brad turned away from her then, unsure why he was telling her about this. He never told anyone about this, especially not a reporter! He glanced over at her out of the corner of his eye. She did promise not to reveal his secret or the existence of shifters, and what was most alarming about that was that he believed her. He frowned to himself and shook his head.

“Finish up, we should go.” He said. Annie took a final sip of the coffee and set her still half-full cup in the sink. It was a good thing she had already caffeinated herself on the way here otherwise that would have been very disappointing. She made sure to wear pants instead of a skirt today and more casual apparel. She didn’t know what he had planned, but based on the events the day before she wanted to be prepared.

Brad handed her his spare helmet and led her down to his motorcycle. He had been up most of the night worrying about seeing her again, and looking at her in her perfectly fitted jeans and floral blouse that hinted at the magnificent cleavage he knew she wasn’t helping him remain cool and collected. She barely got to conduct her interview yesterday and if he wanted to ensure that nothing compromising was included in the article, then he had to give her some more content.

They drove leisurely out of town and back up the mountain road they had taken the day before. Annie felt much more relaxed on his bike and noticed that he was in fact going the speed limit, (or possibly even a little under), to ensure her comfort.

Her arms were wrapped loosely around his torso and she was able to actually enjoy the ride unlike the day before where she was so terrified he was going to crash and kill them she kept her eyes squeezed shut most of the drive. Brad didn’t take the same pull-off like she had expected when the familiar gravel bend came up. He kept driving, climbing higher into the mountains. It was only another fifteen to twenty minutes or so before he did pull off of the main road, taking an unmarked road between the trees. Eventually, Brad came to a stop in a clearing. The one-lane road kept going far past the clearing making Annie briefly wonder where exactly it led to..

“Wow.” Annie breathed, climbing off the bike and removing her helmet to look around. The clearing where they had stopped was beautiful and secluded. There were tall, thick trees in a circle all around them, forcing the sunlight to filter through their many leaves before reaching the grassy ground. The clearing wasn’t very big—only about twenty feet in either direction, but it was comfortably intimate for two people. Annie turned to Brad who was leaning against one of the trees watching her.

“Why’d you bring me here?” She asked, wondering what sort of crazy thing he had planned. Maybe he was going to scale one of the trees barefoot or attempt to fly or something. Brad shrugged and pushed himself off the tree. He walked a few paces and then plopped down in the grass, tilting his face toward the sun. Annie sat down bedside him, watching the sunlight dance across his sharp nose and square jaw. Her heart skipped pace or two and she had to look away to regain composure of herself. *What the hell was that?* She wondered.

“I thought this might be a nice place to conduct the interview. No distractions or people around to overhear. So ask away!” Brad said, lying down and propping his hands behind his head like a pillow. Annie nodded and pulled out her recorder and pad of paper from her bag that she had strapped to his bike. She resumed her seat beside him and turned the recorder on.

“Alright. With your father’s retirement rumored to be on the horizon, what do you think will happen to the company?” Annie asked with her pen poised to write. Brad’s face twisted a little in thought but he just shrugged.

“My father has continued in the tradition of the company. He’s put new and more functional systems in place for more efficiency. I have no doubt that after his retirement, the plans and systems he’s implemented will continue to carry the company at the same level of prestige and operation that is expected.” He answered. Annie frowned and jotted down bullet points for herself. He answered the question very diplomatically without alluding to her underlying point. *Well played,* she thought.

“That’s encouraging to hear. Who do you think will be selected to take over your father’s position?” She asked, hoping to rope him into giving her a name or confirming or denying whether or not it will be him. As soon as she gets her answer her boss will be happy and she can leave, never having to see his beautiful face again. Annie’s heart lurched at the thought but she ignored it. She had a job to do first and foremost. Like always.

“I’m not too sure. There are several viable options; it will be up to my father which route he wants to take.” Brad answered simply. He opened one eye and suppressed a smile at the frown on Annie’s face. He knew what she was trying to get at, but it was too much fun messing with her to simply give her what she wanted. Besides, the longer this took, the longer she would stay with him. *Where did that come from?* He wondered. He closed his eye again and turned his face away from her. He could feel his heart pound a little harder but ignored it. He didn’t want to deal with emotions like that. He had tried in the past and failed—miserably—twice. He didn’t need to do it a third time to know it would end the same, humiliating way.

“What would those ‘viable options’ be?” Annie asked. She was starting to get a little frustrated by his purposeful avoidance. The fluttering in her stomach and the speeding of her heart were making her very uncomfortable and she just wanted to go home and type up her article. Her job *always* came first and this would be no exception.

“Well there’s a few. There are several excellent directors and VP’s currently employed who could be considered for the promotion.” Brad opened one eye and glanced at Annie. “And no, I won’t name them because that is up to internal business operations to make the selection and notify them.” He interrupted before Annie could ask the follow-up question.

Annie closed her mouth and said nothing, just jotting more notes down on her pad of paper. “Another option would be to eliminate the position altogether and just have the Board of Directors take over. And then, of course, there’s always the possibility that the company could be inherited.” He answered smoothly. Annie nodded and looked up from her pad.

“So that would be you who could inherit it?” She asked. Brad smiled at her and turned onto his side to face her.

“Not necessarily. It could be me, or one of my younger brothers. Brandon would be the best choice because he has some corporate experience working within the company.” He said.

“Would you say he’s a better choice to inherit than you?” Annie asked. Brad sighed and flopped back on his back. He pondered that question a moment while he stared up at the shifting leaves.

“Possibly. He’s very capable and knows what he’s doing.” Brad turned his head back toward Annie. “But off the record, I couldn’t in good conscious recommend him.” He said. Annie raised her eyebrows and set her pen down to show that this part of the conversation was indeed off the record.

“Why not? You said that he was capable and has experience in the company. Do you even have that? Because all the research I did on you shows that right out of college you went off in your own direction.” Annie countered. Brad winced a little and nodded.

“All of that is true—to a degree. While he’s very capable and intelligent and I have no doubt that he would be successful, he’s also twenty-six. There’s a ten year age gap between us and when I look at my life and what’s happened in those ten years to shape who I am, I would never want to deprive him of that experience.” He said passionately.

“And becoming CEO would deprive him of experiences to shape him?” Annie pressed. Brad caught the hint of sarcasm in her tone and glared at her.

“Yes. Being trapped behind a desk and having to care for thousands of employees’ livelihoods as well as customers’ puts a real damper on the time window to figuring yourself out.” He said hotly.

“I guess I can see that perspective. On the other hand, it could give him experiences that you never had and just shape him differently. I went to work right away and not at my dream job either. I was lucky to get any job in my field right out of college, let alone one with great job security and the opportunity to move up. Your brother is very lucky for the opportunities he has, and so are you for that matter.” Annie said, switching off her recorder. Brad watched her closely and sat up.

