

Blue Heart

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Match grade fate.

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Chapter One: Low Profile

It is early one morning, and officers Salena Cruz and Gabriella Jones ride in their patrol car. Gabriella Jones, a ten-year veteran of

the police force, is Salena Cruz's training officer. Officer Cruz is eleven-months into her first year of training, and has barely thirty days left with Officer Jones before she is assigned to a permanent partner and Officer Jones begins training another new recruit. The twenty-two-year-old Cruz is a tall woman, and a Voeldahn. Her digitigrade feet are large, with sharp claws on her hands and a broad snout. She has the features of a black bear, with a matching fur pattern, a nub of a tail, and short round ears at the top of her head.

Though Salena Cruz is clearly a woman, with large and noticeable breasts, she has a sturdy build with very subtle curves. Her shoulder length black hair is pulled into a high ponytail, with bangs that hover just over her amber eyes. They pull their patrol car into the parking lot of a mini-mall, which sits across from a large and well-known jewelry store. The pair enter a convenience store that is a part of the mini-mall, buying their morning coffee. Typically, they don't patronize this particular store, but Officer Jones also needs to use their restroom; the store that they often buy their coffee from has no public bathroom.

As the pair leave the store, something catches Salena's eye. She stands with a foot inside the patrol car, the other planted firmly on the asphalt parking lot. She watches as a figure moves within the jewelry store; their head looks unusually large.

"What is it, Salena?" Officer Jones asks her.

"Do you see that person in the jewelry store? They don't look right." Officer Cruz replies.

Officer Jones steps out of the car and turns toward the jewelry store. The human's eyes narrow as she looks toward the front window. As the two police officers watch, the man turns, revealing the side of a rubber Halloween mask and a gloved left hand. He steps away from the window, walking further inside.

“Shit...” Officer Jones mutters.

“Is that what it looks like?” Officer Cruz asks.

“We’d better check it out.” Officer Jones replies.

They hop into the patrol car and drive across the street, entering the parking lot of the jewelry store. They don’t use their lights or siren. They climb out of the car and walk carefully around the front of the store. Looking through the plate glass windows at the front, they don’t see anyone inside. All of the display cases are empty, and some of them have smashed rear glass. Officer’s Jones and Cruz both draw their weapons and slowly enter the front of the store. They hold their sidearms low, the barrels pointing at the ground before their feet as they scan the main room of the store. They examine several display cases with broken rear glass.

“I don’t like the look of this.” Officer Jones murmurs.

As they walk through the store, a man emerges from a door that leads to a back room. He stumbles through the doorway that sits on a diagonal wall, his hands bound in front of him with duct tape and a piece of tape is placed firmly across the dark-skinned human’s mouth. Behind him are two more men, both wearing rubber Halloween masks that look like common animals and covering their whole head. The two men are holding handguns, pointing them at the bound man’s back. The two police officers point their weapons at the robbers, who pull the human back, using him as a shield and aiming their weapons at the officers.

“Let him go!” Officer Jones demands.

“Fuck that, bitch!” A robber with a cat mask yells.

“Turn around, while you still have a chance.” A robber with an eagle mask adds.

“Just lower your weapons, and we can resolve this peacefully.” Officer Cruz says.

“No, we can’t.” A third robber says.

Officers Jones and Cruz both turn to look at the source of the voice. A man wearing a wolf mask emerges from a second door that’s just off to the side of the back room. He grips a large semiautomatic pistol with a silver slide and barrel, pointing it at Officer Jones. She quickly reaches her weak hand to her shoulder mounted radio, but before she can call in the robbery, the wolf masked robber fires two shots. They strike Officer Jones in her chest, stopped by her bullet resistant vest. The other robbers follow along, shoving their captive at the police officers. Officer Cruz is hit by the stumbling man and falls back as Officer Jones opens fire.

The three robbers turn their attention to Officer Jones, firing nearly twenty shots at her in mere seconds. The rounds pummel her chest, neck and face. She falls dead in front of Officer Cruz, who fires through the glass display cases as she crawls backward and toward the door. The robbers fire at her, striking the crawling man in the back and killing him. Officer Cruz reloads her handgun and waits for the firing to die down.

“Damn, that Voeldahn was cute.” Wolf says.

“Seriously? Is that why you didn’t shoot her?” Cat asks.

“Yes.” Wolf answers.

“Well, go check on your teddy, lover boy.” Eagle chuckles.

She hears footsteps approaching, crunching on the broken glass that lies strewn over the floor. She quickly reaches her hand up and fires through the display case, startling Wolf, who stumbles back.

“Shit!” Wolf exclaims.

He scrambles away as the other robbers duck for cover. Officer Cruz fires wildly as she runs for the front door. As the slide of her pistol locks back, she turns and looks through the entrance. Wolf aims his large pistol at her as he lies on his side on the floor. He pulls the trigger, the round spinning out of the barrel of his stainless-steel Taurus PT809 and ripping into Officer Cruz’s face. It cuts the front of her snout as it flies diagonally across before slamming into the flesh of her left cheek. She falls backward from the door, dropping her gun as she reaches up and holds the torn flesh of her face.

“Oh no, I shot her!” Wolf laments.

The blood flows from the wound, a crimson stream seeping through Salena’s fingers and dripping onto the ground. She scrambles for the squad car as the Eagle and Cat follow her. Jumping into the front seat, she unlocks the shotgun in the center console, blood dripping onto the faux leather seat loudly as she yanks the firearm from the clamp. She turns and aims the shotgun at the front door, resting her arm on the top of the driver’s side door. The bandits jump back inside as she fires a shot. The glass shatters. She pumps the slide and chambers a round, before quickly calling in the robbery on her own shoulder mounted radio.

She waits, guarding the front door with her shotgun as the blood stains her navy-blue uniform and gathers into a small pool at her black boots. Minutes pass, and soon she can hear the sound of sirens in the distance. Her arms grow weak as the adrenaline begins to wear off. The pain in her cheek is incredible, but she doesn’t scream or even lose focus. Soon, several more police cars race into the parking lot, surrounding the front of the store. An ambulance pulls in shortly after. The other officers move into the store after failing to receive an answer, calling out to the robbers with a megaphone. Office Cruz is sedated and taken to the hospital where she is prepped for surgery.

Officer Cruz opens her eyes, seeing only the ceiling of the room. She blinks and turns her head, looking at the I.V. bag that hangs just to her side. She looks around the room, but doesn't see anyone. She presses the button that summons the nurse, eager to find out what has happened. As she reaches up for the button, she takes a minute to touch her face which is heavily bandaged. After waiting a moment, the nurse enters the room. The Voeldahn woman with off-white fur, wavy blonde hair, tall ears and a fluffy little tail, is followed by several officers of superior rank. As the nurse checks her bandages and looks over her chart, the officers stand around Salena's bed.

"Hey there. How are you feeling?" The Chief asks.

"Like shit..." Salena mutters.

One of the officers removes a portable audio recorder from his pocket, setting it on the small wheeled table that hangs just over the side of Officer Cruz's bed. The officers look around at each other; they hesitate to begin the interview. After a long pause, the Chief sighs and asks Officer Cruz if she is going to be alright giving her statement. He very politely reminds her that it would be better while the memories are still fresh. Though she doesn't say anything, Salena nods her head once. A Lieutenant takes the recorder and turns it on, pressing the little red button before he sets it back down on the table. A Major asks the nurse to give them privacy.

Salena explains what she can to her superiors, starting from the convenience store and ending at her being led to the ambulance. Though she tells them what she can, she regrets that she doesn't have more information for the officers. All of the robbers wore masks that completely covered their heads, many of which were designed to fit the head, snout and ears of a Voeldahn. None of them had visible skin or fur; they wore black leather or latex gloves, scarfs beneath their masks to cover their necks, and if they had tails, they were either small like a rabbit's, or tucked into their pantlegs, which seemed

unlikely. Officer Cruz can only guess that one or all of them were humans. After a nearly fifteen-minute recap of her experience, the officers thank her for her time and turn off the recorder. They urge her to rest and turn to leave, but Salena can't help herself.

"What happened to the perpetrators?" She asks the officers.

They stop in their tracks and turn to each other. Her heart sinks as she sees the looks they give each other. She knows that whatever they have to say to her is not going to be good.

"They uh... They escaped." The Lieutenant murmurs.

"What?!" She weakly exclaims, her EKG machine beeping faster.

"They must have escaped through the back as you were guarding the front. We saw skid marks from three motorcycles. The money and jewelry was gone, and the only blood at the scene belonged to the store clerk, Officer Jones and you." The Chief explains.

"The must have left something behind!" Salena chokes out.

"They were professionals. This definitely wasn't their first job. Had you and Officer Jones not spotted one of them near the window and investigated, we might not have known about them until the clerk's body was found by some random customer." The Major adds.

"It's the biggest theft in our city's history; over one million in cash, jewels and cut gemstones are missing." The Lieutenant chirps.

"... How long have I been out?" She asks them.

"Almost a day. You were in surgery for nearly six hours. After that, you slept for twelve." The Major says.

Salena rests her head on her pillow and stares at the ceiling. She sighs and closes her eyes. The officers wish her well before leaving the room, leaving her alone to dwell on the incident. She looks

to the empty chairs near the wall and wishes that her parents were still alive, that she wasn't an only child, and that she had someone special to comfort her. She feels so guilty as she recalls what the Major said to her; if she hadn't pointed out the masked man to Gabriella, she would be alive right now, and returning home to her husband and two teenaged children. Salena Cruz brings her hands to her face, covering her eyes as she begins to weep, crushed by the guilt. How will she be able to live with herself now?

Chapter Two: Scars

Salena Cruz spends the next week in the hospital, recovering from her wounds. Her face required minor reconstructive surgery after the bullet sank into her cheek, where it bore clean through. Though her cheek bone was cracked, it was merely grazed by the bullet, it didn't need any pins or plates. Her muscles and flesh were carefully put back into place and stitched together. For the first few days her wound was kept numb to allow the tissues to bind together more easily. After being discharged, she was placed on paid medical leave by the police department, pending a thorough analysis by the department's therapist. This is standard procedure for anyone who has to fire their gun, is injured, or loses their partner in the line of duty.

As a by-the-books police officer, she reluctantly visits the therapist. She is open with her thoughts and feelings, because the book tells her to be. After several visits, Salena is diagnosed with acute depression attributed to Officer Jones' death, as well as her injury, which is turning into a very noticeable scar. The scar shatters her already fragile self-esteem, further deepening the sorrow she feels. For the next month, Salena is kept on paid medical leave. Her police issued sidearm is held by the department, as she is considered a suicide risk. During that time, she moves out of her apartment, which is the same building that Officer Jones' family occupy.

