



BULLI HEADED

COLD-BLOODED ALPHA BOOK 9

EVE BALE

BULL-HEADED

COLD-BLOODED ALPHA #9

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Bull-Headed

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ABOUT BULL-HEADED

MADI...

Colorado was supposed to be my haven. A place to lie low and avoid my abusive ex for a couple of days. In no way did I expect to stumble into a naked man's garden and watch him change into a wolf...

Dean Blackshaw, the delicious-smelling, naked guy I witnessed do the impossible, seems dead set on proving not all men should be avoided. That some might actually be worth falling for. But he isn't in my future. I have a life waiting for me in Nebraska and a career that I spent years building. One I have no intention of abandoning for someone I suspect is keeping secrets from me.

I'm used to managing on my own, in life and in business. To have someone watch my back is a pipe dream that belongs to someone else. Dean says I'm bull-headed, and maybe I am. Unfortunately, so is the abusive ex who followed me to Colorado and intends to do me harm.

If heroes exist in this world, I've never come close to finding one. But if I want to survive what's coming, I'm going to need one. Dean is determined to be that guy. Can I trust him?

***Content Warning:** The heroine in this book is fleeing a physically abusive ex. It includes mentions of physical & emotional abuse as well as controlling behavior. As with all my books, Bull-Headed contains explicit sexual scenes, adult themes, and violence. Suitable for readers 18+.*



A man is holding me close to his heart, and it's beating a little too fast for him to be the least bit calm.

The scents of amber and wintergreen surround me. It's a combination I've never smelled before, but I like it. I'd like it more if I didn't think I was overhearing a plan to kill me.

"You need to find out what she saw, Dean," an unfamiliar man orders in a commanding tone.

"And then I give her to Gavin?" the man holding me responds in a low, husky voice edged with quiet panic.

Who's Gavin? What the hell is going on?

I don't dare open my eyes to get answers to either question. If they think I'm conscious...

I try not to think of what they'll do to me then.

The man who smells like amber and wintergreen tightens his arms around me. One small movement is all it takes to make my head swim.

Suddenly, I'm watching a naked, dark-haired man with gold-flecked brown eyes rise from a garden lounge and change into a wolf.

I don't move, blink, or even breathe. Doesn't stop the brown wolf from angling its head my way. Almost as if it knew I was hiding in the forest beside this remote cabin in Hardin, Colorado.

I whirl around, sprinting away.

The sound of my footsteps echoes loudly around me, a fierce drumbeat vibrating in my chest. Behind me, something crashes through branches. I know what it is, of course. A wolf is chasing me. Step by step, it's closing the distance.

Miraculously, I make it to my big, pink delivery truck.

I wrench open the door and throw myself into the driver's seat, starting the engine while my ass is still sliding over pink slippery leather. And then I'm away, speeding off toward the main road that'll take me back into town. I tell myself nothing good can come from peeking into the rearview mirror for signs of pursuit.

I don't listen to that voice, needing confirmation that a wolf isn't running me down.

Smash.

My head snaps forward, pain explodes in my face, and my world turns black.

A brown wolf is staring at me. It's wearing a collar, and the collar says Gavin.

The wolf sighs and, in a low, husky voice, says sadly, "I hope you didn't see anything. It would be a shame to kill you."

He lunges at me.

I shove myself upright, chest tight and a scream caught in my throat.

And I frown as I run a hand through my sweat-dampened shoulder-length blonde hair because, where the hell am I?

*I'm lying in a bed that is not mine. The room is masculine, dark, and decorated in shades of blues and greens. A khaki green velvet curtain makes it impossible to tell if it's day or night. The solid pieces of dark wood furniture give no hint of whose bedroom I'm in, but it smells of amber and wintergreen, so it must be *his*.*

Tap, tap, tap.

The bedroom door is partially open. And in the next room, the frantic keyboard tapping stops so suddenly I must have given some clue that I'm no longer asleep.

My heart takes over from the furious tapping. In my case, it races. I don't hear footsteps move toward me. That doesn't mean I don't feel a presence moving closer and closer. Those almost sad words haunt me now. "It would be a shame to kill you."

He knows I'm awake, knows I saw something I wasn't supposed to—even if I don't know what that something was—and he's going to kill me because of it.

Before I can lunge for the window, the door swings open. A leanly muscled man in his late twenties, with intelligent gold-flecked brown eyes and short dark hair, fills the doorway. His black t-shirt and sweatpants are so rumpled I'd assume he'd slept in them were it not for the bags under his hooded eyes.

"Who are you?" I lift a hand to touch my throbbing temples. "And why does my head hurt?"

"You don't remember what happened?" he asks, watching me closely.

"I was in my truck, and now I'm here. That's all I remember," I say.

Lie.

I saw a man change into a wolf, which can't be real. But I must have seen *something* for him to lose all the tension in his shoulders.

All I have to do is keep inwardly calm, act outwardly confused, and not give him any reason to go ahead with his plans to silence me. Then, I can take the first opportunity to run.

I pause.

Which is a problem. I was running *to* Hardin, Colorado, in search of Jenna, the graphic designer who designed the menu and packaging for my cupcake business. I'd wanted to hide

from Hunter, my abusive ex, and I thought it wouldn't take me long to find out where she lived in a town this small.

Instead, I crash my truck and wind up with this guy.

He takes a step toward me.

My heart jolts as I shove my back to the headboard, eyeing him warily as I lick my dry lips. "You didn't say who you were or why I'm here."

He shows me his palms and backs up a step as if to reassure me he means no harm.

I'm not sure why I would dream about a man changing into a wolf or if I hit the steering wheel that hard, but I'm trusting my instincts. And right now, they're telling me not to trust him.

"You crashed your truck into a tree nearby," he confirms. "You have some bruises on your forehead and left cheek. Since you weren't far from my house, I heard the crash and brought you here."

He didn't need to tell me about the bruises on my face. I know all about them. If I picked up a few more in my crash, they're recent additions to the ones I had before.

"What time is it?" I ask, hoping he doesn't read my growing unease in my deep blue eyes.

"Late," he responds.

I'd hoped for more than that. Like, an actual time would be nice. It would be even nicer to know what state my truck is in because if it's too late to track down Jenna, then I'd rather find a motel to hole up in. I overheard someone in town saying something about Jenna and a cabin in this part of town. Clearly, I did a terrible job of eavesdropping to have wound up in his back yard.

I consider asking him about Jenna and if he will take me to her. One thing makes the words stick in my throat, though. It's a question he should have asked me and hasn't.

Namely, what was I doing outside his cabin in the first place.

“And I’m guessing here is your cabin?”

I have a sudden flash of him dropping into a crouch and turning into a wolf. I shake the image away as a product of ramming my head against a steering wheel.

Don't be silly, Madi. Werewolves aren't real.

“That’s right,” he replies slowly.

His gaze hasn’t left me since he stepped into this room, making me painfully aware that it took me a while to get here from town. Which leaves me a long, long way from help if he starts giving me serial killer vibes.

I’m not prepared to wait for him to show me his dark side.

As I slide my leg out of bed, I’m relieved to find I’m dressed in my V-neck pink sundress with cap sleeves. I’m even still wearing my pink fluffy socks. Now, all I need to do is hunt down my sneakers, and I’m good to go. “Well, thanks for bringing me in and giving me a place to rest. I should—”

“Unfortunately, leaving isn’t an option,” he interrupts.