“I did have those experiences. Right out of college my dad made me a director to get my hands wet, so to speak. I worked for two years under him and the other VPs of the company before I just… snapped. I quit and turned to extreme sports and extreme living and haven’t looked back. You can’t grow in an office.” Brad said, resting his arms on his bent knees and giving Annie a sad smile.

Annie didn’t say anything for a moment. It explained some of why he ran so far in the opposite direction, and why he chose to leap off cliffs rather than run a company. What she didn’t care for, though, was how it made her consider the path she’d chosen. She put her career first, and everything else came second or not at all. She strove and struggled for that office, and he just cast it aside. She couldn’t really wrap her mind around it, but it did raise a sneaky question to mind: what had she missed out on by pushing everything back until she was twenty-nine?

“Do you have any more questions on the record?” Brad asked, his voice steady. Annie shook her head and put her pad of paper and recorder back in her bag.

“No, I think I have everything I need.” She said a little disappointedly. They sat in silence for a few minutes, neither one of them wanting to be the first to get up and initiate their departure. He couldn’t quite explain it, but he didn’t want to leave. He didn’t want *her* to leave. He glanced over at her. Annie had her head tilted back and the sun made her blonde hair look golden.

Her eyes were closed and a soft smile played on her lips. Brad felt his lion roar and before he could stop himself he rolled on top of her, flattening them both against the grass and crushed his lips against hers. Annie was stunned, she didn’t know what was happening, but the feel of his warm lips made her instantly relax and wrap her arms around him.

His kiss was hot and passionate, but gentler than she expected. She opened her mouth to him and he dipped his tongue in, twisting it around hers in an agonizing dance. Annie felt like her skin was burning. She knew this wasn’t smart, that this was nothing special for him and *extremely* unprofessional but she didn’t care. She’d been waiting to do this since the incident in his apartment when he pushed her up against that door.

Brad pressed his body against hers, feeling all of her curves mold to him. She felt right in his arms. She felt more right than any other woman he’d ever kissed before—even Bailey, his first attempt at finding his mate. His mate. The thought struck him like lightning and he pushed himself off her roughly.

Annie stared at him, her eyes half-lidded with confusion and her lips still parted. Brad stared down at her, a mixture of surprise and fear on his face. His mate? He found her, and yet… He shook his head and stood up. He couldn’t handle this. His lion roared at him, trying to force him back toward her, back into her arms, but Brad shrugged him off and kept walking. Annie frowned and stood up, following him to the bike. She had seen his face and wondered what had caused him to have such a reaction, but she didn’t dare ask lest she get the answer she didn’t want to hear.

“We should go. You have an article to write.” Brad said, sliding onto the bike and shoving his helmet on. Annie strapped her bag back onto the bike and donned her own helmet. What the hell just happened? She wrapped her arms loosely around him and bit her lip. This was for the best; she couldn’t get emotionally involved with a guy like him. He would just play her and forget about her. She could do without that kind of heartache weighing over her.

# Chapter 7

“This is very good, very good. The only thing is,” Mr. Reginald started. He rubbed his chin and gave a pained expression as he read over her article again. Annie clasped her hands tightly in front of her and waited for him to finish his critique. *Say that it’s too short, or too long, or not enough semi-colons, just don’t make me go back there.* Annie begged silently to herself. It had been two days since their awkward departure.

Brad had clammed up after he kissed her and his humor, his snide comments, everything—was gone. The rejection was silent but solid and it hurt less than if he had been crass or harsh about it, but it still hurt. She replayed the kiss over and over in her mind and still couldn’t figure out quite what had happened. He was so into her. His lips and tongue, everything was fire. She could feel how much he wanted her and then he just pulled back. Suddenly, harshly, with this terrified look on his face and then closed off. No matter how many ways she played it, she was missing something.

“The thing is we don’t get a solid answer out of him. Is he taking over the company or not?” Mr. Reginald asked, tossing her article down on his desk. Annie watched her article slide a few inches from the force of his toss and come to a halt.

“He doesn’t know, sir. As I wrote in the article there are a few possible avenues and it is unknown—even by him—which direction David Waldon will take.” Annie answered debonairly. Mr. Reginald looked up at her and pursed his lips. Annie took a deep breath and shifted her weight in preparation for his final assessment. His fingers were steepled under his chin and his blank look gave no indication toward his thoughts. He was just as likely to fire her, demote her, congratulate her, or promote her right now. She doubted the promotion and prayed he wasn’t going to fire her, but until he spoke she had no inkling as to which direction he would go.

“I see. Well then, I guess our readers will just have to be disappointed for now and keep reading as the story progresses.” He said finally. Annie breathed a sigh of relief and nodded.

“Yes sir. I’ll just get back to my college finances piece then?” Annie asked as she turned to leave his office. Mr. Reginald nodded and waved his hand dismissively.

“Yes, that’s fine. But stay on top of this story! As soon as there’s any word David Waldon is about to declare his retirement and successor I want us to have the story first. Got it?” He shouted after her. Annie couldn’t stop the slump in her shoulders and nodded.

“Yes sir.” She said and returned to her cubicle. It looks like she wasn’t finished with Brad Waldon just yet.

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Brad tossed his empty beer bottle into the fire pit and slouched down in his chair. Josh eyed him amusedly, refraining from saying anything until Brad had given a few huffs of frustration.

“Alright man, what the hell is bothering you?” Josh asked, leaning forward in his chair across from him. Brad glared at him and lifted his upper lip in a sneer.

“You. This is all *your* fault.” He growled. Josh sat back in surprise, his eyebrows raised so far they almost met his hairline.

“My fault? What’s my fault? What did *I* do?” He asked defensively. Brad grumbled incoherently and reached for another beer out of the cooler beside him. Josh reclined in his chair, a knowing smile on his face.

“Ohhh, so you finally figured it out then, did ya?” He asked smugly. Brad shot him another glare but refused to answer. “So, tell me, when did it finally hit you? I wasn’t entirely sure anything could make it through that thick skull of yours.” Josh teased. Brad snarled and opened another beer.

“Shut-up. How did you know?” Brad asked. Josh gave him a cheeky grin.

“Know what?” He asked teasingly. Brad threw his bottle cap at Josh, hitting him on the forehead. “OW! Alright, geez! Take it easy. I knew when I saw how possessive you got over her. All I said to you was ‘she seems nice’ and you wanted to bite my face off. No, don’t deny it, you did. That’s when I knew she was your mate. She was different and she triggered your lion unlike any other girl before.” Josh answered, hushing Brad before he could interrupt him. Brad sighed and leaned his head back, looking up at the stars.

“I don’t know what to do. After everything that happened with Bailey and then Christine, I just don’t want to go through all that again.” Brad said, heaving a heavy sigh. Josh nodded.