Simply seeing the building is painful to her, so Salena rarely leaves it. She does everything she can to avoid viewing the exterior, even shopping online at an upscale grocery store that delivers to their customers. For weeks she spends her time reflecting, wallowing in her own sorrow and wasting away. She sits by her window, gazing down at the street below. As she watches Gabriella's teenaged children returning home from school, tears well in her eyes. She feels the grip of her personal pistol, turning over the Glock 22. Her fingers flex as she looks down at the firearm in her hand. She can't bear the guilt anymore, but doesn't know what to do.

She rests the slide against her scar, feeling the cold metal on her flesh. She contemplates using the pistol on herself, turning the weapon and pressing the barrel against her temple. Tears stream down her face and around her snout as she looks down at the street below. As her finger caresses the plastic trigger of the pistol, she is startled by a knock at her front door. She takes her finger from the trigger guard, resting it alongside the frame of her sidearm. She sets the pistol down on her kitchen table and walks toward her front door. She looks through the peep hole in the door and steps back in shock.

On the other side of the door is Gabriella's oldest child, her son Scott. Salena quickly wipes the tears from her face and opens the front door. Scott stands there in silence for a moment as the two look to each other.

"Hi..." He eventually says.

"Hey, Scott." Salena murmurs.

"I just wanted to say..."

He pauses as he looks down to his feet. He takes a deep breath and slowly exhales. Salena braces herself.

"I wanted to thank you... For trying to help my mom. I know you did the best you could." Scott says.

Salena is stunned into silence. She can't believe what the teenager has just said. How can he be thanking her when she failed her partner?

"I should have done more." Salena mutters.

"More would have been to stay, and then you'd be dead too. You were outnumbered and outgunned... At least my mom didn't die alone." Scott says.

He turns and walks down the hall, returning to his own apartment. Salena stands there for a moment, watching the boy enter the elevator at the end of the hall. She closes her door, her facade of strength crumbling. She rests her back against the door and slumps down onto the floor. She weeps for Gabriella's family, but also for herself. She had spent all this time imagining their hatred of her. She has an epiphany as she sits on the floor; perhaps their imagined hatred was merely a reflection of how she feels about herself? Had Scott not knocked on her door, she may very well be dead right now.

She runs her fingers through her hair as she looks down at her feet. This will be the last time that she will allow misplaced guilt to control her. After regaining her strength, she wipes her eyes and returns to her kitchen. Activating her laptop, she begins searching for a new apartment; not because she can't bear to live in her current home, but to give herself a fresh start. In short order she finds an apartment nearly identical in cost, but a few blocks closer to the police department. The building is much older, though it has been recently renovated, and is situated near downtown. It is known to be inhabited by new age hipsters who somehow find it ironic to stay in an older building, and elders who have lived there for many decades.

Salena doesn't care about the background, or the building. She just needs somewhere to start over. In short order, she moves out of her old apartment and into the new building. As she unpacks her things, she feels out of breath. She has allowed herself to grow weak since her injury. She can't be weak if they are ever going to return her to active duty. Salena begins exercising at home, jogging on her treadmill and lifting weights. She refuses to take the elevators, only ever using the stairs; she considers it good exercise, as she lives on the top floor of her new building.

The staircase is in the center of the long and rectangular complex. It is open and visible from the main hallway, lined with apartments. An elevator sits on either side of the staircase. A week after moving in, Salena jogs on her treadmill. Her sports bra hugs her large bust tightly. As she stops to rest, she walks over to her weight bench, passing by a large window in her living room. She looks down as her attention is drawn by a familiar yellow moving truck parked outside. A pale skinned human carries boxes alongside the uniformed movers. He must be a new tenant.

She returns to her workout routine, lifting weights and performing over one hundred crunches. After a full hour of exercising, she showers and dresses in her usual outfit of blue jeans and a solid colored t-shirt. She holsters her Glock pistol and pulls her shirt over it to conceal the weapon, before leaving to shop for her groceries. She jogs down the hallway and staircase, her high ponytail swaying. As she reaches the ground floor, she slams into someone walking by and knocks them to the ground. A medium-sized cardboard box falls from the person's hands and lands with a thud on the ground.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry!" Salena apologizes.

The young man sits on the floor and looks up to the woman with emerald green eyes. She reaches out a hand to help him up. He takes her hand and she quickly yanks the human to his feet, startling him.

"Wow, you're strong." He comments.

"I hope none of that was fragile." She says.

**"It's fine. It was the last box, and it's filled with books anyway."
The man replies as he brushes himself off.**

She scans the human, who looks to be in his early twenties. The man has a slim build and stands five feet and eight inches tall, but he still looks up to Salena. His black hair is cut short on one each side, but long at the top and pulled over to one side, hanging just past his eyes. His beard is full, but trimmed neatly. Overall, he has a quasi-hipster or neo-rocker appearance; he could easily fit in with the younger tenants already living in the building. At first glance, she doesn't think much of the man.

"I'm Max Beckett." He says, holding out his hand again.

"Pleased to meet you." Salena replies, shaking his hand.

"That's normally where you share your name." Max chuckles.

She stares blankly at the man, who's smile quickly fades.

"Wait... You're Salena Cruz, right?" He asks.

She pulls her hand away from the man, her eyes narrowing as she scans him again.

"How did you know that?" She barks.

"You were on the news for like a week. You survived that robbery. You're a hero, you know." He says to her.

"No I'm not, kid."

“Kid? I’m twenty-four.” Max retorts.

“Whatever.” She sighs.

Though Max tries to talk to her at length, Salena is far more interested in ending the conversation than maintaining it. She was never really attracted to humans to begin with. As he speaks to her, she can’t help but feel that she may have met this man somewhere before. His voice is somehow familiar. The polite Max commends her for her bravery during the robbery, and asks her how she is fairing. His kind words, genuine concern and gentle smile are rewarded with her disinterest and a blank stare. Though he struggles to converse with her, she does nothing to contribute. After a long pause, she walks away from the man, not even saying goodbye to him.

She leaves him in the hallway, walking to a local store to buy her provisions for the week. When she returns, she jogs up the staircase with her supplies, which will soon become her routine. As she reaches the floor just beneath hers, she sees a door ajar near the staircase. Several boxes line a partially open doorway, one of them crumpled at one corner. Max emerges from the apartment, picking up boxes and bringing them inside. He stops when he sees Salena standing at the stairs, watching him.

“Hey again.” He says with a smile.

“Aren’t the movers supposed to help you with that?” She asks.

“I guess they had something better to do.” He chuckles.

“Hmm...”

Before he can utter another word, she turns back to the stairs and jogs up to the final floor. She enters her apartment, which sits directly above Max’s. Though Salena doesn’t leave often, whenever she does, she often finds Max spending time in the ground floor hallway, or sitting on the steps of his floor where he quietly reads a

book. She never sees him working, or even leaving the building. Though Max is polite, always smiling and waving to her, she never sees him talking with anyone else in the building, especially the other hipsters. For reasons lost to her, she can't help but feel somewhat uneasy around the nice man, whom she often avoids.

After living in her new apartment for over a month, and nearly three months since the robbery, she is cleared by the department's therapist and returns to active duty. Officer Cruz is initially given a desk job to ease her back into things. No officers dare to tease her for her scar; she has seen more action than many of the veterans of the department. It makes little difference, however. Even without verbal taunts, the looks they accidentally give her when they see it, and the stares that she witnesses from the corner of her eyes make her feel terrible. They are exactly the same looks that citizens often give her when she passes by. Though her guilt has subsided, her wounded self-esteem never truly recovers.

Salena quickly becomes withdrawn; she was always a bit of a stoic, but now she is aloof, bitter, and even hostile. This carries over to her personal life, where she is often cold to other tenants, especially Max, and even her landlord. Her personality alienates her from many of the office staff at the precinct, and she develops an unpleasant reputation. After three weeks behind a desk, she can no longer stand it. She barges into the Major's office immediately after roll call.

"Well! Office Cruz! What can I do for you?" He asks her.

"I'm sorry for intruding, Sir, but I need a new assignment. I need to be in a black and white again." She begins.

"... Are you sure?" He asks, raising a brow.

"Yes, Sir. I'm ready." She nods.

He sighs as he leans back in his chair, resting his hands on the edge of his desk. Salena is something of a legend now.

“Alright... We can do that. I have an officer who’s riding solo right now. Do you know Margaret Samuels?” He asks her.

“No, Sir.”

“She’s a vet, with nine years on the force. She’s been solo for six months, after her partner retired. You can ride with her.”

“Thank you, Sir!” Salena exclaims.

The Major picks up his phone and places a call.

“You’ll like her; she’s a very good cop.” He adds.

After speaking to a first-line Sergeant, the Major has Officer Samuels sent to his office. After waiting in silence for a moment, Officer Samuels steps inside the open doorway.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” Officer Samuels asks.

“Yes. Officer Samuels, meet your new partner.” He says as he waves a hand, presenting Salena to Margaret.

Salena turns to look at her new partner. The twenty-eight-year-old Officer is a feline Voeldahn with a slim frame, small bust and buttocks, orange tabby fur, bright amber eyes and short red-orange hair. Her tomboyish appearance is surprisingly attractive. The burly Salena stands nearly six feet tall, towering over nearly everyone, especially the dainty Margaret, who is only five feet and five inches tall. Salena immediately feels threatened by Margaret, who she considers pristine and very pretty.

“Oh! I didn’t know I was getting a partner! Pleased to meet you!” Officer Samuels giddily exclaims, extending a hand.

“Likewise.” Salena replies.

Margaret’s grip is soft and feminine, only making Salena feel even more intimidated.

“Officer Margaret Samuels, but you can call me Marge.”

“Hello, Officer Samuels...” Salena murmurs.

“Well... You two better get going.” The Major says.

“Yes, Sir!” Margaret nods.

The two officers walk through the precinct and head for the rear lot to Margaret’s squad car. Not knowing the route, Salena climbs into the passenger seat of unit 941 while Margaret takes the wheel. They drive in awkward silence for a moment, Salena staring out of the passenger window as Margaret drives her designated route.

“So... What was it-”

“I don’t want to talk about the robbery.” Salena interrupts.

“Okay... I’m sorry. What do you want to talk about?” Margaret asks.

Salena remains silent.

“Do you have a someone special?” Margaret asks.

Salena turns her head slowly to Margaret, glaring at the feline in mild irritation.

"It's just a question." Margaret remarks.

"Do I look like I would have someone special?!" Salena growls.

"Well, why not? You're pretty. You could have a boyfriend, or a girlfriend." Margaret retorts.

Salena is taken back by the surprise compliment.

"I uh... I'm not into girls, and I don't have a boyfriend." Salena replies.

"Oh... Well, you'll find a man!" Margaret chirps.

"Whatever..." Salena mutters.

"I have a girlfriend myself."

"I didn't know that about you. Guess I shouldn't have been surprised." Salena remarks.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Major said you were a good cop; most female cops that are worth their weight are lesbians." Salena chuckles.

"Who said I was a lesbian? Maybe I'm bi?" Margaret smirks.

"So, you *aren't* a lesbian?"

"... Okay, I am. But what about you? I heard about you, and you're not a lesbian." Margaret asks.