Fuck.

There it is. The serial killer vibe I’d hoped to avoid. Is that why he’s looking tired? Did I see him burying a body out in the forest and forget it?

Gripping the sheets tight with both fists, I calculate the distance between me and the potential serial killer observing me. “Why not?”

“I won’t hurt you.” He even looks like he means it as he retreats another step from my bed.

But experience has taught me that just because someone says sorry or they won’t hurt you, promises are cheap. It’s how they treat you that matters.

“We’re stranded,” he says.

My eyes widen. “What?”

“The local mechanic towed your truck into town,” he explains. “My car has been having issues. Until a part comes

in... well, none of us are going anywhere.”

This is not good, Madi. Not good at all.

None of that explains *why* I would ram my truck into a tree when I’m a careful driver. At least when I’m not terrified that my abusive ex is pursuing me through town.

I’d sped through town when I first arrived in Hardin because I’d thought I’d seen Hunter’s black Toyota. When I didn’t see the vehicle again, I realized I must’ve just been seeing things. If Hunter had been tailing me, there’s no way he would have let me go.

So I wouldn’t ram Stella, AKA my big pink delivery truck, into a tree unless I had a good reason to.

And now I’m stranded.

With the way my luck has been lately, he’s bound to be a serial killer.

I dart a rapid glance at his long, strong fingers and large palms. They don’t *look* like serial killer hands, but how would I know?

I’ve seen those true crime documentaries. The worst serial killers are always the ordinary-looking ones, or, in this case, attractive.

“You’re lucky I had the mechanic up here taking a look at my car when you crashed,” he says, crossing lean-muscled arms. “I live pretty remote, so he towed your truck into town.”

Oh God. This is like the start of a horror movie. A slasher one. The only thing that would make it more terrifying is if it was raining and I was in a crumbling hotel instead of a rustic cabin in the middle of nowhere.

His nostrils flare, and he slowly uncrosses his arms as if he can scent my fear. “I won’t hurt you.”

You keep saying that, but I heard you planning to kill me.

I swallow and nod, tugging the sheet up to cover myself. “I’m sure you can imagine how scary this must be for me, especially when I don’t remember what happened.”

He nods as a faint smile—of relief?—curves his lips. “Well, that’s understandable. I’m Dean, by the way, Dean Blackshaw. And you are...”

Shit, he wants to know my name. And I can’t lie. He saw my truck. He’ll ask me who Madi is if I give him a fake name. “Madi,” I say. “Maddison Sawyer.”

“I thought it might be. I saw the name on the side of the truck when—”

A soft beep from the next room pulls his gaze from mine.

“If I’m keeping you from something, please go. I’m still tired, and if it’s late, I’d like to get more sleep if I can.” I flash him what I hope is a tired but convincing smile.

He hesitates until a second beep captures his full attention. “I have to check that email. I’ve left a spare toothbrush and towel for you in the bathroom. Shout if you need anything.”

Yeah, that won’t be happening.

But I smile and nod as he turns away and leaves the door partially open.

No sooner has he walked out than I’m on my feet, heading for the window.



*T*iptoe to the window and draw the curtain back.

Shit.

He wasn't lying when he said it was late. It's a pitch-black forest out there.

I hesitate, glancing back at the comfortable bed I scrambled out of moments before. Leaving in the morning would probably result in me not breaking anything. But...

I remember my weird dream. The man changing into a wolf is unlikely to be real. A guy living alone in a cabin in the woods who might be a serial killer? That sounds far too real for comfort.

Gripping the window with both hands, I yank upward. The muscles in my arms strain with the exertion, which is about the only thing to happen. The window itself doesn't budge.

Double shit.

Giving up on my easy escape out the bedroom window with a quiet sigh, I re-draw the curtain and cross to the bathroom.

I quickly confirm there's no window—or escape—through there.

For the longest time, I stare at the partially open bedroom door. It sounds like Dean is back to frantically typing on his computer.

No time like the present.

Oh-so-slowly pulling the door open, I stick my head out.

The rustic open-plan cabin is dimly lit. The living space, where two burgundy couches and an armchair form a U-shape in front of a dead fireplace, is empty.

My gaze travels across the room to rest on the hunched figure sitting at a dark wood kitchen island. He has his back to me, the bright screen from his laptop the source of the illumination.

Beside him is a half-empty glass of water, and beside that is a bunch of keys. If Dean was telling the truth about his car being out of commission, there's no way I'll be able to confirm it. He has his head down, tapping furiously, but he's going to notice if I slink on over there and pocket those keys.

Fortunately, I won't have to make the long trek into town in my pink fuzzy socks. Nestled against a pair of brown hiking boots on the left side of the front door are my sneakers.

Perfect.

I pull the door open a little wider and creep toward escape, hoping whoever lay these floorboards down did it so well that not even a mouse would make it creak.

I'm halfway across the room, and Dean is still going at the keyboard like he's sitting an exam, and someone just told him he has five minutes left when—

“Couldn't sleep?” he calls out.

I freeze.

Shit. Think of something, Madi. Think, think, think.

“Um, no.”

He still has his back to me, so I retreat a couple of steps so it looks like I'm on my way to the couch and not the front door.

And then I halt, realize I'm closer to the door than he is, and it's one of those clasp-type latches, which means no lock.

“Actually, I wanted to get some fresh air.” I keep half my attention on him and the other primed to run for it if he so much as twitches in my direction.

He taps some more. “It’s chilly out there. I’d grab a jacket from beside the door if you think you’ll be more than five minutes.”

I stare at his back.

Surely, if he’d been planning on killing me, he wouldn’t let me walk out of here.

Would he?

Could I have been wrong about him planning to kill me?

Maybe. But there’s no time like the present to test that theory out.

I take another step toward the front door. He doesn’t seem to give a shit whether I stay or go as he mutters a curse and stabs the same button three times. There’s only one button someone would attack like that.

Delete.

Guess this late-night working session isn’t going smoothly.

If he meant me harm, he’d be trying to stop me. Right?

“I know about the wolf,” I say, watching his back for any sign of tension.

He stops typing. “Oh, yeah. Colorado is famous for wolves.”

But there’s a note in his voice I’m not sure I trust.

Since the simplest explanation is usually the right one, it makes sense that I would see a wolf, run from it, and crash my truck. Maybe the thing he doesn’t want me to know about has to do with this wolf.

“Are you keeping animals here?” I ask.

When he doesn’t immediately answer, it kicks my anger into gear. He *is* keeping animals up here. Maybe even hunting them if he’s being this evasive.

I eat meat, but the thought of a poor, defenseless animal being run down and shot for sport? No. That doesn't sit right with me. It never has.

My back stiffens. "Are you a hunter? Is that what you do, you sick fu—"

"I am not a hunter," he interrupts, spinning around to blink owlishly at me. His expression is such a strange mix of surprise, confusion, exhaustion, and utter blankness I'm having a real issue working him out.

But he's hiding *something*.

The more I think of some poor animal chained up outside to a tree or locked up, waiting to be released so it can be hunted down, the angrier I get.

"I saw the wolf. Where are you keeping it? Do you know how inhumane that is?" I stalk over to him and lift my finger to poke him in the chest, realize before I do it that it might not be a smart thing, and lower my hand as I retreat a half-step.