“I get that. I mean, Bailey seemed awesome from what you told me about her and she opened your eyes to what it could be like to find your mate and that was a great thing. But she wasn’t your mate and it’s good that you didn’t force it.” Josh said. Brad snorted and took another swig.

“Yeah, I agree with all that. So explain Christine.” He said bitterly. Josh scratched the back of his head and frowned in concern.

“Well, I guess the easy explanation is that she obviously wasn’t your mate, either. And since she wasn’t your mate, that’s why she was such a bitch and cheated on you. When you’re with your mate, she feels the same way that you feel. You know how angry you got at the thought of me, a happily mated lion, being interested in Annie?” Brad nodded and Josh proceeded. “Well, she feels the same kind of possession and claim over you that you feel for her. Since Annie is your mate, she won’t want anyone else— just you.” Josh finished. Brad sat silently, digesting everything his cousin just told him. Brad groaned and buried his face in his hands.

“Shit, what am I supposed to do now?” He asked. Josh smiled and downed the rest of his beer.

“Get her back ya idiot.” Josh said, grinning.

# Chapter 8

Annie let out a sigh and rubbed her tired eyes. She glanced at the clock in the bottom corner of her computer monitor and groaned. It was almost 11:00pm and she was still working on this stupid article. She knew her boss wouldn’t care if she didn’t have it finished in time to go to print tomorrow, but she cared.

This article was her baby, and if she hadn’t wasted a week on that stupid Brad she wouldn’t have to pull an all-nighter trying to get this done. *This* was her big shot, not some fluff piece about David and Brad Waldon. Annie put her head in her palms and sighed. Alright, it wasn’t a fluff piece. It was actual news worthy information for many stockholders and clients who do trading with their financial corporation. That didn’t mean she had to waste a week on it. And the best kiss of her life.

Annie dropped her head on her desk and whimpered. She had to stop thinking about it, stop thinking about him. She just felt such a pull toward him and she didn’t understand it. She took a deep breath and got back to work. Just as she started typing again, her phone rang. With another groan Annie hit the “talk” button without looking at the caller-ID.

“Annie Martin.” She answered professionally. Her voice sounded exhausted and a little irritated, but she didn’t care.

“Well hello, Annie. I’m pretty sure I still owe you a drink, want to grab one?” A deep, familiar voice on the other end said. Annie gasped and sat bolt-upright in her chair.

“Brad! How… what?” Annie stammered, unable to finish her thoughts. Brad chuckled.

“My assistant gave me your number. Come on, I can’t imagine being at work this late is healthy.” He teased. Annie shook her head. She must have fallen asleep; this had to be a dream.

“I don’t understand, why are you calling? You left without a word after the clearing and how the hell do you know I’m still at work?” She asked, her voice rising in volume with her panic for her tired brain to comprehend what was happening. Brad laughed harder.

“Please, you’re a workaholic. Yeah, I checked you out too, sweetheart. Where else would you be on a Thursday night before print? Also I’m in the parking lot beside your car so that seems pretty solid evidence that you’re still here.” He said. Annie shook her head, unable to keep the smile from coming to her face.

“Fine. Fine. But *one* drink and then I have to get right back to finish this article.” She conceded.

“We will see, but for now I agree. Now get down here.” He said and hung up. Annie frowned and looked at her phone. Was this real? By all means, it made absolutely no sense to her. She saved her article and grabbed her sweater. She might as well see what game he’s playing now. The elevator to the parking garage doors opened and sure enough there he was, leaning against a very expensive looking car parked right next to her not-so-expensive one.

“’Bout time. Get in.” He said, a smile stretching across his unfairly handsome face. Annie frowned but obliged, happy that it was a car and not his motorcycle. She was wearing an A-line dress so it wasn’t as constrictive as the pencil skirt, but she doubted it would be fun either.

“So what’s going on? I was pretty sure you didn’t want to ever see me again.” Annie said as Brad sped out of the garage. Brad frowned.

“Well, I’ll admit, I didn’t leave things very well.” Brad said, taking a turn down an unfamiliar street. Annie pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow at him.

“You didn’t leave things very well?” She repeated sarcastically. Brad winced and nodded.

“No, I didn’t. I had some things I had to think through, I wasn’t expecting to be so drawn to you— you’re such a pain in the ass.” He replied, his seriousness taking on a teasing tone. Annie’s frown dropped and she shook her head.

“I know exactly what you mean.” She muttered, turning to look out her window. “And if I’m a pain in the ass it’s only because you’re a jerk and deserve it.” She turned to snap back at him. Brad laughed and took a few more turns and pulled the car to a stop in front of a tall, wrought iron gate. Annie stared up at the ominous gate, wondering where exactly they were and what he had planned.

“This doesn’t look like a drink.” She stated, her uncertainty coming through. Brad smiled and rolled down his window. He didn’t say anything as he punched in a code to the gate control box and the doors slowly swung open.

“Oh, it is.” He said mischievously. Annie frowned and sat back, looking out her window at the dense trees that bordered the road they were on.

“Where are we?” She asked, fear beginning to creep into her stomach.

“We are on my property, don’t worry.” He told her. Annie relaxed a little, now understanding the gates. So this was the Waldon estate, it was lovely. She peered over his shoulder and could just make out a large lawn stretching out in his direction. The road was dark, with only a few well-placed street lamps along the way to cast additional illumination to their headlights.

After a few minutes of driving he pulled to a stop. Annie gasped as Brad jogged around the car to open her door. Annie would have given him a confused look at his suddenly gentlemanly behavior, but she was too shocked by the sight before her. Brad took her hand and led her up the stairs to the gazebo which was decorated with hundreds of tiny lights. A bistro table with two chairs was positioned in the middle and a variety of alcohols and mixers lined the back railing. Annie smiled and took a seat.

“What the hell is all this?” She asked with a small laugh. Brad smiled at her and strode over to the bar he had set up.

“This is an apology, and that drink I owe you.” He said with a wink.

“I don’t think you actually owe me a drink. I’m pretty sure I rejected your offer and paid for it myself.” Annie said.

“Well you’re still here, so I guess it doesn’t really matter. What’ll you have?” He said with a cheeky grin. Annie laughed and shook her head.

“I guess not. I’ll have a martini.” She ordered. Brad poured the liquors into a shaker and began to mix her drink. “I’m still confused by all of this, though. This doesn’t seem like a good idea.” Annie said, accepting her drink and taking a sip. Brad sat down across from her, a simple glass of whisky in his hand.

“Why not?” He asked. Annie eyed him over her glass skeptically.

“What game are you playing here? I’ll admit it was fun at first but I’m over it. I’m not about to be another drunken floozy desperate to sleep with you.” Annie scolded. Brad’s eyes went wide and a small, shocked smile curled his lips.