"I said *most* good female cops, not all. I'm an exception." Salena replies.

Knowing that Margaret is gay does not make Salena feel any better about herself, or make it any easier to work with her. Though Margaret makes an attempt to continue the conversation, Salena is

less than cooperative. She quickly shuts down on the small and polite Margaret. They cruise the city in near silence, responding to calls and keeping the citizens safe. This pattern repeats itself for the better part of a week, before Salena finally opens up enough to say more than four words to Margaret on her own. By the end of the first month patrolling the streets together, Officer Cruz still hasn't shared any personal details with Officer Samuels, except for the initial conversation on their first day.

One day, after a long and uneventful shift, they head to a local bar to unwind at Margaret's urging. Salena seems more annoyed than anything else. They take a seat at the bar, and Margaret orders a Budweiser. To her surprise, the burly Salena abstains. She stares with a raised brow at Salena's Coca Cola.

"So where is the bourbon?" Margaret asks.

"I'm straight edge. I don't drink alcohol, smoke, use any form of drugs, and I don't have sex with strange men." Salena replies, sipping her soft drink.

Margaret is stunned into silence as Salena suddenly opens up to her. She never would have guessed that this tough and intimidating woman would be so angelic. Even Margaret has slept with someone who's name she never knew.

"Wow... No wonder you are so miserable." Margaret chuckles.

Salena sets down the glass and glares angrily at the woman.

"Keep talking like that and I'm going to need a new partner, after attending your funeral." She growls.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that... So... What do you do for fun? How do you release?"

Salena merely shrugs her shoulders, staring at the fizzy soft drink on the table in front of her.

"Don't you spend time with family or friends?" Margaret presses her.

Salena turns her eyes to her partner. They aren't harsh and angry like before, but soft and sullen. At that moment, Margaret's heart aches as she realizes how utterly alone Salena must be. Salena has never spoken of her personal life; parents, siblings and children weren't mentioned. Perhaps she doesn't have any of those things? Salena isn't unattractive, but her reserved personality and imposing figure doesn't make dating any easier; most men don't want to look up to their woman.

"I'm sorry, I... It's been six weeks, and I still barely know you. I just want to be friends." Margaret apologizes.

"It's fine... I know I'm not making it easy for you. I just don't like talking." Salena replies.

"Well, ever consider dating? You easily could, you know."

"Maybe before, but now?" Salena chuckles.

"What's so funny?" Margaret raises a brow.

"I could have had a man before. There were a few takers, but I was too into my career. Now, with this on my face, I doubt I could pay a man to be with me."

"Don't be so hard on yourself! You have a lot to offer someone!" Margaret exclaims.

"Not so loud." Salena says as she looks around the bar.

“I’ll make you my personal project. We’ll turn your personal life around or die trying.” Margaret grins.

“That’s a distinct possibility... If it’s alright with you, I don’t feel like talking anymore.” Salena murmurs.

Chapter Three: The Lonely

True to her word, Margaret takes an interest in Salena’s private life. On their next day off she introduces Salena to her girlfriend, Sandra, a human with tanned skin and who works as a professional seamstress. They spend their next few off days hanging out together; Salena grows closer to the two women, who are her only friends at this point. The only other person who even comes close is Max, the unusually polite human who lives beneath her. Every day she leaves for work and every evening that she returns home, she encounters Max on the staircase or in the main hallway; he sits alone, reading his books, but always has time to say hello to her.

Lately, she hasn’t been quite so cold to the human, as odd as he might be. Perhaps it’s her familiarity with her neighbor, or her newfound friendship with her partner Margaret, and Margaret’s girlfriend Sandra? She sees Max sitting on a bench in the ground floor hallway, his book in hand.

“Hey there!” He says, closing his book and waving at her.

“Hi, Max.” She replies.

As she walks by, she stops in her tracks and turns back to Max, who watches her with a pleasant smile. She walks back to the bench and sits beside him, to his surprise.

"This is new." He chuckles.

"So why are you always out here? What's your deal?" She asks him.

"Uh... I live here." He grins.

"That's not what I meant, smart ass." She snaps. "I mean, you don't go anywhere, you don't do anything, and I never see you with anyone."

"Way to make me sound pathetic. Thanks." He mutters.

"I'm just curious." She says.

Max sighs and leans back on the bench, setting his book down across his lap. He was reading a surprisingly thick copy of 'The Art Of War'. He looks to Salena and his smile fades. Salena is unsettled by his melancholy expression; she had grown quite used to seeing him exceedingly cheerful.

"I'm kind of a trust-fund kid. I don't really need to work, but I can't stand decadence; it makes me physically ill being around posh upper-class types. I like to read, and the atmosphere is much better down here, or on the soft carpeted steps than in my apartment. I did have friends, but they're gone now." He answers her matter-of-factly.

"Gone?"

"Yeah, as in dead... They were coming over to my old apartment and were t-boned by a drunk driver." He murmurs.

"I'm sorry." She says softly.

"Thanks... I've been seeing you out and about more these days."

"Yeah. I'm working more now, and seeing a few friends on my time off." She replies.

"Sounds nice." He mutters.

"Yeah... Well, I'm going to go. Take care, okay?" Salena says.

"You too." He says with a warm smile.

She smiles back at him; it's the first time that she ever did. A few days later, Margaret and Salena are driving together in their squad car. Salena gazes out of the window, as though in a trance. Margaret looks over to her partner, wondering what is on her mind. Salena daydreams about Greg, a man who works at the precinct's records department, who had recently caught her eye. She's been interested in the handsome canine Voeldahn since she first saw him, and hides it very poorly.

"Hey, Sal... Hello? Salena!" Margaret yells.

"Huh? What?" She turns to her partner.

"Thinking about Greg again?" Margaret smirks.

"What are you talking about, Marge?"

"Oh, come on. Everyone under the sun sees how you look at him, and I've never seen you walk out of your way to say hi to anyone, not even me." Margaret replies.

"That doesn't mean anything." Salena murmurs.

"Not to anyone else, but to you it does. Don't lie to me... Want me to set something up?"

"You could do that?!" Salena asks excitedly as she turns to Margaret.

"I fuckin' knew it!" Margaret chuckles.

"Shut up..."

"Don't worry, I'll work something out." Margaret assures her.

Salena is at a loss for words. Her mind races with the dramatic possibilities. Maybe Greg will like her? Maybe he is the one for her? Maybe she won't be so lonely anymore?

"You're welcome." Margaret chuckles, after a moment of silence.

"Thanks." Salena smiles.

Several days later, Salena is at Margaret and Sandra's apartment, trying on a dress that Sandra had made for her. Margaret spoke to Greg only a day later on Salena's behalf, and arranged a semi-blind date between the two. The lesbian couple have truly gone the extra mile for Salena, and she certainly appreciates their help and friendship. She hasn't felt truly cared for like this since before her parents died. Later that evening, a nervous Salena paces her apartment in her new red dress, nibbling on her claws as she moves back and forth. She looks to the clock; it's nearly time to meet Greg.

She steps out of her apartment, feeling like a fish out of water in her new dress. She holds the rail as she walks down the steps and toward the ground floor; her car waits for her in the parking lot outside. Her stomach churns as she walks carefully down each step. She stops when she sees Max sitting on the steps, using the soft yellow light of the staircase wall sconce to read another book.

"Figures..." She sighs.

Max turns, closing his book.

"Oh, hi!" He says with a smile.

"Hey, Max."

"Wow, you look great, Salena!"

"Thanks." She mutters, walking past him.

"What's the special occasion?" He asks.

"Nothing."

"Nothing doesn't require a sexy red dress." He smirks.

"I'm just going out. No big deal."

“Oh... Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Look Max, mind your fucking business for once!” She growls at him.

“Fine... Sorry...”

His lips curl down into a frown as he rises from the steps. He walks back to his apartment, closing the door behind him. Salena watches him the entire time, standing on the staircase. She immediately regrets yelling at him; he was just trying to be nice and talk to her. She’s just so nervous, and doesn’t want to talk to Max at the moment. She climbs down the stairs and walks out of the building, climbing into her car. The butterflies in her stomach are making it hard to breath; she hasn’t been this nervous since grade school. She drives to where she is to meet Greg, a rather nice restaurant in downtown, and placed quite close to her precinct.

When she arrives at the restaurant, Greg is already waiting for her. He greets her with a smile and compliments her dress. The dinner begins as any other would, with small talk and pleasant banter; he is polite and sweet, paying her several more compliments. Salena can’t believe it is working out so well. After dinner, they sit and talk for a bit longer. They don’t have much in common, but he seems very interested in her, and Salena just wants to be close to him. After paying the bill, they sit in silence for a moment, smiling at each other.

“So, what would you like to do now?” Salena asks.

“You could come back to my place.” Greg suggests.

“What?” She asks in surprise, raising her brow.

“Or we could go to yours. Whatever you prefer.”

“And what would we do there?” She questions him.

“I’m sure we can think of something... I have condoms.” He winks.

“Excuse me?! I assumed we were getting to know each other first.”

“We are, and what better way than to peel you out of that dress?” He grins.

Salena hesitates. Greg eyes her body, focusing on her large breasts. She can’t believe how forward Greg is, suggesting they have sex on their first date. Furthermore, she can’t believe that she is even entertaining the thought, but she is. It’s been a long time for her, and maybe she wouldn’t feel so lonely afterward? She scratches her chin as she genuinely considers his offer.

“Look, we both know that you aren’t ever with anyone. I’m offering you free sex.” He says as he grows impatient.

She turns to him as he seems visibly irritated that she didn’t immediately agree to sleep with him.

“Offering *me* free sex?” She scoffs.

“You heard me.”

“I’m not a charity case.” She barks.

“Of course you are. I mean, you have a decent body and those big, perfect tits, but have you seen that beauty mark on your face? You aren’t going to be a centerfold anytime soon.” He chuckles.

“... Fuck you, you piece of shit!” Salena growls.

She stands and shoves the table toward him, rattling the dishes and tipping his glass, spilling the last of his drink onto his jacket. Greg scoots back, visibly surprised as she storms off. Once she is out of his view, she runs to her car. Jumping in as fast as she can, she fights back her tears as she turns the key and shifts into gear. She squeals her tires as she races back to her apartment. This isn’t how

she pictured Greg; she was hoping for something real. When she pulls into the parking lot of her apartment building, she looks up to the top floor. She can't hold back any longer and cries, resting her head on the top of her steering wheel. Tears stream down her snout and drip off her nose, landing on her dress as she sobs for several minutes.

After regaining her composure, she steps out of her car. She slowly returns to her apartment, climbing the stairs slowly and methodically. She reruns the failed date in her head. As she reaches the floor just before her own, she looks to the stairs. Max is not sitting on the steps; she was hoping that he would be. She looks to his door, still feeling guilty for yelling at him earlier. More than that, she actually wants to talk to him. She stands at the top step of his floor, gazing at his door as she considers knocking and speaking with him. At the very least she should apologize to him. After standing there for what feels like hours, she continues up the stairs to her own apartment. She can't bring herself to knock on his door.