He frowns. "I am not—"

"Oh, so you were going to feed me to Gavin, then?"

He freezes. "What?"

I was right. He *is* up to some illegal hunting up here. I don't know if you need a special license or something to hunt wolves, but surely, people can't go around shooting wildlife whenever they please. Can they?

"Why would you name a wolf if you weren't keeping it, probably in some inhumane tiny cage? Were you going to feed me to Gavin the wolf?"

He stares at me.

I'm not sure whether he's constipated, about to have a stroke, or trying not to laugh.

"You think I have a wolf named *Gavin*?" he asks tonelessly.

I have a faint inkling that I might have gotten this situation twisted around. Now I'm throwing these accusations around,

they don't sound far-fetched but crazy. Impossible. "People name their pets anything. I knew a girl with a parrot called Bob."

He slow-blinks. "Bob?"

"Her ex, Robert, spent more time repeating what she said than sharing an original thought," I explain. "But he was good in bed, so—"

Why the hell am I telling him about Bob's big dick, which briefly excused his empty head?

Clearing my throat, I return to the matter at hand. "What I'm saying is people sometimes have reasons for giving their pets strange names. So that's what my friend did."

That was back when I had friends. Back before Hunter chased them off and ensured I would have no one to go to for help.

Dean's blank expression doesn't change. "Why not Robert?"

Why do I think he's laughing at me?

I hunt out signs of amusement, finding none. He'd make a damn good poker player, that's for sure. "You're laughing at me."

"I'm curious," he counters. "Do you have any other strange pet names?"

"No, I do not," I say, frowning. "And you haven't told me about the wolf."

He gives me a long look. "You seem fond of animals to care so much about whether I hunt them."

"I don't mind them." My eyes narrow. "Why? What else are you keeping here? Exotic birds? Chinchillas for their fur? Or are foxes your jam?"

When I realize I'm edging into panic, I shake my head and spin away. If he's not a serial killer, nothing is stopping me from walking out. "Well, thanks for bringing me in."

“It’s the middle of the night,” he calls after me, but he makes no move to stop me. “And where would you even go?”

I grab my sneakers from beside the door, hopping as I stuff my feet in them. “I came to see Jenna, and someone in town said you were friends. So, that’s where I’ll go.”

Or find a motel and start looking for Jenna tomorrow instead.

“Jenna is a friend,” he confirms.

“Perfect. Then you can take me to her,” I say, lifting my head.

“We’re stranded, remember?” he responds before spinning to face his laptop. “How exactly do you know each other?”

“We work together,” I say.

That’s a bit of a stretch. We’ve emailed a few times, though we’ve never spoken on the phone. She was always warm and friendly, enough that I hope she’ll let me crash on her couch for a couple of days. Back in Nebraska, I wasn’t hopeful that she would. That’s why, even though I have her number, I didn’t call her before setting off for Colorado.

I was too afraid she’d say no. If she did, I would have nowhere to go.

“Was she expecting you?” he asks.

“She’d want to see me.” I avoid giving him a yes or no answer. Maybe he wouldn’t be able to tell I’m lying, but he seems perceptive.

Jenna has no idea I’m here. If she knew the sort of trouble I was running from, she’d likely slam the door in my face—nice emails or not. Anyone would.

He taps some more. “Well, like I said, we’re both stranded up here, so no one is seeing anyone.”

“You could call her?” I suggest since I turned my cell phone off and stuffed it in my glove box to dodge Hunter’s many, many phone calls. My phone wasn’t in the bedroom, and it doesn’t appear to be here, so it must be with the

mechanic in town. Not ideal. It makes me dangerously reliant on Dean Blackshaw.

“No cell phone signal up here,” he says, distracted.

“But you have internet, right?” I glance at the laptop, but he’s angled it so I can’t see what he’s working on.

“Internet is different from cell phones,” he mutters.

“Fine. Then I’ll find her myself.” I pause. He doesn’t so much as glance my way. “You’re not going to try to stop me?”

I thought he might. There’s still the small matter of what I heard—or thought I heard—while I was out of it.

His unconcern about my leaving makes me wonder if I didn’t dream about his intention to silence me and, therefore, I might be perfectly safe here. At least for the night. He’s still a stranger, and I’m not sure I’d be comfortable staying any longer than that.

“By all means, go. I have a deadline, and like I said, my car isn’t running,” he says, dragging his finger across the trackpad and tapping twice.

What the hell is he working on over there?

“Unless I found Jenna myself,” I remind him.

“Yup,” he mutters. “You could do that.”

He’s just letting me go?

When he resumes typing, I turn around and reach for the door handle. “Okay, then. Bye.”

I’m closing my hand around it when he says, “Good luck.”

I halt, my fingers inches from the handle as I twist to face him. “What do you mean, good luck?”

“It’s not like we don’t have bears out there.”

“Bears?” I echo, my voice faint.

“It’s Colorado. Of course there are bears in the mountains.”

“You’re lying,” I say.

“Sure, I am,” he cheerfully admits.

My eyes narrow on his back. This must be some kind of reverse psychology. He knows I want to leave, and he’s telling me I can... if I don’t mind running into a bear or two. Maybe he doesn’t want me to go to Jenna. Maybe there’s something else going on here. Or he doesn’t believe I’ll actually do it, city girl that I am.

Little does he know me.

I stiffen my back, pull the door open, and walk outside.

It’s pitch black. I have no idea where I’m going or how far it’ll take to get to a motel in town. Or if there’s even a motel in town.

Or how I’ll pay with my purse in my glove box.

I pause.

Yeah, this might not be the best idea I’ve ever had. I shiver as my teeth chatter when an icy wind cuts through my dress, making me feel naked. Dean wasn’t lying. It *is* freezing.

I almost turn back, but then I remember I’ll be spending the night with a stranger in a remote cabin. How safe is that, really?

Knowing what men are capable of, and with the bruises on my face to prove it, I keep walking. If I head downward, I’ll get to where I need to go.

Eventually.

Up ahead, a twig snaps, and the rumbling growl of something big and probably hungry makes me stop.

I stare into an almost pitch-black forest, turn around, and walk at a near run back into the cabin, slamming the door shut behind me.

Dean hasn’t moved from the kitchen island.

My teeth continue to chatter from the cold and the possibility that I narrowly avoided being eaten by a bear, so it takes a while to find my words and use them. “You weren’t lying about the bears.”

“I wasn’t lying about the bears,” he echoes.

Once I’ve regained my composure, I toe off my sneakers and head for the bedroom. “I’ll leave tomorrow. During daylight. If you won’t take me to see Jenna, I’ll find her myself.”

“By all means,” he says, still pecking away at his keyboard. “Good night.”

With a stranger in the next room and no lock on the bedroom door? Doubtful.



I spent a long night tossing and turning. When I wasn't dreaming of being mauled by bears, I fell into nightmare after nightmare of a wolf called Gavin hunting me through the forest.

Early the next morning, still half-asleep, I'm lured out of the bedroom by the rich, fragrant smell of coffee.

The quick shower I took didn't so much wake me up as nearly make me fall asleep with my head resting on the tile. But I'm up, I'm showered, teeth brushed, dressed, and ready to go find Jenna.