“Haha, I can respect that. I’m not expecting you to be a, how did you phrase it? ‘Drunken floozy’?” Brad said. His heart started to pound and he felt the most incredible urge to turn and run. Memories from the last time he had had this conversation pounded through his mind like a jack-hammer. *This is stupid, I should kill Josh for suggesting this,* he thought. Everything about this felt simultaneously wrong and right. *She’s my mate, this is different,* he reminded himself. He took a gulp from his whiskey and the warmth spreading throughout his limbs was instantly soothing.

“Then what *are* you expecting?” Annie asked, frowning at him in confusion. None of this seemed in character with the ass-wad she’d met at the bar; or the cool, confident man she saw at the jump; or the excited boy she witnessed filled with adrenaline. She thought for a moment, sipping on her drink. This did fit with the man he showed himself to be “off the record.” Maybe underneath all the extreme sports, the sleaze-ball player, and sarcasm this is who he was.

“I’m not exactly sure. You remember the afternoon when you, ahem, caught me in my lion form?” Brad asked. Annie nodded.

“Well yeah, that’s kind of hard to forget.” She joked. Brad smiled at her and downed the rest of his whiskey.

“You made a comment that I didn’t really pay much attention to at the time, but you said that you knew shapeshifters existed. How did you know?” Brad asked seriously. Annie sighed, feeling both relieved and disappointed. So this is why he invited her here, he wanted to find out how much she knew and how much of a threat she was. That explained the remote location on his property.

“Well, back in college I had overheard a couple of sorority girls talking about their parents arranging a marriage to a wealthy shapeshifter. I didn’t hear any other details; just the one mention and then they hushed up about it and left once they realized I was eaves dropping.” Annie started to explain. She saw a sad tug at Brad’s lips and he refilled his drink.

“That does sound like a familiar practice. Go on.” He said with a humorless chuckle. Annie frowned at the emotion behind his words but continued.

“Well, I was working for the campus paper at the time and thought if there was any truth to it, then it would make an amazing story.” Brad shot her a glare and Annie held up her hands defensively. “I’m sorry, I had no idea. It never occurred to me at the time the kinds of repercussions society would have on the exposure.” Brad’s glare softened and he gestured for her to continue.

“Anyway, I started researching it and was able to find several reports of people claiming to have witnessed a person shift into an animal, the mythology of shapeshifters, crack pot theories, etc. I wrote a very compelling article but it was never run because there wasn’t enough concrete evidence to support it.” Annie finished. Brad nodded slowly.

“So what did your research tell you about shifters?” Brad asked tentatively. Annie shrugged.

“Not a whole lot since there was no definitive proof or anything. Just that shifters are born with the shapeshifting gene and it’s passed down genetically, not like werewolves or something. The persons tend to take on the traits of their animal and depending on the creature are typically monogamous for life. At least, that’s what the sorority girls said.” Annie said with a laugh.

She felt a pang in her chest at the thought that it was just silly girls talking and that there might not be any truth to it. It was strange, but she wanted to think that Brad could be monogamous for life with someone. *Like me,* she quickly shook the thought off and concentrated back on Brad. Brad set his glass down on the table and leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees.

“That’s all pretty accurate. I’d say you are an expert researcher.” He said. Annie set her glass on the table as well, unsure what he meant.

“What’s inaccurate about it?” Annie asked curiously.

“Nothing, like I said: it’s all accurate. I mean, some of the details might be a little off but the big picture is spot on.” Brad said, leaning back and tapping his thumbs on his thighs.

“Oh.” Annie said awkwardly and they fell into an uncomfortable silence. Brad stared at his glass, debating whether or not he should tell her like Josh advised him to. His eyes flicked up to hers and he could tell that she was ready to leave. *Fuck it. Since when do I do things the way Josh does?* He thought. Brad stood from his chair and strode over to Annie. With one swift move he pulled her from her chair and captured her lips with his own. Annie gasped for breath in surprise and was rewarded with him plunging his tongue into her mouth. She moaned against him and wrapped her arms around his neck. She didn’t know what brought this on, but she wasn’t about to argue. She had been thinking about their last kiss all week and had been craving his lips.

Brad pulled back and looked into her eyes. Annie met his inquiring gaze with a bold determined look of her own. She didn’t want to be a drunken floozy, but she was okay with being a bold, confident woman who got what she wanted. And she wanted him. It might just be for the night, but she knew she didn’t want to leave without having this moment.

Brad saw her determination and began to plant soft kisses down her neck. Annie leaned her head back and her breathing grew heavy. He kissed his way down her throat, pushing her sweater off her shoulders and letting it fall to the ground. Goosebumps formed on her skin at the sensation of the cool night air, but with one slide of his hands they were obliterated by his heat. Annie slid her hands down the tight panes of his back and along his sides to his chest.

She groaned at the feel of his rippling muscles through his t-shirt, wanting to feel more. Brad kissed along the neckline of her dress before pulling the straps down her shoulders. He pulled her breasts out and massaged them before taking one of her nipples into his mouth. Annie flung her head back and moaned, entwining her fingers through his hair. Brad nibbled the sensitive skin before swirling his tongue around it to ease the sting of his teeth. Needing to feel him, Annie pulled at the hem of his shirt and yanked it over his head. Her eyes widened and took him all in. He loved the way she looked at him: it was a mixture of hunger and longing that made him instantly hard.

“Brad.” She moaned, raking her nails down his chest. Brad groaned and pushed her against the railing. He had wanted to make this last, but when she moaned like that he knew he had to have her. Now. Brad slid his hands under her dress and lifted her onto the railing. He squeezed her ass as he let go and moved his hands to push along the inside of her thighs.

Annie griped the railing and instinctively parted her legs, longing for him to touch her. He slid his hand up and under her panties, stroking her. Annie cried out and clutched onto his shoulders as he teased her with his fingers. *Two can play at that game*, she thought reaching one hand down to cup him through his jeans. Brad growled and bit her shoulder. Annie unbuttoned his jeans and stuck her hand under the waistband. She wrapped her fingers around the length of him and he jerked in her hand. He pulled back suddenly and slid her panties down her wonderfully thick legs.

“I have to have you.” He growled into her mouth as he kissed her hungrily. Annie helped him unzip his jeans and pulled his erection free. She couldn’t believe she was doing this, she was giving him exactly what he wanted but she didn’t care. She wanted him too, more than she cared to admit. He gripped her ass tightly and plunged himself inside her. Annie gasped at how much he filled her. He began to pump inside her slowly. Annie wrapped her legs around his waist and with one hand she held onto the railing and the other she wrapped around his neck as he began to pick up speed. He thrust harder into her, making her cry out. If he had had any doubts before that she was his mate, they were all gone now.

He could think of nothing except for how she felt amazing, like no one he had ever been with before. He lifted his head from her shoulder and stared into her eyes as he claimed her. Annie felt her release building within her. She grinded her hips against his and threw her head back as her orgasm washed over her. Brad felt her walls clench around him and he couldn’t hold back any longer. He gave another hard thrust and cried his release as he spilled inside her.