She climbs the remaining steps and enters her apartment. Walking into her bedroom, she sits at the edge of her bed and slips off her shoes. She removes her red dress, setting it neatly atop the dresser. Now in only her pink lace panties and bra, she lies back on her bed. She reflects on Greg's behavior, and how she nearly accepted his offer; had he not been impatient with her, she might be having sex with him right now. As soon as she imagines the act, she recalls how cruel he was. He is the first person who works with her to use her scar as ammunition for an insult; he only cared about getting laid, not for her as a person.

Suddenly, she recalls Max, the eccentric human who always stops to greet her and speak with her. When he talks to her, he never glances down at her breasts, or at her scar; he maintains perfect eye contact. Not only that, but he appeared somewhat disappointed when she left for her date. She then recalls how she had clearly hurt his feelings. Her mind is filled with so many thoughts, she can't pin any of

them down. She sits up and looks down at the sheets, resting her face in the palms of her hands, her fingers weaving through her bangs.

“What’s wrong with me? I treated Max like shit, and nearly fucked that asshole Greg.” She thinks aloud.

She drops her hands from her face, resting them in her lap. She looks down at her floor, and can’t help but wonder what Max is doing at that moment.

“Alright... I’m off tomorrow... I’ll go see him and apologize.”

She stands from her bed and slips off her panties and bra, tossing them onto her dresser where they land on her red dress. She steps up to her closet door, which is a large sliding panel covered almost entirely with a mirror. She looks over her naked body, running her hands over her figure. Though she does love her plump breasts, she can’t help but feel that the rest of her is inadequate; her figure could be shapelier and her buttocks more noticeable. She walks into her bathroom and stands before the sink to brush her teeth. As she looks into the mirror of the medicine cabinet, she runs her fingers over the scar tissue on her cheek. As she brushes, she can’t help but stare at the twisted flesh. Why can’t her fur just grow back and cover it?

Looking around her bathroom, she takes a spare towel from the rack and drapes it over the mirror, hiding her reflection. After brushing her teeth, she takes a shower. She stands there, letting the water run over her body. It cascades over her form, soaking her fur as she stares down at the drain. As she turns to wash her back, she pauses. She sits down in her shower, letting the water fall onto her like hot rain as she draws her knees close to her chest. She’s surprised by how comforting the water is, and can’t help but chuckle at the irony; she never thought someone as strong as herself would be in such a pathetic and cliché position.

She sits there until the water runs lukewarm, finally finishing her shower. She climbs out and wraps a towel around her body, and a smaller towel around her hair. She pulls the spare towel from her mirror, wrapping it around her hand. As she turns to place the towel back on the rack, she glances at her reflection in the mirror. Her scar stares back at her, even more vividly now that her flesh is glistening. Greg's words run through her mind once again and a rage builds. She bears her teeth as she glares at her own reflection. With the towel still wrapped around her hand, she slams her fist into the glass, shattering it.

"God damnit..." She mutters, looking at the damaged mirror.

She sets aside the spare towel and dries off her fur. Setting the damp towels aside, Salena walks into her bedroom and climbs into bed. She draws her sheet and blanket over the soft fur of her naked body; she often sleeps undressed. She turns her back on the large empty half of the bed, as she does every night, and like every night, she struggles to sleep. She wakes up the next morning to the sunlight beaming in through the window. Her eyes strain as she sits up in bed, the covers falling from her body. She looks around the room, sighing when she looks at the empty and unused space beside her.

"Maybe I should get a dog..." She mutters.

She looks at the clock on her nightstand, and to her surprise she has slept much later than usual. She climbs out of bed and stands in front of her dresser, taking her phone from its charger. She has a text message from Margaret, asking her if she'd like to come over to her and Sandra's apartment for dinner, to share how her date with Greg went. Salena replies to her text, accepting the invitation before quickly digging through her clothes. She looks down at the floor and recalls what she said to herself last night; she needs to apologize to

Max for her rudeness yesterday. As nice as he is to her, he deserves at least that much.

As she slips on a bra and panties, she hesitates. Does she really want to wear her usual clothes, allowing Max to think that she left her apartment just to talk to him? She strips off her underwear and dresses in her typical workout clothes; a sports bra and matching running leggings, with tight pockets that hug her phone and MP3 player to her body. If Max cares to ask, she will claim that she was merely going for a jog, and decided to apologize when it was convenient for her, on her way down to the ground floor. To complete the facade, she takes her phone, MP3 player and ear buds with her.

She jogs down the steps and approaches Max's apartment. Taking a deep breath, she knocks several times. After waiting for only a few seconds, the door unlocks and swings open. Max's eyes grow wide as he sees Salena standing in front of him.

"Uh, hi." He says.

"Hey."

"Wow, you're looking good." He smiles.

"Thanks. I hope I'm not bothering you." She smiles back.

"Not at all. Are you alright? You've never knocked on my door before." He asks as he steps outside.

"I'm fine. I was just about to go for a run. I uh... I wanted to stop by on my way down and apologize for how I acted yesterday." She begins.

She scratches the back of her head, her snout pointed to the ground, though her eyes turn up to look at him.

"I didn't want to sound so mean. I was just... I-"

"It's fine. I'm not upset." Max interrupts her.

"Really?" She asks in surprise.

"Yeah. You were just nervous. It's all good."

"Yeah... Well, I'd better go." She says as she turns to the stairs.

"Wait!" He exclaims.

She turns back to him, looking down at the human.

"H-how did it go? You're date?" Max nervously asks.

"What makes you think I was going on a date?"

"Your behavior is very predictable: You leave once a week on Friday to buy groceries, and your shift as a police officer is pretty stable. You leave in the morning and come back in the evening, give or take an hour. When you do leave on your days off, you always wear jeans and t-shirts. I actually didn't know you even owned a dress. It was a very pretty one, too."

"Every girl owns at least one dress." Salena grins. "You're pretty observant." She adds.

"Only when I care to be." He murmurs.

"You care to notice me?" She asks.

"I uh... Well." His eyes dart around as he hesitates.

Salena looks at the human who is so kind to her. As she backs him into a figurative corner, Max seems nervous and uncertain of what to say next. As often as she disregards him, Salena can't believe that Max would still care to notice her. Recalling her failed date with Greg, she replays his cruel words in her head. The pain of Greg's insults reemerge, cutting her all over again. She wonders if she has made Max feel as badly as Greg made her feel. The thoughts only serve to magnify her guilt. She reaches a hand across her chest, brushing her large bust as grabs onto her own arm as if bracing herself. Her eyes

well up and her lips curl down into a frown. Max's smile fades as he sees her demeanor drastically change.

"Are you alright?" He asks in a gentle voice.

"Yeah, I... I'll be fine..." Her voice trembles.

"Did you want to talk inside?" He opens his door for her.

Salena steps into his apartment, eager to be out of the hallway. She takes a seat on a brown leather couch in his living room. Max sits beside her, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"What's wrong, Salena? You can talk to me if you'd like. I'm here for you if you need me." He assures her.

She turns to him, her eyes glossy with tears. A single, salty drop escapes from her eye. It runs down her cheek and lands on top of her bosom, soaking into the sports bra that covers her. Max quickly grabs a box of tissue paper from his coffee table, bringing it closer to her. His hand that rests on her shoulder gives her a comforting squeeze, his thumb gently rubbing her soft fur. She can't understand why is he so nice to her; she doesn't feel like she deserves his attention, but it makes her feel better. She needs to talk to someone, and Max is the only person she cares to be around right now.

"You're right. You're right about everything." She begins, her voice trembling.

"I guess it didn't go so well, huh..." He comments.

"It was fine at first. He was sweet and thoughtful, and so handsome." She says.

"Oh..."

“But he wasn’t what I hoped he would be; all he wanted was sex. He outright asked if we could sleep together at dinner.” She continues.

“What an upstanding gentleman.” Max says facetiously.

She turns to him, tears streaming down her face as she cries even harder. A concerned Max takes out a square of tissue paper, gently dabbing her eyes for her.

“I’m sorry, I just wanted to make you smile.” He apologizes.

“It’s not you, it’s me.”

“Gee, that sounds familiar.” Max chuckles softly.

“Greg offered me sex, and I was tempted to accept...”

“I see...” He mutters with a frown.

“While I was thinking it over, he became impatient. He acted like he was doing me a favor, like I couldn’t get laid without him. He was so mean and mentioned my...” She hesitates and brushes her scar with her fingers. “He was very cruel...”

“What a bastard.” Max grumbles angrily.

“I never felt so worthless... So ugly.” She sobs.

She rests her face in her hands and breaks down, unable to hold back her emotions any longer. Max can’t believe what he is seeing; the tall and strong Voeldahn woman weeps like a child. He softly shushes her as he slips an arm around her, scooting closer to her. His other arm slips underneath her ample breasts, resting over her toned belly. He holds her gently, his hands clutching her side.

“You’re not ugly, Salena.” Max assures her.

“Please don’t, Max. I know what I am.”

“No, you don’t. You’re strong, vibrant and beautiful; you’re not ugly or worthless, and I don’t ever want to hear you talk about yourself like that again.” He says sternly.

“You’re so nice to me, Max... I don’t deserve it.”

“What did I just say?” He says, his arms giving her a squeeze.

She rests her hands on her lap, her arms over his as she leans over. She rests her head against his and sniffles. Max is so warm and comforting against her body. Her frown fades, her muscles relaxing. She feels Max slowly nuzzle her shoulder, his beard making a faint scraping noise as it brushes her soft black fur. She closes her eyes and sighs, enjoying his presence. She reaches a hand up and rests it on his face, gently scratching his cheek with her claws.

“I’m so sorry you saw me like this. I didn’t mean for this to happen.” She sniffles again.

“It’s alright, Salena. You’re strong, but you’re still a woman; Unlike men, you’re allowed to talk about your feelings.” He says softly.

“Shut up.” She giggles, cracking a faint smile.

He takes a fresh piece of tissue paper from the box and dabs under her eyes. As Max tends to her needs, Salena feels terribly guilty. She never intended to use him this way, but she can’t deny how good he is making her feel. The dichotomy within her is unbearable. As he wipes her eyes for her, she suddenly pulls away, unwilling to allow him to care for her any longer.

“Okay, fine. Be that way.” He grins.

“Look, Max... I just wanted to apologize to you before I left for a run. I didn’t really intend for this to happen.” She says.

"I know that you didn't mean for this to happen, but it did. I just want to be there for you." He replies.

"I appreciate that, but you don't owe me anything. You're not my lover, or even a good friend; we're just neighbors. I don't want you taking care of me." She remarks, wiping her own eyes.

She doesn't truly mean it; she's never felt so wanted as when he was comforting her.

"Is that why you put on your cute jogging outfit?" Max asks.

"What?" Salena's eyes grow wide.