Dean hasn't moved from the kitchen island. He's still typing away, though a little less frantically than before. The granola bar hanging out of his mouth is probably distracting him.

His ass must have fallen asleep hours ago. If he even remembers he has an ass.

You're paying his ass altogether too much attention, Madi. You don't even know you can trust him. Refocus. Like, yesterday,

I refocus on what truly matters.

The delicious, mouthwatering scent of coffee makes me hesitate in the doorway. My gaze bounces between the slow-dripping coffee pot in the kitchen and the front door.

I don't have many weaknesses. Good food, nice guys, and coffee. That's it.

"Morning," he calls out around his granola bar.

I give the bar a look of disgust and deliberately turn away from it to focus on the front door. Birds are chirping out there, sunlight is streaming in through the windows, and I can't imagine bears wander around during the day. Which makes now the perfect time to leave.

When my stomach grumbles loudly, I rearrange my priorities.

"Want a granola bar?" he calls out. "Or are you still looking to get friendly with bears this morning?"

I scowl at his back as I cross over to the kitchen. "Bears hibernate."

He pulls the granola bar from his mouth to say. "During winter. During the day, they're out foraging for food. And I'll tell you something. You don't want to get near a momma bear looking to feed her cubs."

I pause, eyeing him for signs of deception. Just like the night before, I don't see it. He said I could leave whenever I wanted. So why do I get the impression he doesn't want me to leave at all?

It doesn't matter what he wants. I'm leaving. Now. Ignoring my grumbling stomach in favor of escape, I'm halfway across the room when I remember a YouTube video of a momma bear stopping traffic to lead her three cubs across a busy road.

In broad daylight.

I slow and eventually stop.

Okay, so maybe he's right. Maybe I don't know nearly enough about bears. With the luck I've been having, I'm likely to skip out of here and promptly get myself eaten by one.

And speaking of food...

I eye the bar hanging out of his mouth and sigh. “Please tell me you have more to eat around here than granola bars.”

He shrugs. “I think there’s food in the refrigerator.”

“You *think*?” I’m immediately horrified. Maybe more than the thought of being eaten by a bear. How can a person not know if they have food? The thought of someone going hungry shuffles my responsibilities around into an order that doesn’t—and shouldn’t—make sense.

It’s the cook in me. Don’t judge.

Dean never lifts his gaze from the laptop. “I’m under deadline.”

“So you intend to starve yourself completing it?” I mutter as I skirt around the kitchen island and head for the refrigerator. “Because granola bars are not real food. I don’t need much, but I’m sure I can throw together something a lot more nutritious for...”

I pull the refrigerator door open and take in the jumbled contents. And the smell... good God, where is that smell coming from?

“Breakfast,” I finish weakly.

I sigh again, heavily this time.

This is bad.

Now that I’ve seen it, I can’t just leave. I have to fix it.

I’m reaching in to grab a package of bacon, the source of the foul smell, when I bump my left shoulder against the fridge door.

Hissing in pain, I squeeze my eyes shut as I lift my right hand to probe the back of my left arm. And I know, like the older bruises on my face, this pain wasn’t the result of smashing into a tree. It was from my last encounter with Hunter, an altercation that made me realize what was at stake if I stayed in the city much longer.

My life.

“Everything all right over there?” Dean calls out.

I smooth out all traces of pain from my face and glance over my shoulder. Dean is eyeing me with that damn granola bar still hanging out of his mouth.

“Fine. Why wouldn’t it be?” I ask briskly.

He couldn’t have known how much pain I was in with my back to him, yet he’s acting as if he saw *something*. He can’t be that perceptive, can he?

“No reason,” he says as his probing gaze sweeps my face. “Just thought there might be. That’s all.”

I swing back around and get busy emptying the refrigerator before I can clean it with hot, soapy water. The bacon looks like it’s the oldest thing in there. Thank God. If he’d had veggies in the crisper, I dread to think of the mold growing on them.

That’s not to say there aren’t slim pickings in the refrigerator, but there’s enough to pull together a filling breakfast and maybe a couple of meals. Not for me. I won’t be staying.

As I clean, the typing continues, but at a slower and slower pace. At first, I think it’s because Dean is falling asleep. When I peer over my shoulder, I discover he’s watching me with a strange expression on his face. Turning back around, I give the top shelf in the refrigerator one last swipe and close the door.

“What is it?” I ask.

He shakes his head as if bemused by me. “Just curious. You seemed intent on trekking down the mountain.”

“I am. And I will.”

“I’m wondering why you felt the need to clean out my refrigerator first,” he says.

“I’m a chef. Once I saw that, it would have haunted me.” I shudder. “Probably given me nightmares as well for the next month.”

He snorts. “It said Madi’s Cupcakery on the big pink van. I thought you baked.”

Finished cleaning, I cross the kitchen to investigate the cabinet beside the stove. You can elevate the simplest, most boring meal ever with spices, and everyone has spices.

I swing the cupboard open and scowl at the dusty, mostly empty space.

Everyone except this guy, apparently.

“Chef. I fell into baking after...” *Hold up. Am I seriously getting ready to tell this guy my life story?* No. I am not. “I also bake.”

Rising to my tiptoes, I spot a couple of small bottles at the back and reach deeper into the cupboard to investigate what they are.

My left arm throbs, and I briefly squeeze my eyes shut.

“Madi?”

I pull my arm back and head for the bedroom. “Um, I’ll be right back. I just need to use the bathroom.”

I walk into the bedroom, close the door, and try to breathe through the worst of the pain.

Hunter had grabbed me when I’d told him about the restraining order and how the next time he turned up, the cops wouldn’t hand him a warning. They’d lock him up.

He’d shaken me so hard, and he’d had a look in his eye...

That was when I understood I might not survive the next time he turned up at midnight, trying to force his way into my apartment.

That was when I knew I had to leave Nebraska—at least for a little while.

According to the post office address stamped on the invoices Jenna had sent me, she lived in the middle of nowhere. With no family and my former friends all too easy for Hunter to find, there was nowhere else I could think to go that Hunter wouldn’t find me.

Once the worst of the pain has subsided, I return to the main room.

I must have been in the bedroom for maybe a couple of minutes. I'd thought Dean would be back to working on his deadline. He isn't. He's frowning, arms crossed, with his body angled to face the door I just stepped out of.

"What?" I ask, projecting a calmness I don't feel.

"Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? What could be more wrong than a guy pushing me to eat granola bars instead of real food?" I quip on my way back to the spice cabinet.

"You rushed out of here pretty quickly," he says.

I eye the shelf and the tiny spice jars buried in the back. Damn, that's going to hurt my arm. Maybe a granola bar might be the way to go.

I'm working myself up to stretch into the cabinet when unexpectedly powerful and surprisingly warm hands grip my hips.

I yelp. "Hey!"

Dean gently nudges me aside. I'm 5'5, but he's closer to 5'9, which makes him the ideal height to grab the jars for me. "What do you need?"

"Don't you have a deadline?" I remind him. "What is it, anyway?"

Geez, from close up, he looks even more exhausted. When was the last time he slept? And what deadline is so important that he'd stay up so long?

"Satellite. I'm stopping you from climbing over my counter, falling, and cracking your head open, which really would impact my deadline," he explains. "What do you need?"

Satellite?

I shrug. "Just whatever spices you have."