“Mine.” He whispered, still holding her as he gave a finishing thrust. Annie leaned forward, her eyes searching his.

“What?” She asked, not sure she heard him correctly. Brad shook his head, the haze of his release clouding his mind. He met her confused gaze and felt his lion roar possessively. He wanted to claim her, tell her, take her. But he stopped. That would mean exposing everything to her, including his family. Was he ready? Was she?

“You’re amazing.” He said instead, his voice husky with fatigue. Annie felt a wave of disappointment but pushed it back. She was still reeling from her orgasm and didn’t want to come crashing down just yet. He leaned in and kissed her deeply.

*Mine*. He thought, wanting to whisper it again against her lips, but finding himself unable to do so. When they broke apart Annie smiled sadly, bracing her hands on his chest to push him away. She got what she wanted, and now it was time to get back to her reality.

“Thank you for the drink.” She said softly, pushing against him so she could jump down from the railing. Brad felt his chest tighten at the loss of her in his arms but he didn’t know what to do. His lion screamed at him to declare her his mate, but the look in her eyes spoke only of rejection. He nodded and zipped up his pants, bending down he picked up his shirt and handed her, her discarded panties.

“Thank you for joining me.” He said monotonously. Annie nodded and fixed her dress, a blush rising to her cheeks as she caught sight of his bite marks.

“I believe you promised to return me to finish my article?” Annie asked, trying to sound teasing instead of depressed. Brad’s face closed off and he nodded.

“Yes I did,” He said, everything in him wanting to stop her, “unless you want to come back to my place for the night?” He blurted out. Annie’s heart skipped a beat. She bit her lip, debating on what to do. Her body and heart cried for her to say “yes” but her mind reasoned with her that it was better to end it now. This way it ended on her terms without a walk of shame in the morning or the ugliness of getting kicked out of his apartment. No, it was better this way.

“Thank you, but I really need to get my article finished to go to print tomorrow.” She said, forcing a smile and commanding her legs to move toward the car. Brad closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Well, there it was. *I guess Josh was wrong,* he thought and unlocked his car to take her back.

# Chapter 9

There was a ringing. Brad turned his head to the side, his eyes still closed. Yes, it was a very distinct ringing. He pried one eye open and fumbled around for the source of the ringing.

“What?” He groaned into the phone.

“Well good morning to you too, sunshine. It’s 10:00am, shouldn’t you be up and doing things by now?” His mother chided him on the other line. Brad groaned. He propped himself up on his elbow and looked at the clock beside him. His head was pounding and the sunlight streaming in through his curtains didn’t help. It came flooding back to him. After dropping Annie off he drove home and yelled at Josh over the phone for a good hour, all the while drinking himself stupid. Why did he let Josh convince him of the big romantic gesture? Stupid.

“Hi Mom. What’s up?” He asked, quietly climbing out of the bed so as not to aggravate his headache. He tip-toed out of his bedroom and down to the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

“Your father and I were hoping to have a talk with you. Will you be able to swing by in an hour or so?” She asked sweetly. Brad gulped down the glass and refilled it.

“Uh, make it two hours and I’ll be able to stop by.” He said, putting a hand to his spitting head.

“Sure, that’ll be okay. I’ll make us lunch.” His mom replied.

“Sounds great, see you then.” He said and hung up the phone. Brad groaned and cradled his head in his hands. Nothing good was going to come of this, he could feel it.

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Brad drove to his parent’s house, the familiar iron gates filling him with anger and depression. He drove past the gazeebo and started to get aroused just thinking about the night before with Annie. He hated to admit that Josh was right, but she was different than the other women. He could feel it. His lion could, too. But she didn’t want him, she made that clear. *You also didn’t tell her she was your mate,* a pesky voice reminded him. Brad growled, not wanting to admit that the voice was right.

He drove around the lawn and pulled into the drive. He walked into the large home and headed straight for the dining room. His mother said she was going to prepare lunch and he was thankful because his stomach was already growling. He had worked up quite the appetite last night and he needed to have something in him to soak up all the alcohol he had consumed afterward.

“Morning Dad, Mom.” He said, giving his mother a kiss on the cheek. He took a seat at the table to the left of his father, knowing his mother always sat on the right. His mother smiled and returned to the kitchen. He sat for a minute in an awkward silence with his father before standing up and following his mother.

“Do you need any help?” He offered. His mother nodded and handed him two of the three plates.

“Please take these out for your father and yourself, dear. Thank you, I’ll be right behind.” She said sweetly. Brad took the plates, a scowl on his face. If she was being so nice then he definitely wasn’t going to enjoy this conversation. He placed the plate in front of his father and resumed his seat. Luckily, it wasn’t much longer before his mother breezed back into the room.

“Alright, I am starving. I’m so glad you could join us today, Brad.” His mother said. Brad frowned suspiciously at her. *So she’s the good cop, which means…*

“I had something important I wanted to talk to you about and I’m pleased you could make time in your busy schedule.” His father started, his voice cold and diplomatic. Brad sat back in his chair and began to eat his sandwich.

“Sure. What is it you’d like to discuss?” Brad asked, falling into the same tone of detachment as his father. His mom’s brow furrowed with concern but she remained silent.

“Well, your mother and I have been discussing your life choices, and while we recognize they are yours to make and we cannot force you down a certain path we also don’t have to support you either.” His father said. Brad pursed his lips and glanced at his mother. Her face was twisted with guilt so he knew this was serious.

“So what exactly are you saying here? You’re going to cut me off and that’s that? Is it just access to the fortune now or does this also include my inheritance?” Brad asked coldly. He understood this was a business transaction right now, and while he knew it wasn’t exactly personal—it wasn’t not personal either. Was his life really so despicable that they didn’t want to contribute to it at all? Annie popped into his mind at that moment and he felt his heart ache.

Maybe she had been right to run away if this was how people saw him. David took a deep breath, he knew it would be hard to have this conversation and he hadn’t been looking forward to it but it was necessary not only for the business, but for his son, too. His gentle guidance wasn’t helping, so maybe no guidance would.

“For now we are just going to cut you off from current financial funds. You will no longer have access to our accounts or your family one. You will only have access to the money you earn through those stunt jobs you do. We are still discussing the inheritance and are debating some terms. We are thinking of making the inheritance conditional, but again that is still up in the air for now.” David explained. Brad nodded slowly.

“It’s not a permanently done deal, honey. I want you to know that we love you; we just can’t support this reckless lifestyle anymore. If you choose to work for the company—whether it’s taking over for your father or just as a director then we would reconsider this decision. Hell, if you chose to work for *any* company doing anything other than risking your life by jumping off cliffs or out of planes then we would reconsider.” His mother soothed. Brad looked from one parent to the other, his face stoic with contemplation. He pushed his chair out from the table and stood, his half-eaten sandwich still on his plate.