"You put on that outfit so I wouldn't think that you came down here just to see me, right? We both know that you have a treadmill. I hear it humming and thumping when you use it." He explains.

"N-no I... I..." She stammers.

As Max looks into her eyes, he can see how uncomfortable Salena is becoming; he's backed her into a corner. His heart sinks in his chest. Not wanting to make her feel worse, he quickly backtracks. He lets go of her and pulls his arms away, scooting back on his couch to give her more room while his eyes rush toward the coffee table.

"I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I uh... I gave myself way too much credit... You probably just decided that you'd rather have fresh air when you exercised." He says.

"Uh... Right! Exactly!" She exclaims.

"I uh... I know you don't really need anything from me, but I'll say it again anyway, one last time... You are a strong and beautiful woman, Salena. Don't ever sell yourself short, or let the words of some ass hole drag you down. You're too good for that." He tells her, turning back to her and flashing a warm smile.

"Thanks for saying so. You're such a sweet guy." She smiles back.

He shrugs modestly as her eyes meet his. They gaze at each other for what feels like an eternity. Salena's heart beats a little bit faster as he smiles so warmly at her. She's never really been attracted to humans, but Max has been so kind and compassionate, even when she didn't return it. She begins to realize how much he must care for her, and her heart burns. The way he treats her and cares about her; somehow it begins to matter less to her that he is a human. Staring into each other's eyes, Salena finds herself replaying the same thoughts and fantasies that used to revolve around Greg, but with Max now taking his place.

She can't believe her own heart and mind as she begins to wonder if Max might be the one for her. So what if he is a human? She can't recall where she heard it, but the saying 'chemistry is the strongest aphrodisiac' runs through her mind. It must at least be partially true; she already finds him more attractive. She wonders if maybe she should give him a chance. Considering how kind he is to her, especially after yesterday, he certainly deserves one. They may even have a lot in common. He might be the kind of man that she wishes she could sleep beside. He might be the kind of man that she wants to come home to.

"I-I uh... I don't suppose you'd like some company when you go for your run." Max sheepishly asks.

"Well... Do you think you can keep up?" Salena smirks.

"No, but I can try."

Her heart flutters at the thought of spending more time with Max. She's elated that he's asked to go with her. She does her best to maintain a straight face, not wanting to look too excited. She decides to go for it and see if they click. Suddenly, she impulsively reaches out

a hand and rests it on his arm, her thumb rubbing his smooth skin. He scoots closer to her, eager awaiting her response.

“You know... I don’t really feel like running anymore. How about we go out for a drink instead?” She suggests, leaning closer to him.

“That’d be great!” He exclaims. “Oh, but I don’t drink alcohol. I hope that’s alright.”

“That’s perfect.” She murmurs.

Chapter Four: Spontaneity

They are both eager to go out on their first date together, unexpected and impromptu though it may be. The pair leave Max’s apartment, walk down the steps together, and exit the building. As they head toward the parking lot, Max takes out a set of keys. He approaches an older BMW E Series coupe with a custom orange paint job, dark window tint and black aftermarket rims. Salena had seen the car before in the parking lot, but never really wondered who owned it. The sporty car is from the early or mid-nineties; it’s older than Max. Without a key fob, he slips the metal strip into the door and unlocks it manually, opening the passenger door first. He presents the seat to her, even closing the door behind her like a true gentleman. As he walks around the back of the car, she reaches over and opens his door in return.

“Such a sweetheart.” He smirks, climbing into the car.

“I have my rare moments.” She winks.

She directs him to a cheap hole-in-the-wall diner called Ramsey’s, a place that, to her surprise, Max actually knows quite well. When they stop in the parking lot, Max is quick to open both the car

and diner door for her. The waitress greets them and tells them to sit wherever they like. They approach a booth near the far wall, with a good view of the front door. They both approach the same seat, nearly bumping each other.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did you want the far seat?” She asks him.

“Oh uh... No, it’s alright.” He answers after a pause.

“Are you sure?” She presses him.

“Yeah. I just don’t like sitting with my back to a door. I like being aware of my surroundings.” He replies.

Salena is surprised by Max’s answer and can’t help but grin. They move to a corner booth alongside the opposite wall, allowing them both to watch the front door. They slip into the booth and sit beside each other. To Salena’s delight, Max scoots exceptionally close to her. After a brief debate, they decide to order lunch. When the waitress returns, Salena asks Max to order first. To her surprise, they both order the same meals. As they sit and wait for their food, they sip the same flavored soft drinks and begin to chat. Though the conversation is initially somewhat awkward and forced, they soon realize that they share many things in common.

They enjoy the same movies, television shows, and even have nearly identical tastes in music. By the time their food arrives, they are so busy talking that they inadvertently ignore the waitress who sets down the plates. By the time they actually begin eating, their food has already gone cold. Salena can’t believe how immersed she has become simply talking to Max, and he is just as interested in her as well. With every word spoken and every mutual interest shared, Max becomes more appealing to her. She soon looks at him and finds him even more attractive than Greg was before their ill-fated date. He even makes her laugh.

Eating slowly, and talking far more than they ate, it takes them over two hours before they are ready to leave Ramsey's diner. Salena keeps a thin wallet with her in her jogging outfit, but Max insists on paying for her. As soon as he sees her reaching for her pocket, he raises a hand and takes out his own wallet.

"I've got this." He says with a grin.

"Are you sure?" She asks.

"Trust fund kid, remember?"

"Is that why you drive a car that's officially an antique?" She giggles.

"It has character." He retorts.

"Is that what you call it?" She smirks.

"Yeah. When I hop out, people see the rims, window tint and paint, and I have a chance to pretend to be interesting." He grins.

She giggles and rests a hand on his arm, stroking him gently.

"You *are* interesting." She smiles wide, bearing her teeth.

"Aww, you're such a sweet liar."

"It's true!" She insists.

"Thanks, Salena." He says softly.

He rests a hand over hers, feeling her soft fur on his palm and between his fingers. They pause for a moment as they gaze at each other. They both lean a little closer to one another. It's going so well, that Salena grows worried. Could it be too good to be true? She suddenly has a thought; a little test of his character.

"So... What do you want to do now?" She coos.

"I don't know... The day is barely middle-aged." He grins.

Salena giggles.

"We could go see a movie, or maybe take a drive. How about a nice walk? Too bad we don't have any beaches around here." He thinks aloud. "Whatever you want, just so long as we're hanging out."

She watches with a little smile as he lists things for them to do together. Inside she is elated; he's nothing like Greg, and she's thankful for that. They decide to see a movie together, driving to a theater that plays older films that they both prefer. After the movie, they climb back into Max's old beamer. Again, he holds the door open for her, and again, she unlocks his door for him.

"So..." He says as he clicks his seatbelt into place. "Where too?"

Though she wants to stay out with him, she sees the time on his dashboard clock. Her heart sinks; it's nearly time for her to visit Margaret and Sandra.

"We should probably go back." She murmurs.

"Oh, alright... Where do you live again?" He teases her.

"Drive the antique." She chuckles.

They return to the apartment and Max gets her door one last time. They walk through the parking lot and into the building. Salena has had such a wonderful time with Max. She really doesn't want it to end, but she told Margaret that she would see her. Max notices her expression and stops.

“Hey, are you alright?” He asks her in a gentle voice.

“Yeah, I’m fine...” She says as they stand at the bottom of the staircase. “Hey, I’ll race you to your floor!”

They simultaneously bolt up the stairs, stomping up each flight as Salena gets away from Max. As they reach the floor just below his, the second from the top, he slows his pace. He holds his side and pants as he struggles to walk up the steps. Salena turns back, barely breaking a sweat as she watches him leaning on the hand rail at the top of the stairs.

“And that’s why I’m glad we didn’t go running.” He chuckles as he gasps for breath.

“You’re always on these steps; how are you so out of shape?” She wonders.

“Gee, thanks.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” She giggles.

“I take the elevator. I just like to sit on the stairs and in the hallway.” He tells her.

They walk to his front door, standing before each other for a moment.

“Are you sure you don’t want to hang out more? I’m not doing anything.” He asks her.

“I told a friend that I would meet her for dinner tonight. Honestly, after spending time with you, I would rather stay with you and see her some other time.” She replies.

“So why don’t you?” He suggests.

“I don’t often go back on my word.” She says.

Nodding, his lips curl into a disappointed frown. He steps up to her and hugs the woman, resting his chin on her shoulder. She wraps her arms around him and holds him tightly, her heart beating faster.

"I hope we can do this again soon." He murmurs.

They hold each other for a long time, neither of them willing to be the first to let go. Salena has never experienced this before.

"After I first saw you, the day I moved in..." Max begins, speaking softly.

"Yeah?" She asks after he hesitates.

"Well... I sat on the stairs just so I could say hello to you."

"Really?!" Her heart skips a beat.

"You're just so beautiful and strong, I didn't think I was good enough to be with you. After I saw your routine, I would sit on the steps or in the hall and wait for you, just to say hello. I know that sounds weird and creepy, and I probably shouldn't have said that, but I just wanted you to know..." Max confesses.

Salena can't believe her ears. She had no idea he cared for her so much, but after a brief reflection, it all makes sense to her. He has liked her since the day they met. She is at a loss for words. As they are still holding each other, she can only think of one way to express her thoughts and feelings; she squeezes him tighter, her claws pressing into his back as she grips him. He nuzzles her cheek with his nose, brushing right over her scar; he doesn't even seem to notice. She nuzzles him back, her snout rubbing against the side of his face. Salena's stomach feels as though it is full of butterflies as she pulls back from Max.

Rather than tearing herself away from the man, she merely shifts, sliding her snout in front of him and planting a kiss right onto his lips. Though startled, Max doesn't back away. He holds her even tighter, a hand sliding down to the small of her back. Wearing only the sports bra as a top, he feels her fur, scratching her gently with his short fingernails. His touch makes her tremble, and only increases the passion and duration of their first kiss. Finally, their lips pull away. Her eyes narrow, gazing at the man. He smiles up to her, their faces mere centimeters apart.

"Well, that was a pleasant surprise." Max remarks.

"You have no idea." Salena coos.

He leans in, kissing her again. She closes her eyes as she feels his lips over hers, his warm breath on her face as they make-out in the hallway. Their jaws open slightly as they kiss, their tongues caressing and then wrestling with each other. Saliva runs down the side of her snout as her hands grip him even tighter, her loins burning as her desire grows. She can hardly believe the turn of events; Max is the real deal, and she isn't going to lose him or miss her chance. After a pause, she pulls back from him.

"Give me a second, okay?" She says sweetly.

"Anything you want." He replies.

They let go of each other simultaneously and she wipes her snout dry with her palm. She takes out her cell phone from her pocket. Max unlocks his apartment door as Salena quickly sends Margaret a text message, apologizing for missing dinner with her and Sandra, but that something important has come up. She quickly sends a second text, assuring Margaret an explanation tomorrow, during their shift together. Max stands in front of his partially open door, watching Salena. She shuts off her screen and slips her phone back into her pocket as she turns back to him.