Without another word, he scoops out all the spices, not only from the bottom shelf I could barely reach but the top one as well. My fingers itch with the need to create *something* because I have a lot more to work with than I thought. He

doesn't stop with the spices. He pulls out cans of tomatoes, veggies, and soup as well. Basically, emptying everything on the counter.

"Anything else?" he asks, turning away.

I'm still hungrily eyeing the dust-covered spices and the cans of veggies as I work out what I can throw together to make a filling breakfast. "Huh?"

"Anything else?" he repeats.

"No. This is good," I mumble, distracted.

I'm frowning at the counter when a mug of steaming coffee enters my line of vision. "Here."

Blinking in surprise, I lift my head. "I could have gotten that."

"I keep the granola bars beside the pot. With the way you were eyeing the one I was eating, I'd rather they didn't wind up in the trash. Here." He twists the mug in his grip and offers it to me.

Grateful for the yummy-smelling coffee, I take it from him. "Thanks. And I wouldn't have tossed your granola bars."

Probably.

"Hmmm," he mutters as he returns to settle at the kitchen island. "I left the creamer on your right. The sugar, too. Help yourself."

"Why? Were they beside the granola bars as well?"

"Practically touching," he says drily.

I turn away before he can see the smile forming on my lips. "Thanks."

After adding creamer and sugar to my coffee, I spend the next several minutes with my eyes closed, leaning one hip on the counter as I chug the delicious coffee.

"God, I needed that," I moan.

If he knew how bad the coffee was on the nearly ten-hour drive from Nebraska, he would know how close this one came

to sending me to my knees. It is *good*.

I drain the last of my coffee and glance over at Dean. He's hard at work, head buried behind his laptop.

I frown.

Even if I haven't heard him typing in a while.

For a second, it felt like he might have been watching me.

Dean was not watching you drink, Madi. And why would he? His deadline has to be a million times more interesting than you salivating over coffee.

"You have good coffee," I say as I place the empty mug in the sink so I can start making breakfast.

"Hmm, really?" he asks, sounding distracted.

What is he doing on his laptop if he isn't typing? Watching a presentation? Reviewing a report?

"Yeah." I've gotten a handle on what to make when I realize all the spices Dean pulled down have to go back into the cupboard. My arm isn't as sore as before, but by the time I'm through returning everything to the cupboard, it will be.

Damn, that's going to be painful.

I turn to ask Dean if he has a step stool or something when he beats me to it.

"Leave the spices and everything else there when you're done. I'll put them away."

I study his bent head. "Because you don't want me to fall and crack my head on the counter?"

"Sure."

I'm watching him when he lifts his head and blinks at me. "What?"

"Nothing. Just..." I turn away.

Just wanted to say that was a nice thing to offer.

After gathering my ingredients, I head for the stove and get started on breakfast.

Twenty minutes later, I set a white bowl in front of him and another beside him.

He closes his laptop and nudges it aside before sniffing. “What is it?”

I take the seat beside him and pick up my spoon. “Shakshuka.”

“Shak-whata?” He frowns down at the bowl.

“Eggs poached in spiced tomato sauce. It’s a North African breakfast, and it’s better with fresh herbs. Since you had dried and not enough eggs to scramble or fry, and your bacon... well, the less said about that, the better. I made do.” I nod at the sliced bread. “And I found some bread for dipping. It was a little stale, so I toasted it with some garlic and butter. Hope you don’t mind a savory breakfast.”

“If I told you what I usually eat for breakfast, I don’t think my granola bars would survive it,” he admits, picking up his spoon. “It smells good.”

“Well, it’s just something simple,” I say casually as I watch him intently out of the corner of my eye.

Since pastry school, I’ve prioritized baking. My dream of working in a professional kitchen never materialized, but I always hoped it would. That’s not to say I don’t enjoy baking. I do, but I wanted more.

I still do.

The longer I baked, and the more I relied on it for my livelihood, the harder it was to risk walking away from it.

It was only when I tried and repeatedly failed to get any other kitchen job than pot-scrubbing that I abandoned my dream altogether. Instead, I settled for something more achievable.

I’d yet to find a place in the city that I thought stood out with amazing baking, so I spent a weekend drawing up a plan and baking cupcakes. The following Monday, I hit up the local cafés and restaurants with free samples and the offer to supply

them with fresh-baked cupcakes, pastries, and other sweet treats.

A café owner took a chance on me and ordered a few dozen cakes. When they sold out in two days, Madi's Cupcakery was born, and my dream of working as a chef died.

So, I watch Dean dipping his spoon into his bowl and lift it to his mouth. And I hold my breath, waiting for his reaction.

He has a small spoonful.

His expression doesn't change.

My stomach sinks. He hates it. I've made him something so inedible he's struggling to hide how bad it is from me.

Because you can't cook, Madi. You think you can, but maybe you can't.

He dips the spoon into the bowl again, takes a bigger spoonful, chews a little faster this time, and I start breathing again.

When he sets his spoon aside, dread forms in my gut until he reaches for the bread, dunks it in, and chews happily. "This is really good."

I release a quiet sigh of relief and turn to dip my spoon in my bowl. "Oh? It was just something I threw together."

"It's good," he says between bites. "Better than any granola ever."

I eye his abandoned granola bar and sigh. "Thanks. I think."

After I've finished eating, I'm moving to get up when he bounces to his feet and seizes both our plates. "I've got it."

My mouth gapes open as I watch him wash the dishes, leaving them to dry on the drainer before he returns to his laptop.

I'm stunned he did it with no prodding necessary. Hunter...well, Hunter would have gotten up after I cooked, but only to get comfortable on the couch while I washed up.

With a filthy refrigerator now clean and a decent breakfast consumed, it's time to go. I push myself to my feet so I can find Jenna. "I'd better go."

"Well, good luck," he says, opening his laptop. "Thanks for the breakfast. And the refrigerator."

I'm at the front door, pulling my sneakers on when I feel eyes on me.

But when I glance over my shoulder, he has his back to me, focused on his laptop.

After convincing myself he wasn't watching me, I step outside the front door and take in the beautiful blue sky, viewing it as a sign that this was meant to be. Smiling, I pull the door closed behind me and start my trek to town.

I'm back an hour later.

And I'm dripping.

Dean is still at the kitchen island, another one of those damned granola bars hanging out of his mouth, when he pulls it out to call out, "Bear?"

I slam the door shut and take my sneakers off, leaving them on a mat so I don't trail water everywhere. "Puddle."

One I didn't see until I was standing—or drowning—in it.

I stalk across the cabin toward the bedroom so I can get in the shower.

A male whistle lets me know that Dean is no longer focused on his laptop. "How big was this puddle?"

"The size of a fucking ocean," I mutter.

A snort of amusement is his response to what isn't far off what actually happened. I'd seen the puddle and thought nothing of it. Until I stepped in it. And then I found myself flailing because there was a hole under that puddle.

A big one.

It might be funny if it happened to someone *not* me. But it did. I might even be able to laugh it off if I didn't currently

have my hair plastered to my face, and I didn't smell of wet leaves, dirt, and something musky I hope isn't bear shit.

If Dean is laughing at me, I'm going to be tempted to take that granola bar and ram it down his throat.

He's not laughing or even smiling.