“You’ve given me a lot to consider. How long do I have before this goes into effect?” He asked. His mother shared a look with David.

“Three days.” His father said definitively. Brad nodded.

“I’ll give you my decision in three days.” He said and left.

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Annie stared blankly at her computer screen. She had finished and sent off her article hours ago and it made it into the print edition of the magazine but she didn’t care. She couldn’t stop thinking about Brad and what he seemed to have stirred within her. With one night, one tryst in a gazeebo, he instilled such a longing she couldn’t shake.

Her heart told her she was supposed to be with him, but she knew that wasn’t true. That couldn’t be. *It was one night, and you’re just going to have to be fine with that. At least you had one night,* she told herself. She took a deep breath. Yes, she could be okay with one night. It was better than never having that experience at all. Now she could get back to her career and never wonder what love felt like. *Love?* Where had that come from? Annie shook her head and tried to push him out of her thoughts.

“Ms. Martin!” A stern voice shouted at her. Annie jumped and spun around in her chair.

“Yes Mr. Reginald?” She asked. Her boss stared at her and pointed to her phone.

“You are having a call transferred to you. It’s from a source inside the Waldon estate and they called saying they have pertinent insight.” He said. Annie nodded and Mr. Reginald walked away just as her phone rang.

“Annie Martin.” She answered. The voice on the other line spoke in hurried, soft tones and Annie rapidly jotted down the information. The conversation didn’t last long and within a minute or two she hung up. She stared down at her notepad with sadness.

“I’m sorry Brad.” She whispered to herself. Annie set the pad down and pulled up a new document. “The public will be interested to know that you’re not going to be taking over the company and are being cut off from the Waldon estate.” She said and began typing.

# Chapter 10

“I don’t know what to do, Josh.” Brad said, exasperated. Josh heaved a heavy sigh and ran his fingers through his short hair.

“I don’t know what to tell you, man.” Josh said. Brad nodded contemplatively.

“I mean, is my life really that… disappointing?” He asked. Josh twisted his lips and shrugged non-committedly.

“I don’t know if ‘disappointing’ is the word I would use but it is unconventional,” Josh started.

“Unconventional isn’t bad. Millions of people have successful ‘unconventional’ lives. You could make the argument that *every* successful person has an ‘unconventional’ life.” Brad defended. Josh nodded.

“You could, but that’s not the same unconventional I’m talking about.” Josh said. Brad frowned.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“Well, you don’t really follow any rules. You don’t contribute to society, you do your own thing without caring who it will affect or what the benefits of it are you just kind of do it. Which is fine, but it makes it hard for you to share that life with anyone—family, friends, or otherwise. You’re all about you.” Josh said. Brad felt his lion roar defensively and glared at Josh.

“I’m not all about me.” He countered angrily. Josh gave him a deadpanned look.

“Yeah, that’s mature.” Josh said. Brad growled but conceded.

“What do I do?” He asked again, his voice turning a little desperate. Josh patted him on the back.

“What do you want to do?” Josh asked. Brad shrugged and gave a groan.

“I want… my life. Not my father’s, not yours, mine. But maybe, I’ve been going about it the wrong way.” He said, slumping down in his chair with his hand on his head.

“So how do you want to change it?” Josh asked. Brad opened his eyes and regarded his friend.

“I want Annie.”

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Brad pulled up to the modest apartment building and sighed. This is what he wanted; he had to follow through with it this time. He got out of his car and searched for the correct apartment number. He was glad her friends at the magazine were so forthcoming with her personal information. He just had to give a little charm, smile, and it was almost as if Annie’s address magically fell into his hands. He should warn her about that, actually. It probably shouldn’t have been quite that easy. His mate’s safety is a huge concern.

Brad straightened his shirt and knocked on the door. He waited a minute, and when the door was still closed he anxiously knocked again. After the second knock, Annie opened the door. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a messy bun, her face bright and clean without any make-up. He looked her up and down, taking in the old t-shirt and worn-in sweatpants that she wore. Brad’s heart skipped a beat, and he had the over whelming desire to push her up against a wall and take her again. She was so beautiful to him even without trying.

Annie was shocked and she knew her face expressed it with her mouth slightly ajar and her eyes wide but she couldn’t help it. He was here! At her door! She’d only spent the entire day thinking about him as she wrote her update article on the new development the informant had told her about. Now, think of the devil, here he was!

“Brad! What are you doing here? And how the hell do you keep figuring out where I am? This is borderlining on creepy.” She said, her brain a little apprehensive about the situation while her heart leapt at the sight of him. Brad smiled apologetically.

“Sorry, I got your address from your friends at the magazine. You might want to talk to them about that, it was rather easy to get your personal information from them. May I come in?” He asked. Annie frowned but opened the door wider for him to enter.

“Okay, and yes, I’ll have to have words with them about that. It was Stacy and Diane I’m assuming?” Annie said, stepping back and allowing him to enter. Brad looked around and was struck with the hominess of the apartment. His never quite had this feeling; then again, he was rarely there other than to sleep. Annie watched him glance around her small place and crossed her arms insecurely. She knew it was nothing compared to what he was used to, but her little one-bedroom was all she needed.

“I’m not sure but that sounds about right. I wasn’t paying too much attention.” He said distractedly as he looked around. Annie rolled her eyes and watched him meander about her living room.

“So… why are you here?” She ventured. Brad glanced back over to her and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably. *Alright, this is it—you actually have to get the words out this time,* he thought to himself.

“I’m here to claim you as my mate.” He said bluntly. The words hit Annie like a wave: a jolt at first that kind of made her teeter, and then smoothed over her as the weight of them sank in.

“Huh?” She said eloquently. This was Brad, the king of playboy billionaires, why would he settle down with a mate? She wondered.

“You are my mate. I’ve had an inkling for a while but I wasn’t ready to accept it because it would change so much about my life. However, after you left last night, I realized that I don’t want my life to go back the way it was—I want it to move forward… with you.” He confessed. Brad held his breath as he watched and gauged her reaction. Annie frowned in confusion and slowly lowered herself onto the couch.

Based on what he was saying, that meant she wasn’t the only one feeling this draw, this pull, these ties. He loved her, too. The elation that filled her at that moment was so strong she almost wanted to cry. But then another realization settled over her, like a bucket of cold water dumped over her head.

“Why now?” She asked, looking up at him. Brad shrugged.

“Because I’ve been forced to look at my life the past couple of days and you’ve made me realize how empty it is.” He answered. Annie nodded.

“So I’m your mate, what happens next, hmm?” She asked, bitterness seeping into her tone. Brad frowned at her and shook his head. This was not the reaction he was expecting. He expected her to leap into his arms, to kiss him, hug him, maybe even slap him in the face but not this.