"Looks like my schedule just freed up for the night." She says with a little grin.

"Lucky me. So, what do you want to do now?" He asks, smiling back.

She steps up to him and rests a hand on his cheek.

"Maybe you could give me a tour of your apartment?" She asks.

"You already saw my living room, and the floorplans are all the same." He replies.

"I know." She says.

She kisses his lips passionately, their tongues sliding over each other. She kisses along his mouth and cheek, moving toward his ear.

"But I never saw your bedroom." She whispers.

"Right this way." He says softly.

"Good boy."

She lets out a moan as he kisses her neck. Her large bust presses against his chest as his hands grip the small of her back. He pulls her against him as he steps backward inside of the apartment. To her surprise, he nearly drags her into his apartment, their bodies pressed tightly together. His firm grip and dominant behavior makes her burn for him even more. She can't remember the last time she has wanted a man so badly. Salena slams his front door closed behind them, barely having the time to lock it before he pulls her toward his bedroom. Their lips press together and rub as their heads shift, their tongues tasting the other.

They stumble down the hallway toward his bedroom, their focus on each other. He slides his lips over hers, kissing alongside her snout before nuzzling her neck. His hand grips a plump breast through her sports bra. He hesitates and looks up at her, as though worried he went too far. It's been nearly eight months since Salena has had sex, and she is eager to reset the clock. She grins wide and leans in, kissing him more.

"Oh Max, I want you so badly." She coos.

"I want you too." He says.

His hand massages her breast through her sports bra, his other hand sliding down to her butt. She loves every shift and squeeze of his hands. Her body trembles at his touch; she melts like snow on a warm spring day. She caresses his bearded face as she kisses him. Her other hand slips underneath his t-shirt and runs along his back, feeling his warm flesh. Her claws gently rake his skin.

"How much do you want me?" She asks.

"Ever since I saw you, you're all I've ever wanted." He replies.

"Aww, Max! Well, now you have me."

His hands release her breast and buttocks, sliding over to her back. He holds onto her tightly, their faces resting beside each other as they hug. Her heart pounds within her chest so hard that she worries that Max will feel it. They savor every moment with each other; he strokes her soft fur as she rakes her claws along his back.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" He asks her softly.

She pulls her head back, gazing into Max's eyes. He looks up to her sincerely as he waits for her response. With a warm smile, she

narrows her eyes and leans in, answering him with yet another passionate kiss. She leans hard against him; he pulls her through the opened doorway of his bedroom.

Chapter Five: Comes The Dawn

Salena rolls over in bed, roused by the faint chiming of her cell phone's alarm. She sits up, still in Max's bed and covered only by his bedsheet. She looks over, but Max is not lying down beside her. She can't help but be somewhat disappointed. She looks around the room for her clothes. On the ground in a heap lies her sports bra and matching leggings, the top fifth of her phone peeking out through the small pocket. She climbs from his bed and takes out her phone, deactivating her alarm. She has to be at the police department for roll call in two hours. Without getting dressed, she walks through the apartment, looking for Max.

As she steps into the hall, she hears a faint sizzling; a delicious and familiar aroma filling her nostrils. Walking down the hall, she enters the kitchen. Max stands at his stove in his underwear. One hand holds the handle of a skillet, while the other grips a spatula. She leans against the archway of the kitchen, her arms crossed underneath her exposed breasts as she watches him cook. Max doesn't notice her standing several meters behind him, so she reaches out a hand and clicks her claws on the wall near the archway. He turns, a warm smile on his face.

"Good morning, Salena!" He chirps.

"Hey." She grins.

"I hope I didn't wake you. I wanted to be next to you when you woke up, but I thought I could make you breakfast first." He explains, looking down at the skillet.

Her heart warms at his genteel and sweet nature. She immediately forgives Max for not being beside her when she awoke. Her arms lower to her sides as she approaches him. She stands behind him and wraps her arms around him. Her hands rest against the skin of his bare chest, gently stroking him with her claws as she holds him.

"You looked so cute and peaceful, I just wanted to do something nice for you."

"You're so sweet." She coos.

She kisses his cheek and nuzzles his face with her snout. He lets go of the skillet and spatula, letting the bacon and eggs sizzle as he reaches back. He strokes her cheek tenderly with his fingers as she grips him tighter, pressing her chest against his back.

"I'm really sorry for waking you up."

"It's alright. My phone alarm did it; I have a shift today. I prefer to eat at a table anyway." She replies.

"Oh..." He looks sullenly at the skillet.

"I'm sorry." She laments, kissing his cheek.

"Well, if it'll make it easier, you can use my bathroom to get ready; run upstairs and get your uniform after. Your breakfast will be ready for you when you get out too."

"That's okay. I probably should go." She replies.

He sighs, looking down at the floor, obviously disappointed.

"I'm not asking you to move in, I just like having you around." He murmurs.

"I know." She says.

"I just want you to know that what happened last night... That wasn't all I wanted from you. I mean, it was great, and you *are* beautiful, but you also have a wonderful personality; we have a lot in common and I feel like we have a real connection... I like you for you, and I just wanted to show you that."

Her smile grows wider as she rests her hands on Max's shoulders, squeezing him gently.

"You already did." She rubs his shoulders.

"Thanks." He grins faintly.

"How about if I stay for breakfast?" She suggests.

Max's eyes light up as he quickly finishes cooking. Without bothering to get dressed, Salena and Max sit at his small dining room table, eating well cooked bacon, and eggs that are sunny side up. Salena is surprised how delicious the simple breakfast is, but then again, she has never had someone cook for her before. After eating, she showers in Max's bathroom. For a single man he is surprisingly neat and tidy; everything has a place and is easy to find. After washing, she dresses in her leggings, shoes and sports bra, the same outfit she left in a pile on his bedroom floor.

She emerges from the bedroom to find him sitting on the couch, fully dressed in black jeans and a matching t-shirt. His feet are resting on his cheap coffee table, several books sitting atop it. He looks to her and smiles, waving her over to him. She takes a seat beside him on his leather couch. He slips an arm around her and pulls at her; she leans into him.

"So, when do you have to go?" He asks her.

"I have some time left. Just enough to cuddle." She grins.

He shifts his body, stretching out as she leans against him with his arms around her. Salena should already be back in her own apartment, changing into her police uniform, but she isn't quite ready to tear herself away from him.

"Max."

"Yeah?"

"The last sixteen or so hours has been amazing." She says to him.

"I liked it too." He says, running his fingernail through the fur of her arm.

"I've never had such a good time with anyone." She adds.

"Does this mean that you'd like to see me again?!" Has asks excitedly.

She turns her head, gazing at him. Her lips curl up in a wide grin. She reaches a hand up, resting it on his face as she kisses his lips tenderly.

"Is that a yes?" He chuckles.

"Well it definitely isn't a no." She giggles.

"If we're going to see each other, we better exchange numbers. That way I can text you goodnight, and you can blow up my phone when I oversleep." He laughs.

"Good idea. I'll need to keep tabs on my new man." She winks.

She takes out her cell phone from her pocket and activates the screen.

“Oh, shit!” She exclaims, bolting upright. “I need to go, or I’ll be late for roll call. I’m sorry babe!”

“You just called me babe.” He grins.

“I’ll come over tonight after work, okay?”

“Okay.” He nods. “Be safe, Salena.”

She turns back to him and leans in, giving him a tight hug and a final kiss before rushing for the front door. He follows her to the door, waving goodbye to her as she rushes up the stairs. She bolts into her own apartment and hastily strips off her clothes, throwing on mismatched panties and bra before quickly donning her uniform and duty belt. She takes the elevator for the first time since she’s moved in, purely to save time. She climbs into her car and races to the station, blowing through several yellow lights and driving nearly ten miles per hour over the speed limit. Pulling into the police station’s employee parking lot, she rushes into the building, making it to work with only a few minutes to spare.

“Are you alright?” A surprised Margaret asks.

“Oh, I’m fine.” Salena says, catching her breath.

Chapter Six: End Of The Tunnel

Salena sits in the passenger seat of unit 941, her and Margaret’s squad car, a noticeable smile plastered on her face. She rests an elbow on the armrest of the car door, her chin on her upturned palm with her claws brushing the top edge of her snout. Margaret looks over to her partner several times as she pulls away from the police station, ready to begin their patrol.

"Well?" Margaret finally asks.

"Huh?" Salena turns to her.

"Aren't you going to tell me why you bailed on Sandra and I yesterday? We wanted to hear how your date went."

"Right. I did say I was going to do that didn't I?" Salena murmurs.

"So, can I assume by your smile that it went well?" Margaret smirks.

"Actually, it was a disaster. Greg was a total piece of shit." Salena begins.

"Are you serious?!" Margaret exclaims in shock.

"Mhm... He was nice at dinner, but after that it went downhill fast. He asked me if we could go to one of our homes and fuck, right there in the restaurant. I almost said yes, since it's been a while, but as I was thinking it over, he acted entitled; he thought he was doing me a favor, insulted me and my looks. He even brought up my scar."

"Men... That's why I don't date them." Margaret mutters.

"And to top it off, we didn't even have anything in common!"

"Oh, Sal." Margaret chuckles. "Then what are you so happy about?"

Salena turns in her seat, looking to Margaret. As soon as she sees Salena's expression, the dainty cat woman pulls over the squad car, parking it in front of a fire hydrant. She turns on the red and blue light bar, though not the siren, and turns down the volume of their radio scanner.

"Alright, so what's going on? I want real details, damnit! No glossing anything over." Margaret grins.

Salena takes a deep breath, arming herself with oxygen for the verbal barrage. She confides to Margaret about her human neighbor, explaining the young man's behavior, and how their impromptu date came to be. Salena's eyes light up as she recalls how sweet and gentlemanly he was, and how much they have in common. She extolls his virtues, and admits that their connection made it easy to forget that he was not a Voeldahn, her preferred race of man. Salena spares few details when her story brings her and Max back to his apartment. She regales Margaret with the intimate details of how they made-out in the hallway, culminating in the pair having sex in his apartment throughout the night.

Margaret rests her elbows on the center console, their issued shotgun sitting vertically by her right arm as she nibbles on her off-white claws. She can't believe the change in her partner. Salena is cheerful, excited, and even bubbly. Salena admits to Margaret that having sex with Max was a mixture of both her desire to feel a man's touch after so long, as well as a genuine attraction to, and even a growing affection for Max.

"Well, no wonder you're smiling." Margaret giggles. "Sounds like someone has a crush." She winks.

"Well, I did sleep with him... Several times." Salena giggles.

"You even said it yourself, though. It's much more than that; when you say his name, you light up. You should date him!" She urges Salena.

"When I woke up this morning, he wasn't next to me. I found him in his kitchen, trying to make me breakfast in bed. He said he wanted to prove that he wasn't just after my body." Salena adds.