His eyes sweep over me before he turns back to his computer. "I have sweats you can borrow. They'll be too big for you, but they're all I have."

I blink in surprise.

"And leave those clothes outside the bathroom. I'll deal with it."

He'll deal with it.

I continue to eye him, surprised at his generous offer when almost from the moment I turned up in Hardin, I've been distracting him from his deadline. "You mean you'll wash my clothes?"

The only thing Hunter knew about the washing machine in the apartment we'd once shared was that we had one.

"No need to sound so surprised." He shoots me a rapid glance. "You should get in the shower before you end up with a cold."

"You don't need to wash my clothes," I tell him. "If you point out where the—"

"It's sticking clothes in a washing machine and pressing a button, hardly scaling Mount Everest. Leave the clothes outside. I'll deal with it."

Which reminds me of the spices. I glance at the counter. Everything is still there, only pushed up more neatly to the back of the counter within easy reach.

"Do you need help?" he calls out.

I drag my attention from the spices to the man sitting at the kitchen island. "With?"

He's watching me, his eyes dipping to take in my soaked dress. "Working the shower, or..."

He leaves the *or* hanging there.

"Or?" I prompt.

His gaze finds mine again. "With something else."

There is no reason to think he means anything inappropriate. None at all.

He's just being friendly. I tell myself.

And yet...

My cheeks flush at the thought of him being anywhere near me in the shower. I'd be naked, and he would be there.

I nearly fall in my rush to get to the bedroom, wondering what it is about this man that's getting under my skin.

As I push the bedroom door closed behind me, he's still observing me, head angled and a thoughtful expression stamped on his face.



Even though the steaming hot water feels incredible on my chilled skin after my thorough dunk in muddy, cold water, I don't linger in the shower.

I'm still in a cabin with a stranger, and I have no desire to discover he has a dark side that he's good at hiding. I've made that mistake before and don't intend to do it again.

I wrap a towel around my hair and another around my body, then push open the bathroom door. My muddy clothes are no longer sitting in a crumpled heap on the floor outside.

On the bed are a pair of navy sweatpants and a faded gray t-shirt, both neatly folded. In the next room, the low hum of what must be the washing machine whirls away, and the scent of something rich and tasty wafts toward me.

"Like I said, they won't fit, but they're the smallest things I own," Dean yells.

I jump. The towel around me slips, and I grab desperately for it as I whip my head toward the thankfully closed door.

"Uh, thanks," I call back. "And thanks for..." My voice trails off, and my cheeks burn because I did not think his offer through before I agreed. I should have. I stripped out of everything, and everything included my panties. Would he have seen them before he threw my clothes in the washing machine?

Of course he saw them, Madi. He's unlikely to have scooped up your clothes and walked to the washing machine

with his eyes closed.

“Just thanks,” I finish weakly.

“There’s more coffee if you want it,” he yells back. “I figure you might need something warm.”

“Oh, that’s... nice,” I say, still studying the door. He’s sounding less and less like a potential serial killer with each passing moment, making my weird dream seem less and less likely.

“And something to eat. I can’t promise you something as good as that shak-whatch-a-ma-call-it.”

I smile as I correct him. “Shakshuka.”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t even try to pronounce it. “I threw some pasta in a pot with sauce.”

“The trifecta,” I breathe.

Have I seriously discovered the trifecta in a remote Colorado town?

Good coffee, a nice guy, and good food.

Is this for real?

Doubtful, Madi. You should know by now that if it looks too good to be true, that’s because it is.

“What kind of pasta?” I yell as I unwind the towel from my body so I can get dressed. I will never turn down pasta, and this one smells rich, spicy, and delicious. So does the coffee. The man doesn’t smell bad, either.

“Just the kind with—”

My towel thumps to the floor.

I angle my head to the door, wondering why he stopped.
“The kind with what?”

“What was that?” he yells.

I frown. “What was what?”

“That sound.”

Does his voice sound strained? Or is it in my head?

I glance at the towel I dropped on the floor. The only sound he could be talking about. He couldn't have heard that soft thump, could he? I barely heard it, and I'm the one who dropped it.

"I dropped my towel," I explain.

He's silent again.

My cheeks burn when I realize I've as good as admitted to being naked in here. And he is still a stranger.

As I scramble for a response, he clears his throat. "The bow kind of pasta."

I stuff the sweatpants on so quickly that I nearly fall. Just in case. Then, I pull the towel from my hair to slip into the t-shirt before bending over so I can re-wrap the towel. My blonde hair isn't particularly long, but it's thick and takes forever to dry. It can do that while I inhale Dean's yummy-smelling pasta.

I didn't see a hairdryer in the bathroom or the bedroom, which wasn't too much of a surprise. I have a feeling a guy with short hair never felt the need to buy one.

"Nice. And the sauce?" I ask, stopping to hang the towel I'd used to dry my body on a hook behind the bathroom door.

"Vodka sauce," he says.

My stomach rumbles in anticipation.

"Now, don't go getting excited. It's just the jarred stuff," he warns.

I glance at my belly, hoping he didn't hear it, but knowing he likely did. "Well, pasta and sauce counts as real food in my eyes."

I pull the bedroom door open and step out. Dean is in the kitchen, a mug of coffee on the island as he stands at the stove, scraping pasta and sauce from a silver pot onto two plates. His laptop is closed, so he must have taken a break from work.

"The coffee on the island is yours," he says with his back to me.

Wow, this guy has seriously sharp ears. I didn't say a word, and he knew I was here.

I'm in no hurry to get to the coffee, so I take my time absorbing the sight in front of me. A guy is cooking me a meal, having made me a coffee, and washed my clothes for me. It's such a rarity that I soak it up. Who knows when it will ever come again? Or even if.

Finished dishing out, Dean grabs both plates, turns, and then stops, staring at me.

I glance down, self-conscious. "Yeah, I know they're big, but they—"

"Suit you," he says quietly and resumes carrying the plates to the island. "I didn't think they would fit. Makes me appreciate them shrinking in the wash."

I wouldn't say they suit me, but I probably would've looked like a kid playing dress up if he'd gotten me something else to wear. "Thanks again for this. You didn't have to cook when you have a deadline."

He places the plates down and goes back for forks while I take a seat at the island. "It didn't take long."

After we settle down in front of the generous servings of bowtie pasta and vodka sauce, I reach for my fork.

"I take it you're still set on trekking into town," he says.

"Yup." Unless there's an easier way there. Speaking of easier ways...

I scan the kitchen island.

"And you're sure your car is out of commission?" I ask when I notice his keys are no longer on them.

"Positive." When he notices where I'm looking, he shrugs. "They were in the way."

A small bunch of keys on a massive kitchen island? Doubtful.

I can't think of a way of voicing my doubt without sounding like I'm calling him a liar, so I drop it.

“Anyway, I’ll head out tomorrow morning, I think.” Mostly because I’d prefer not to have to trek down a mountain with no panties in clothes that don’t belong to me. “Early.”

“It’s a long trek,” Dean warns me. “Over an hour by foot.”

I stab my fork into my pasta. “I can make it.”

“The mechanic will be back with the spare part for my car in a few days. No reason you can’t—”

“I’d rather not wait,” I interrupt because he is still a stranger, even if he seems like a nice one. “Jenna is expecting me.”

Lies.