“What do you mean?” He asked tentatively. Annie gave a dry laugh.

“Well now that you’ve claimed me as your mate do we get married? Take over the company? Ensure your claim to your inheritance and financial security?” She spat. Brad felt anger rising up within him at her accusation.

“What the hell are you talking about? Being my mate has nothing to do with my money. We are bound together and there will never be any other person for either of us. That’s it.” He growled. Annie scoffed and stood up.

“Well that all sounds rather pretty but I’m sorry if I don’t quite believe you. You expect me to accept this… whatever this is, on the day that your parents cut you off from your financial teat? A one-night-stand is one thing, I agreed to that, but I will not be used purely so that you don’t have to become financially independent.” Annie shouted. Brad glared down at her. He took a step toward her and if she hadn’t been so upset, she might have been scared. As it was, she met his glare with one of her own head on.

“How the hell do you know about that?” Brad asked. Annie’s anger started to dissipate by the look of cold fury in his eyes and the sneaky suspicion that perhaps she had been wrong began to creep up her spine. She was still too proud to back down and refused to give him the satisfaction.

“A-an informant called the magazine today.” Annie stammered a little, but her stern expression never faltered. Brad gave a single nod.

“Well, now I know what you think of me.” He said, his tone cold with a painful edge. Annie flinched and took a step back.

“Well you have to admit the timing is a little coincidental.” Annie defended. Brad said nothing and remained stoic. Annie watched him as the silence stretched on, her heart pounding against her ribs and making her feel sick. *I take it back, I’m sorry, don’t go!* Her heart begged her to shout but her lips couldn’t form the words. She had to know if he really meant what he said.

“I should go.” He said finally, his voice falling flat. Annie’s heart sank and she nodded, not even able to meet his eyes any more.

“Alright.” She whispered, standing motionless in the middle of the room. Brad stared at her, emotion filling his eyes as he silently begged for her to look at him and tell him not to. But she didn’t. Brad gave a nod and walked to her door, showing himself out and closing the door softly behind him. As soon as she heard the latch, Annie let out a shuddering breath and the tears began to flow freely down her cheeks.

# Chapter 11

“You know what you’re doing, son?” David asked, surprised by Brad’s decision. It was nothing he expected, but he couldn’t help but to feel pride for him. Brad nodded, his hands clasped professionally behind his back as he spoke to his father.

“I do.” He replied definitively. David nodded, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Alright, I’ll proceed with the necessary paper work. As of today you are officially cut off from the family bank accounts. You will only have access to the money you earn.” David said. Brad gave a nod in understanding and turned to walk away.

“Thank you, dad.” He said, pausing at the door to his father’s office. He didn’t wait for his father to respond before walking through the door and leaving. David sat a moment and then picked up his phone.

“Honey, you’ll never guess what just happened.” He said, his smile growing.

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Brad looked up at the looming building, their most recent magazine article printed and tucked under his arm. His lion roared and he squared his shoulders. He was ready to do this. He was going to get the life he wanted and he sure as hell wasn’t going to let anyone stop him. He walked into the building and rode the elevator up. When the doors opened he was greeted with the sight of dozens of cubicles and people busily working in them.

The office sounds of a hundred people collectively typing, talking on phones, and printing documents was almost deafening in the overwhelming amount of white noise. He looked around before his eyes settled on a familiar face. Smiling his charming smile, Brad strode up to the receptionist desk.

“Mr. Waldon!” Stacy exclaimed, surprised to see him. Brad gave a little wave and leaned against her desk. His eyes glanced down at her name plaque for a refresher before snapping back up to meet her widened eyes.

“Stacy, how nice it is to see you again. I know I don’t have an appointment, but I would like to talk with the editor.” He said, his voice dripping with false sincerity. Stacy nodded dumbly and reached for her phone.

“Yes sir. Give me just a moment to call him.” She said, dialing his number. Brad smiled at her and straightened up, smoothing out the crinkles in his tailored suit.

“He’ll see you in the conference room. It’s just down the hall to the left. I can take you if you just give me—” Stacy said, rising from her chair. Brad waved her off and started down the hall.

“No need, I’m sure I can find it. Thanks for your help again!” He said, striding off before she could retort or catch up to him. She was sweet, but would cause unwanted attention and he needed to remain focused. The balding editor was standing in the conference room waiting for him when he reached it.

“Mr. Waldon, I am Marcus Reginald. What can I help you with?” Mr. Reginald asked. Brad took a seat in one of the chairs around the table and waited for the other man to follow suit before responding.

“Over the last week and a half I’ve gotten to know one of your reporters very well. She wrote a piece on me about the company and my father’s pending retirement announcement.” Brad said. Mr. Reginald nodded as he listened.

“Yes, that is correct. Was there anything inaccurate printed or did you have a problem with our reporter?” Mr. Reginald asked. Brad shook his head and set his print of the magazine’s newest article on the table.

“No, not at all. It was all very well written and I rather enjoyed your reporter. No, I am here because another article was released electronically on your site yesterday, and this one I would like to discuss.” Brad said casually. Mr. Reginald opened his mouth to reply but Brad held up his hand to stop him. “The information was accurate at the time of publication, however recent events have changed this information. I would like to conduct another interview with your reporter, giving you the exclusive about the future of the company.” Brad finished. Mr. Reginald was speechless and his eyebrows were raised in silent surprise. He gave a nod and stood from the table. Without another word, Mr. Reginald left the conference room.

Annie was sitting at her desk, her eyes still a little puffy from having been up all night crying when Mr. Reginald stopped outside her cubicle. She turned to face him, confused by his sterner demeanor than usual.

“Come with me.” He said coolly, turning back down the hall without checking to see if she was following. Annie grabbed her pad of paper and a pen and hurried after him. His back was rigid and she was really hating his unreadability. If he could only give her something to determine if he was about to shove her out a window or give her surprise cake.

She was really hoping for the surprise cake. He led her to the conference room where her breath hitched in her throat at the sight of Brad lounging in one of the chairs. He was twiddling his thumbs, gazing around the room and out the panoramic window overlooking the city.

“Mr. Waldon, here is Ms. Martin to conduct your interview.” Mr. Reginald said, leading her to a seat beside him. Brad smiled at Mr. Reginald and leaned forward.

“Thank you, Marcus. We will take it from here.” He said dismissively. Mr. Reginald cast Annie a warning glance before departing, closing the door behind him. Annie kept her eyes focused on her pad of paper, not wanting to look at him for fear the very sight of him again would push her over the emotional edge.

“What interview?” Annie asked softly. Brad’s smile softened, becoming more genuine as he stared at her.

“I’ve told your boss that some changes have occurred since the publishing of your last article. I would like to give you the exclusive.” He said. Annie nodded silently and flipped open her notebook.