"Oh yeah... He's a keeper!" Margaret grins.

"You think so?"

"Mhm... I uh... I hate to ask, but... Well... Was he a gentleman in bed too?" Margaret asks.

"What do you mean?" Salena raises a brow.

"Did he wear condoms?" Margaret laughs as she clarifies.

"Oh, uh... Well..." Salena taps her fingertips together nervously.

"Are you serious?!" Margaret exclaims.

"We were caught up in the moment! ... Several times... We didn't have time to think about condoms." Salena jokes.

"That must have been hard to clean out of your fur." Margaret giggles.

Salena stares back at Margaret with a straight face, her eyes darting away in several directions.

"He *did* pull out, right? I mean you didn't let him just plant his seeds in your garden, did you?"

Salena flushes in embarrassment as Margaret questions her, but she never replies. She lowers her head, looking up and over at Margaret innocently.

"Oh, Sal... You need to be more careful!" Margaret gently scolds her.

"Look, even if he had tried, I wasn't letting him go anywhere. My prey never gets away." Salena jests.

"So, you wanted it?" Margaret asks.

"You're damn right, I did. It felt great! Besides... I was on top the first time he went off. It sort of set the guidelines."

"So, are you going to see him again?"

"Of course I am! I'm going to visit him again after our shift." Salena replies.

"Well I'm glad you found someone who might actually be worth your time." Margaret says with a smile.

She turns off the lights, turns up the volume on the radio scanner and puts the car in drive, pulling away from the curb. She suddenly turns the car around, heading back toward the police station.

"Where are we going?" Salena asks.

"To the drug store a few blocks away. We'll get back on track as soon as we buy you some morning-after pills." Margaret answers.

"Oh god." Salena murmurs.

"Better safe than sorry! If you don't wrap up your new man, you should start looking into stable birth control."

"Gee, thanks mom." Salena teases.

"You're welcome... And don't forget to check in before dinner." Margaret smirks.

As they drive down the road in silence, Margaret suddenly has a realization. She turns to look at Salena.

"Hey, what does he do anyway? You never said." Margaret asks.

"Oh. He said he's a trust fund kid. He sure as hell doesn't act like it, but I've never seem him work." Salena answers.

"Hmm... A wealthy gentleman, eh?"

Salena shrugs her shoulders.

"Look at my little gold-digger." Margaret teases, reaching out to pinch Salena's cheek.

"Shut the hell up and drive." Salena chuckles, swatting her partners hand away.

Back at Max's apartment, he lies down on his brown leather couch, looking up at the ceiling. An opened book lies across his chest, but he can't bring himself to read it. He flips through the pages, sighing sullenly. He keeps thinking about Salena, and their passionate night together.

"Salena's such a sweetheart. I was hoping she would be." Max talks to himself. "It'll be so good to see her again tonight. Maybe we'll end up dating? Maybe she'll even be the one?"

He smiles giddily at the mere thought. He spends quite a while daydreaming about Salena, imagining their future time together. He sets his book down on his coffee table and sits up on his couch. His smile fades as his mind keeps racing. His heart rate increases as he looks toward the hallway, his temperature rising. He walks into his bedroom and looks down at his bed. The sheets are wrinkled, and have a few familiar stains in certain places. Now that he and Salena are becoming an item, he may not have another opportunity like this. He doesn't know why he hasn't done this before, but time is running out. He cares for Salena so much, but she can't ever find out.

He moves the mattress over, revealing the box spring underneath. Moving away the felt reveals a hidden compartment. Inside the compartment is a large silver suitcase. He takes out the suitcase and sets it on the floor beside the box spring. Using a stapler, he staples the felt to the box spring, then turns it over so that the compartment faces the floor. He slides the mattress back into place and sets the suitcase atop it.

"I hope you're the one for me, Salena. I really do." He mutters.

He opens the latches of the suitcase and lifts the lid. Inside are thick stacks of money, all one-hundred dollar bills, banded together with paper bank strips. Several pieces of jewelry and cut gemstones

sit beside a Taurus PT809 pistol with a stainless-steel slide and a rubber wolf mask.

“God, I wish I never shot her. She didn’t deserve that.” He laments, his eyes welling with tears.

He wipes his eyes with the short sleeve of his t-shirt, then removes the pistol and slips it into the back waistband of his pants. He stuffs the wolf mask into his pants pocket and closes the lid of the suitcase.

“I better run to the bank and drop this off with Mr. Kasabian. I can dump the mask and the pistol on my way there.” He thinks aloud.

As he walks into the hallway with his suitcase, he stops. He takes out several plastic grocery bags from his box of recycling and sets them on the kitchen counter. He places the wolf mask into one bag and ties it, then removes the Taurus PT809 pistol from his waistband and dismantles it. Using a cloth, he wipes the fingerprints off of every component, externally and internally. He even wipes down each live cartridge. He places the cartridges into one bag, the barrel in another, the frame in another, the slide in yet another, and the guide rod and magazine share the last bag. He ties them all closed and places the bags into an earth brown M1936 style musette bag that sits in his bedroom closet.

“Thank god I was smart enough to take care of Kerry and Lawrence; these are the last loose ends.” He chuckles as he slips the grocery bags into his pack.

He slips on his small pack and leaves his apartment, carrying his large suitcase in one hand. He casually rides the elevator down, humming a pleasant tune. He walks out to his old BMW and sticks the

suitcase in the trunk, keeping the pack up front with him. As he drives, he makes several stops, dumping the grocery bags individually into dumpsters and trash bins around the city. He feels a bag that must contain the slide, and casually drops it into a storm drain in front of a corner store. Heading inside, he buys a vanilla Coke and a Toblerone. Returning to his orange car, he drives to an upscale bank, well known in the criminal underworld.

Though the bank appears upstanding, in many ways it is. Mr. Kasabian, however, is not. Mr. Kasabian handles the accounts for many of the city's wealthiest criminals; though many are white collar, such as the Mayor, who has required 'special building permits' for years, some of the most dangerous gangsters also deal with him. Mr. Kasabian is an untouchable man in this city, though no one would ever think it to look at him.

"Hello, Mr. K!" Max exclaims as he enters his office.

"Oh, Maxwell! What a pleasant surprise. How are you, dear boy?"

The older Voeldahn grips the red leather and cherry wood armrests of his expensive wingback chair, slowly rising to his feet. His canine ears perk and his bushy tail sways, strands of grey fur running through what was once a vibrant black and white Malamute pattern. Small, yet outrageously expensive spectacles sit atop his snout and help his icy blue eyes focus. Mr. Kasabian, all of seventy-two years old, has known Max since he was a boy, who started his criminal career early; he caught Max trying to pick his pocket nearly fourteen years ago. He took a liking to the intelligent boy, and has watched over and schooled him ever since.

"So, is this business or personal?" Mr. Kasabian asks.

"Both, actually. I came to deposit on my last sale, Mr. K." Max speaks in code.

“You held onto that one for quite some time! What about your partners?”

“I took your advice, Mr. K.” Max says with a sinister grin.

“Good. Those stupid fuckers weren’t worth your time anyway, Maxwell.” Mr. K says, stepping around his large, handmade desk.

Max sets down the silver suitcase as Mr. Kasabian extends his arms. They embrace for a moment; Max pats him gently on the back.

“It’s good to see you, boy. So, what’s this personal matter?” Mr. Kasabian asks.

“I met a girl.” Max grins.

“Well, this *is* news!” Mr. Kasabian chuckles.

Max helps Mr. Kasabian walk through the office and down the hall, toward the vault of safety deposit boxes. He hides nothing from his mentor, explaining in detail his relationship with Salena. He reveals their first encounter during the robbery, moving into Salena’s new apartment, his months of waving to her in the hallway and staircase, their impromptu date, and the night that followed. Mr. Kasabian listens patiently to Max as he gushes over Salena, extolling her virtues.

“Well, she certainly sounds like your type, Maxwell. Just be sure that you’ve destroyed all of the evidence, if you never want her to know.” Mr. Kasabian says sternly.

“Don’t worry, Mr. K. I did just like you taught me.” Max says proudly.

“Good boy.” Mr. Kasabian pats him on the back. “Are you sure you are done? There might be more jobs, and everyone likes computer geeks these days.”

“No. I’m done with the life, Mr. K. I saved eight figures in laundered cash before my twenty-fifth birthday, have never been to prison, and now it looks like I might have found a great woman too. Too much risk for too little reward.” Max answers.

“You always were a smart one, Maxwell.” Mr. Kasabian chuckles. “Don’t worry about the funds. They’ll be taken care of.”

“I’ll stop by and make sure.” Max remarks.

“Hah. Smart lad. I taught you well. Come by and see me again sometime.” Mr. Kasabian says with a smile.

“I will, Mr. K.”

With their business concluded, Max returns to his car and drives to a market to pick up more groceries for tonight. He wonders what he should prepare for Salena as he browses the store. After making his purchase, he returns to his apartment, tidies up and waits for her.

Chapter Seven: Clean Slate

Salena pulls her car into the parking lot of the apartment building, her heart beating faster as she looks up to Max’s floor. She steps out of her car and walks into the building. Her lips curl into a wide grin as she sees Max sitting on a bench in the main hallway and reading a book.

“Hey there. Been waiting long?” She asks.

“Hey!” He exclaims.

He tosses the book aside and jumps up from the bench, walking up to her.

“Only about twenty minutes.” He says as he hugs her tightly.

“Well it’s good to see you too.” She giggles, hugging him back.

“So how did your day go?”

“It’s much better, now that I’m back.” She says softly.

“My day is much better now too.” He replies.

Her heart skips a beat and she grips him even tighter. He seems to know exactly what to say at just the right moment.

“I should probably get a job, so I’m not home doing nothing but thinking and reading all day.” He chuckles.

“What do you think about?” Salena asks.

“You.” Max admits.

She feels so loved and cared for, closing her eyes tightly as she nuzzles his face with her snout. She savors every moment with him.

“Maybe I could get you into the office at the precinct? Most of the clerical staff are civilians anyway.” She says.

“Only if you want too.” He says, gently nuzzling her cheek.

They share a kiss before finally let go of each other. Max retrieves his book from the bench and the pair walk side by side up the steps.

“So, Salena...”

“Yeah?” She turns her head to him.

“Would you like to have dinner with me?” He asks.

"Of course!" She immediately and happily exclaims.

"Great! I bought some huge steaks for dinner today, and I was hoping that I wouldn't have sad leftovers." He chuckles.

Salena giggles and takes out her cell phone.

"From now on, I'll text you when I'm about to leave work. That way you won't have to sit out here and wait, and if you are making plans, it'll be that much easier." She says.

"Such a sweetheart." He grins.

"Don't tell anyone." She winks.