She has no idea I’m here to throw myself at her mercy. I’m almost positive she did not print her P.O. box address on her invoice for customers to track her down using it. She will probably think I’m crazy. If I weren’t so desperate, I’d never have done something this insane.

Dean gives me a long look, his expression neutral, and then he nods. “Well, if you’re sure.”

“Positive.”

We dig into the pasta. Despite the fact it came from a jar, it’s so good that it doesn’t take us long to clear our plates. The coffee goes down so well that I reconsider staying here instead of going to find Jenna.

Until I remember staying in a remote cabin with a strange guy isn’t just a bad idea. It’s a downright terrible one.

Dean is up and clearing the dishes before I can move, and in no time at all, he’s washed the dishes and is striding toward the bedroom. “I’m going to grab a shower. If you want to watch TV or read, I have a couple of books on the shelf, and the remote is on the coffee table. Help yourself.”

Calling out a belated thanks as he disappears into the bathroom, I consider my options.

This is the first time in years I haven’t had to think about work or had a million deadlines hanging over my head. With

my clothes whirling away in the washing machine and the time it'll take for them to dry, it's like the universe is forcing rest and relaxation on me.

I literally have no choice but to do... well, nothing.

So, what'll it be, Madi?

Do I grab one of the fantasy books from the corner shelf and curl up to read it? Spend the afternoon channel flicking? Or nap the rest of the day away?

"TV," I decide. "Trashy TV with a side of napping on the couch sounds perfect."



The next day, after a hot shower, a quickly thrown-together breakfast of coffee, and more shakshuka at Dean's request, I'm ready to trek into town.

"Well, good luck," Dean calls out from the island as I step into sneakers that spent the last day and all night drying out. My clothes dried overnight as well, so I'm ready to go.

He looks like he didn't have nearly enough sleep. But he must have snatched at least a couple of hours. His eyes aren't nearly as tired as when I peeled myself off the couch I fell asleep on last night and stumbled to bed. He was still working.

"Thanks." I reach for the door.

"Keep an eye out for the—"

"Bears?" I interrupt. "Will do. Good luck with that deadline."

My next attempt at trekking to town goes much better.

Better in the sense that I don't wind up flailing in a puddle or run into a feisty bear hunting out a meal for her cubs. Nope,

this one leaves me hobbling back to the cabin with a screaming ankle.

I rest my back against the front door. With my face scrunched up in pain, I work out how I'm going to get my sneakers off when my foot feels welded to it.

"What was it this time?" Dean calls out distractedly from the couch, eyes on his laptop.

"A hole," I mutter.

"And didn't you see this hole?" he asks.

"Not until I turned my ankle in it," I grumble.

Dean glances up, trains his eyes on my now-throbbing ankle, and immediately sets his laptop aside before rising. He points at the armchair in front of the unlit fireplace. "Sit. You need to elevate it."

I watch him head for the refrigerator. "What are you doing?"

"Ice," he explains. "You can use the coffee table to elevate that foot. Don't worry about taking your sneakers off."

Thank God. I wasn't sure I could even get it off.

Frowning, I hobble over to the armchair and gratefully sink into it. "I thought you'd rub it in my face. City girl who can't find her way down a mountain on her own."

Dean returns with a bag of ice he has wrapped with a kitchen towel and bats my arm aside when I move to slip my sneakers off. "I'm not one to laugh at someone's misfortune. Just sit back. I've got it."

I watch him check my ankle with a deeply furrowed brow. He slips my right sneaker off with no problem but eyes me with concern when I hiss in pain as he unlaces the left sneaker and tugs it off. "It looks like a bad sprain."

He's gentle as he places the ice on my swollen ankle and sits back on his heels. "Give it a couple of hours before you get up. I might have some ibuprofen if you need it. Can't be sure, though, since I rarely use it."

I wave off his offer. “No, this is good. This works. You can get back to your deadline if you want.”

He hesitates.

I smile faintly. “Seriously. My ankle is doing its thing. I should have been looking where I was going, so please, don’t let my clumsiness get in the way of your work.”

I wonder at the brief flash of guilt in his eyes before he sighs. “If it hurts, let me know, and I’ll hunt down the ibuprofen. Do you need coffee?”

“Probably not a good idea,” I say. “I think I’ve had enough excitement for today.”

Returning my faint smile, he springs to his feet with more agility than I’ve ever seen. Considering he’s been slumped behind a laptop all night, I’d have thought he’d be hobbling back to the couch like Quasimodo. I know I would be.

Several minutes pass in silence as I study him, letting the ice chase away the throbbing pain in my ankle. “How’s the deadline going?”

He’s frowning as he types. “Not great.”

I shift my focus to my ankle. It’s a little pink, and a bruise is developing. Regardless of the bruise, this is going to halt my trek to town for the foreseeable future.

“Planning your next escape attempt?” he asks.

“Yes, actually,” I admit.

My eyes return to his bent head. More and more, I’m questioning whether I can trust my dream/memory thing. Dean seems more interested in meeting whatever work deadline has him subsisting on a diet of coffee and granola bars than planning to kill me.

He seems too overworked to be the serial killer I believed him to be.

“I feel you watching me,” he says, sounding so distracted that I again wonder if I didn’t completely misread him. I had

rammed my truck into a tree, so of course, an impact like that is going to scramble my brain.

“Why do you live in a beautiful mountain town and spend all your time with your face glued to a laptop screen?” I ask.

Because it *is* beautiful.

Honestly, if I didn't have a business and life in the city—and didn't think living in the middle of nowhere would likely get me eaten by bears—I'd be tempted to abandon my ambition and settle here. I have no idea what I'd do, but the views would be incredible, and the thought of quiet hikes and crisp mornings with good, strong coffee sounds like heaven.

Back in the city, I spent almost all my time in the kitchen, cooking, testing, or pouring over recipe books as I hunted out inspiration. But it's the city. The big, gray, endlessly loud, busy, traffic-laden city. That's what you do. I genuinely thought people who lived the rural mountain life, you know, actually liked the outdoors.

“You sound like Dayne,” he mutters.

I frown. “Who's Dayne?”

He shakes his head, still typing. “A friend... or family, I guess. We're close.”

“Oh, so you *do* see other people?”

He lifts his head to meet my gaze. “Why wouldn't I?”

I shrug, looking away. “I just thought you sat here pecking at your keyboard and cramming granola bars in your mouth. None of those things gave me the impression you were the least bit sociable.”

He frowns. “I'm sociable. I'm talking to you right now, aren't I?”

“Only because I initiated the conversation.” I snort.

He studies me for a beat, makes a sound of assent, and then turns back to his laptop. “Before we got into that interesting conversation about parrots called Bob and wolves called Gavin, you were acting as if you thought I would hurt

you. You wouldn't have tried to leave in the middle of the night if you weren't afraid. And you sprained your ankle trying to get to town. Are you that desperate to get away from me?"

I study his bent head, wondering at the guilt I'm detecting in his voice. Why does it sound like he's blaming himself for my sprained ankle? "My crash gave me weird dreams."

I hope he won't ask about them because there's no way he won't believe I'm crazy if I told him what I saw.

A rapid burst of typing distracts him for a beat. "What kind of weird dreams?"

Turning to stare at the fireplace, I brace myself for him to laugh himself off the couch. That or immediately toss me out of his cabin because he doesn't want to deal with a crazy person invading his space. "I saw you change into a wolf."