“Where would you like to start?” She asked, her brain flooding with questions, unable to isolate the ones related to the job. Brad’s smile grew.

“Let’s start with the expose of the last article: me possibly getting cut off from my financial teat— I believe you called it.” He said. Annie winced a little.

“What information would you like to give regarding that?” She asked, still staring intently at her pen. Brad took a deep breath in and let it out slowly.

“The parameters regarding my financial situation is that I have voluntarily cut myself off of my parent’s income. I am no longer able to draw funds from my family’s money.” Brad said. Annie’s eyes snapped up and her brow creased in confusion.

“Voluntarily?” She asked. Brad’s smile grew wider.

“Yes, voluntarily. I have come to a mutual decision with my father. I will still maintain my inheritance which I will receive upon his death. All other money though, will be my earnings.” He explained. Annie’s hand paused as she absorbed this. Did he cut himself off for her?

“Why did you do that?” She blurted out, her pen falling to the table. Brad leaned forward, his hand brushing against hers.

“Because you made a good point. How can I expect my mate to trust that I want to be with her because I love her, when I have given her no reason to believe me? I can’t blame you for jumping to the conclusion that you did, based on my past it only makes sense. But you’re more important to me than money, so I cut myself off to prove it to you.” Brad said. Annie’s eyes began to water and she shook her head.

“You shouldn’t have done that for me. I didn’t want you to lose your livelihood. Can’t you undo it?” She asked, looking into his loving eyes. Brad shook his head and grabbed her hand.

“Nope. Can’t undo it, but I wouldn’t want to anyway. This is about getting the life I want, and I want you as well as my independence.” He said. Annie furiously wiped at the tears slipping down her cheeks.

“But you’ll lose everything! Your apartment, your bike, your cars! I can’t ask that of you.” She said. Brad gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“You didn’t. I made this choice on my own. And I’m not going to lose anything, I will have my own steady income and be more than capable of supporting myself.” Brad said. Annie sniffed and wiped her eyes again.

“Oh yeah, how? I can’t imagine stunt manning is very lucrative.” She said sarcastically. Brad chuckled and leaned back in his chair.

“No, it’s not, but it will be a nice bonus from time to time.” He answered.

“Then where are you going to get your income?” Annie asked. Brad grinned and handed her back her pen. He gestured toward her note pad and with a frown, Annie poised herself ready to write down whatever he was going to say next.

“My income will come when I take over the company pending my father’s retirement next month. I will be the new CEO, so the check that my father’s been getting all these years will now have my name on it.” He said. Annie nearly dropped her pen again in shock. What? He was going to be CEO after all?

“But you hate offices!” She exclaimed, her thoughts coming too fast to form complete sentences. Brad laughed and nodded.

“That’s true, but there’s no reason I have to be in an office every day of my life. There’s no reason I can’t be the unconventional CEO who BASE jumps on the weekends and telecommutes on his way to climb Everest. Why can’t I have it all?” He asked. Annie paused, thinking his words over. Why couldn’t he have it all? Why did they only have to choose one path? She could have it all, too. She could have her career and her mate. There was no reason why not, although she always believed it was one or the other. Annie stared at him, a smile coming to her lips.

“I guess you’re right. There’s no reason we can’t have it all.” She said. Brad’s grin widened and he leaned forward again.

“We?” He asked, his heart hopeful. Annie nodded and his lion roared.

“We.” No sooner had the word left her lips then had Brad pushed her notebook out of the way and pulled her to him for a passionate kiss. Annie moaned against his mouth, all the nervous twists in her stomach and grief in her heart melting away. Brad pulled back and pushed his chair out so that he could stand up. He yanked Annie out of her chair and pulled her close to him, capturing her lips with his again. After a few wonderful moments, they broke apart again. Breathing heavily, Brad looked down into her eyes and smiled.

“So does this mean you accept me as your mate?” He asked. Annie’s heart leapt and she nodded.

“Yes. I’m your mate and you’re mine.” She whispered, kissing him gently. “What happens now?” She asked. Brad shrugged.

“Now, you write that article and take a half-day off work so that we can go back to your place and have some fun.” He said wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. Annie blushed and nodded.

“That sounds like a good plan to me.”

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Brad’s mother paced back and forth behind the curtain where the press wouldn’t be able to see her.

“Where is he?” She asked worriedly. Annie heaved a sigh and shook her head.

“I’m not positive. All I know is that he asked me to connect the wireless so that we could stream live picture. Knowing him, I have an idea what he’s planning but I’m hoping that I’m wrong.” Annie said, crossing her arms and standing out of the way of her mother-in-law’s frantic steps. Silvia stopped suddenly and looked at Annie.

“Oh god, not today. You don’t think that he’s…?” She started to ask. Annie winced and gave a shrug.

“I’m going to give a tentative ‘yes’.” Annie replied. Silvia groaned and threw her head back, her black curls trailing down her back.

“I’ll kill him. If he doesn’t die, I’ll kill him.” She muttered, rubbing her eyes. Annie said nothing and just nodded.

“What is taking so long? The press are getting restless. We need to make the announcement, now!” David said, poking his head through the curtain from the press stage. Annie felt powerless. There was no way she could control Brad, nor did she want to, so they all had to just go with the flow. Annie’s phone started to ring and she hurriedly answered.

“Where are you?” She snapped. She heard a loud motor on the other line muffling Brad’s laughter.

“I’m ready, turn on the video feed and stream me.” He said and hung up. Annie glared at her phone but did as he said.

“I guess he’s ready—wherever he is.” She told David. David rolled his eyes and groaned.

“Good enough.” He said and went back to the stage. “Ladies and gentlemen of the press. I am glad that you could all make it today for my announcement. Today, I am announcing my retirement which will be effective in one month’s time.” The press started clicking pictures and shouting questions which David ignored.

“I have already appointed my successor, and he will be joining us from a live video feed to accept the position. Brad Waldon had been appointed to CEO of the Waldon Corporation.” David announced, clapping his hands and turning to the projection screen being lowered behind him. Annie connected the feed once the screen was down and a shot of Brad in a helmet and skydiving suit came on the screen. *Well that explains the engine noise,* she thought sarcastically.

“Hello! I am proud to accept the position as CEO and follow in my father’s footsteps. I have great plans to continue the quality and standard that our customers expect from Waldon Corporation.” Brad said gracefully. Silvia came to stand beside Annie, her mouth opened in slight shock.

“Please don’t jump. Please don’t jump.” She pleaded softly. Annie put a comforting hand on her shoulder and shook her head.

“He’s going to jump.” She said. Silvia nodded, defeated.

“I know it.” She said. Annie laughed and they watched the press turn silent in awe as he wrapped up his speech and dove out of the plane.

“He wouldn’t be him if he didn’t jump.” Silvia said, an amused smile on her face. Annie nodded.

“And I wouldn’t have him any other way.” She said.

**THE END**