They trade phone numbers as they walk up the stairs. They stop at Max's floor, but Salena opts to change out of her uniform before joining him. Max sets the table and cooks while he waits for Salena to return. As their food is nearly finished, Salena still hasn't returned. He begins to worry. Maybe she was tired and fell asleep? Maybe she changed her mind? He considers texting the number, but doesn't want to appear clingy or needy. Suddenly, he jumps when he hears a knock on his front door. He rushes toward the door and yanks it open. He grins wide as Salena stands before him, wearing her vibrant red dress.

"Damn, you look good enough to eat." He says, extending a hand to her.

"Thank you." She grins, taking his hand.

"It's a good thing the food is ready." He teases.

"Well, maybe you can have me for desert?" She winks.

"Oh damn..." He mutters, his heart fluttering.

Max escorts Salena to his little dinning room table, where she stops in her tracks when she sees what he has done for her. Atop the

table sits two red roses in a thin, natural glass vase. On either side of the vase are two long candles, waiting to be lit. As neither of them drink alcohol, he has non-alcoholic sparkling wine, as well as soft drinks at the ready. Plates are neatly placed with utensils set out properly. He pulls her chair out for her, before pouring her the drink of her choice.

“Were did you learn your etiquette?” Salena asks in awe.

“Trust fund kid, remember? My great uncle is an archetypal rich guy.” Max replies with a little smile.

“Well he did an excellent job. You’re not like any other man I have ever know.” She says.

“Thanks, babe.” He murmurs.

Salena enjoys every moment she spends with Max; she would have been happy with two microwaved cheese burgers and a can of Coca Cola, but Max consistently surprises her. She feels so special as he waits on her. After serving their food, Max takes his seat across from her. He looks so pleased that she is there with him, and it makes her enjoy him all the more. They talk as they did in the diner, their food growing cold as they very slowly eat. After dinner, Max cleans the table and the two relax in the living room. They talk for hours and soon cuddle as they watch television together. It takes them only a matter of seconds to agree on a show.

Salena and Max cuddle on the couch as they sit before the illuminating flat screen. He caresses her arm and side, while she strokes his cheek. After a time, they both become quite tired, but Salena doesn’t want to leave. She inadvertently voices this to Max, who all but jumps at the chance to keep her with him another night. Salena decides to stay with him; she’s done it before already. They retire to his bedroom, where they both undress and lie down. She takes her phone from her purse and sets it on the nightstand near her side of the bed. Salena isn’t sure what to expect when her beautiful handmade dress slides down to her ankles.

She's isn't sure if she should be happy or disappointed when Max only wraps his arms around her and cuddles with her. That night, they merely sleep beside each other, but simply being together brings them both immense comfort. Neither Max nor Salena has ever slept so well when they were alone. In the morning, when Salena awakens to her phone alarm chiming, she can't help but smile as she feels Max's arms grasping her body. She deactivates the alarm and watches him resting so peacefully, brushing his hair from his face. She holds onto him and waits for him to wake up; it isn't a long wait.

"Good morning." He says rubbing an eye.

"Hey there, sleepy head." She says, grinning at him.

"You work again today, don't you?" He asks.

She frowns and nods her head. They sit in silence and cuddle, enjoying their time together while they can.

"Hey Salena... Is this going to become a thing?" He suddenly asks.

"Is what?" She asks.

"This. Us being together."

"Oh... I don't know..." She murmurs.

"Well, it would be nice if it did." He says as he sits up in bed.

"Really?" She turns to him.

"Yeah. We have so much in common, plus you've seen me naked. I think I'd make a great boyfriend." He says.

"You want to be my boyfriend?" She asks.

"I like you, Salena... A lot. I hope you didn't think I was doing all of this to just be 'special friends'."

Salena's lips curl into a little smile, holding the covers up to her chest as she watches him. She sits up in bed, the covers shrouding her bust.

"Max, I can't even remember the last time I enjoyed spending so much time with a guy, especially the night before last." Salena begins.

"Aww... I try." Max blushes.

"We do have a lot in common, and I like you a lot too... But... Don't you think that this is all happening kind of fast?"

"Well, for me it's been a long time coming. Remember, I've sat out in the hall waving at you and trying to talk to you for months." He answers.

She knows what she wants to say, but just can't say it. She struggles to speak the words, looking at Max who smiles so pleasantly at her. She just wants to be with him, but she's never been good at these situations; she wasn't exactly the most popular girl in school. Suddenly, he leans in and kisses her. Her hand impulsively reaches out and rests on the flesh of his bare back as he pushes himself onto her. She lies back down as they kiss several times, each one more passionate than the last. He rests on an elbow, his free hand caressing her side and sliding up, resting beside her ample breast.

"M-Max?" She stammers.

"I care about you, Salena. I know it hasn't been very long for you, but with the time we have shared, I feel like you are perfect for me. Be my girlfriend; I don't want anyone else." He says softly to her.

She nods, his touch calming her nerves and making the tension melt away.

"I care about you too, Max. I've never felt like this before. We connect so well that it's like we were meant to be together." She coos, wrapping her arms around him.

He grins wide and kisses her. Her jaw hangs open, granting him access. Their tongues caress one another as their hearts beat faster. She burns for him, and him for her. He pushes himself atop her, her arms pulling him close to her body. They spend that morning together as they had the night before last. Once the lovers finish, they stumble from their bed and shower together. Salena's secondary alarm chimes loudly on the nightstand as the pair dry each other off in the bathroom.

"Is that important?" Max asks.

"I set it yesterday before I came down here. I have about forty-five minutes before roll call. Making me late is becoming a habit." She giggles.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry!" He apologizes.

"It's alright." She says, pecking him on the lips. "I'm not."

"I just realized I could have made a great pregnancy joke a second ago." Max chuckles.

"I was kind of expecting it. You disappointed me." She jokes.

"I can make it up to you sometime." He winks.

"How about tonight?"

"Okay. It's a date, then!" Max chirps.

Salena slips on her red dress before rushing back up the stairs to her own apartment. Once again, she makes it to work with just enough time to spare. Margaret is eager to hear the reason for her partners near tardiness, and once again Salena is more than willing to talk. After a stressful shift patrolling the streets with Margaret,

Salena returns home for her third date with Max. This date, like the two before them, goes off without a hitch, and Salena spends another night with Max. The more time they spend together, the more certain they both are that their lonely days are gone forever.

After just over a week of being a steady couple, Salena introduces Max to Margaret and Sandra. Both women quickly grow fond of Max; they fully support their pairing, believing the two to be a perfect match for each other. After a month, Salena and Margaret help Max attain a job in the records department. He replaces Greg, who mysteriously quit not long after his failed date with Salena. Only two weeks after Max began working at the police department, he and Salena move in together. The couple keep Max's apartment, moving Salena a floor below. He insists on paying the rent and utilities, and buying the groceries without her help, essentially taking care of her.

Salena can't help but find his old-fashioned take on their relationship to be charming and sweet. She's never had a man ask to take care of her before, and it feels nice; keeping the bulk of her meager police officer's salary is a pleasant bonus too. They spend every day together, and their bond only grows stronger. The lovers do everything as a team, including exercising and weight training with Salena's equipment. In the four months since she has been with Max, and the ten weeks that she has lived with him, her entire personality has become upbeat and cheerful.

"Are you alright, babe? You don't seem quite yourself." Max asks.

He sits at a table across from Salena in an upscale restaurant in the heart of downtown. He has planned this dinner thoroughly, but Salena seems nervous and quiet.

"It's just, this place is so upscale. I feel like a fish out of water here." She says quietly.

"Why is that?" He asks with a warm smile.

Salena smiles back, though she forces it. She looks around the restaurant at the other patrons. Older men sit with families and dressed in expensive suits, their wives and daughters wearing costly dresses. Those not with their families eat with young and beautiful mistresses who cost most than the luxury cars they arrived in. Several of the woman glance at Salena, and their looks make her feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. Max has never spoken of her scar, and in the time since her injury, it's even begun to vanish beneath her fur, though not completely.

Even without the scar, she doesn't feel as pretty as the other women present. She is taller than most of the men there, with a sturdy build, and muscles that could snap most of the women in half; her large bust does little to make up for her subtle curves. She looks back to Max, who appears oblivious to the patrons around him. She can't help but wonder how she attained a man as superb as Max. Her old insecurities, which she had thought were long since dead and gone, rear their hideous faces once again.

"Come on, babe. Talk to me." Max says softly.

He reaches across the table, resting a hand over hers.

"Do... Do you care about me, Max?" She sheepishly asks.

"What?! Of course I do! I love you, Salena!"

"Why?" She mutters.

He blinks, his eyes growing wide in shock.

"I mean, doesn't it bother you at all?" She asks.

"Does what bother me? You being a Voeldahn?" He raises a brow in confusion.

"Well, that too, but... I mean, I don't look like any of the women here. You must have seen so many beautiful girls, and yet you're here with me."

"What the fuck kind of talk is that?" He asks, sounding quite offended.

Salena shrugs, looking down at the table that's covered in red silk. He gets up from his seat and moves around the table, kneeling by her. Taking her hand into his, she turns her eyes to him.

"I only see the beautiful woman I love and adore. You're the one person I can always being around. The only one worrying about this is you. I don't care about your race, your scar, or that you are taller and stronger than me. I love you the way that you are."

Looking deep into his eyes, she can see that his words are sincere and his feelings are genuine. With her eyes watering, she rewards him with a tender kiss. They gaze at each other, and he reaches into a pocket, taking out a small box. Her eyes grow wide in amazement. The musicians in the background cease playing their violins, and many patrons turn to look at the couple.

"I only brought you here because I wanted this to be really memorable. In retrospect, I should have picked a better spot; somewhere that you would be more comfortable." He thinks aloud.

Salena can't believe her eyes, bringing a hand to her snout in shock. He opens the box to reveal a golden ring with an inset gem; a

sapphire stone of considerable size, cut into the shape of a heart. She has never seen a more beautiful piece of jewelry. A woman seated not far behind her gasps as Salena takes the ring from the box. Max's heart warms when he sees her poorly hidden smile. He feels relieved as Salena admires the ring; it was a tough decision, and an expensive one, but her joy makes it worth every cent.

"Oh god... Max." She coos.

"I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Do you believe me now?" He asks with a smirk.

"Was that your idea of a proposal?" She chuckles, a tear running down her cheek.

He reaches up and wipes the tear away with his thumb.

"Mhm... So?"

"Yes." She nods her head, her eyes glossy with tears.

"Yes, you believe me, or yes, you will marry me?" He chuckles.

"Both."

She wraps her arms around him and squeezes him tightly, kissing him tightly. Several patrons applaud the lovers as they rise to their feet, holding each other. They share a long kiss and gaze at each other for a moment. She slips on the ring; it's a perfect fit.

"This place is pretty snooty, isn't it? Did you want to go somewhere else, babe?" Max asks.

"Yeah. That would be nice." Salena nods.

"Come on." He says, offering her his arm.

She wraps her arm around his as they walk out of the upscale restaurant. Max claims his keys from the valet, walking with Salena to the car on their own.

“Where are we going?” She asks.

“Anywhere you want.” He replies.