"A wolf?" His voice is strange.

But he's not laughing, which is good. I release a quiet sigh of relief in the form of a laugh. "Crazy, huh? I must have hit my head pretty hard to think you're a werewolf, right?"

He chuckles. "Everyone knows werewolves don't exist."



It's weird, but I keep feeling him look at me. When I turn from the TV show I put on, he has his head down.

He doesn't completely forget about my busted ankle because an hour later, he gets up. "How's the ankle?"

I glance at it and shrug. "It doesn't hurt anymore. It's just cold."

He doesn't take me at my word. Moving closer, he drops into a crouch, and he has my ankle between two strong, tanned

hands before I know what he's planning. "The swelling has gone down a little."

I'm painfully aware of his hands on my foot, which is bizarre. So I just nod. "Really?"

He probes a bone on the side, and I wince.

His eyes find mine. "You won't be outrunning any bears for a while."

I sigh. "I really wish you'd stop bringing up the bears on this mountain."

A brief smile twitches his lips, turning him from a serious, tired, and half-distracted guy into something else. Something kind of attractive.

His smile fades, and his nostrils flare as a new intensity fills his eyes.

He's still holding my ankle, and I'm making no move to tell him to let me go. And I should. He's a stranger, and I really should.

"What are you thinking?" he asks.

I look away. "Nothing. Why would you think I was thinking anything at all?"

There's a huskiness in his voice when he says, "Just this sharp sense I have."



After a day and a night spent resting my ankle, I wake the next morning with only the slightest ache. It's still bruised, around the bone in particular, but keeping it elevated and icing it seems to have worked.

I step out of the bedroom, showered and dressed for the day.

Dean is back to typing at the kitchen island with a mug beside him. "Your coffee is in front of the armchair. I found a breakfast burrito in the freezer to go with it."

I take in the coffee and the plate waiting for me and ask myself again why I'm so eager to leave this cabin. "Thanks. But you didn't have to go to the trouble."

"It wasn't trouble. How's the ankle?" he asks, still focused on his laptop.

When crossing over to the armchair doesn't cause so much as a twinge of pain, I release a quiet sigh of relief as I sink into the seat and reach for the coffee. "It's good. I think I just needed to rest it."

"Let me know if you need ibuprofen. I found a couple after you went to bed."

Sweet.

"Well, I'm fine. You didn't—"

"Madi." Dean swivels his head around, pinning me in place with a firm look that makes me snap my mouth shut. "I

said it was no trouble. Okay?”

Reading the sincerity in his gaze, I nod. “Okay. Since you had to hunt down the painkillers, what do you mountain folk do when you get a headache?”

He flashes me a brief smile and turns around so fast—too fast—so I don’t get to see nearly enough of it. “Walk it off.”

I smile as I reach for my steaming burrito. “And if you break something?”

“Easy,” he says with enough of a smile in his voice that I know he’s enjoying our conversation as much as I am. “Sleep. Things are guaranteed to have worked themselves out by the morning.”

I bark out a laugh. “Sure thing.”

Suddenly ravenous after another simple pasta dinner that Dean threw together last night, I take a bite of my burrito. It’s not amazing, but it hits the spot. Sometimes, all you need is an egg, bacon, and sausage burrito. And it’s exactly what I need to fuel me for the trek into town to find Jenna.

It isn’t just a need to find Jenna giving me the added motivation. It’s Dean’s thoughtfulness as well. He’s busy and could probably do without a city girl getting in his way and distracting him from his work. So, I wolf down the burrito and my coffee.

Dean must have eyes on the back of his head because no sooner am I reaching for the plate and mug to take it to the kitchen than he’s there, nearly giving me a heart attack. “I’ve got it. Did you need painkillers?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m good.”

He turns to the kitchen. “Well, I can grab some ice while you—”

“I’m actually leaving,” I interrupt.

He pauses with his back to me. “Leaving? Because you think I’ll hurt you?”

“No,” I deny. “My ankle is a lot better, so I’ll get out of your hair and go find Jenna. You have work to do, and I came to Colorado to see Jenna.”

As much as the idea of staying here with you isn’t as terrifying as it once was.

Dean walks the plate and mug to the kitchen. He doesn’t wash either, though. He just places them in the sink and leans against the island, crossing his arms as he scrutinizes me. “Should you be putting pressure on your ankle?”

I shrug and get to my feet. “I’m good. No pain at all this morning.”

He gives me a long look, straightens, and closes his laptop. “I’ll come with you.”

“Why?” I halt on my way to leave, frowning.

“For when your ankle swells up halfway down, and you need someone to carry you back,” he says, heading for the front door.

I’m closer to it than he is, yet he beats me to it.

How the hell?

I glare at him. “I won’t need you to carry me back.”

“Sure you won’t.” His tone is resigned. It’s as if he’s already mentally carrying me back up the mountain.

“You won’t,” I say insistently.

He picks up my sneakers and offers them to me with a smile lurking in his eyes. “Do you need help getting these on? I don’t know how much walking you’ll be doing, but—”

“Give those here,” I growl, snatching them from him.

His eyes crease at the corners. “Did you just growl at me?”

Dropping back on the couch, I stuff my sneakers on. “Of course not. You’re just hearing things.”

He snorts in amusement.

Thankfully, both sneakers go on easily. My left foot feels a little bit tighter than usual, but I’m sure I can handle walking

to town if it's downhill.

I hope.

Dean steps into his hiking boots and pulls on a khaki green sweater before offering me a thick black coat that looks like it'll drown me. "Here. It's still cold out there."

"Won't you be cold?" I frown, not wanting him to freeze by giving up his coat.

He crosses back to me and offers me his hand. I let him pull me to my feet, and then, to my surprise, he helps me into the coat himself. "I run hot."

Maybe I'd be able to shrug off his comment as him being friendly. But he's standing pretty close to me. And he's peering down with a look in his eyes that doesn't feel the least bit friendly. I'd say overly friendly, but that isn't it, either. It's interested. In me. "Um..."

Now I'm the one running hot.

"You could stay," he offers softly. His eyes linger on the bruise on my cheek that's been slowly fading these last couple of days. "I mean, if you needed to stay for a few days, I'd be okay with it."

I focus on his chin, hoping it isn't pity motivating his interest in me. It sounds an awful lot like he's realized not all the bruises on my face came from my collision with a tree.

"I'm sure you didn't sign up to have a city girl interrupt your life by crashing her big pink truck outside your house," I remind him.

"True," he admits, giving me a crooked smile. "But I can't say I'm not enjoying the experience."

"You have a deadline," I remind him, mostly so he will stop looking at me like he's forgotten what a deadline is.

"I can put it off long enough to carry a beautiful woman back up a mountain." He turns to swing open the door, so he misses my mouth gaping open in surprise.

When I don't make use of the open door, he swings back around, his eyebrow raised. "Problem?"

"I'm not beautiful."

"We're going to have to agree to disagree about that." He smiles. "Do you want me to do up your coat?"

And put his hands near my breasts? I flush hot.

"No, thanks." I rush for the open door before promptly getting smacked in the face by a gust of frigid wind, which sends me stumbling back.

Dean grips my hips, steadying me. "Careful, now."

His hands are so hot I swear I can feel them through my cotton dress. "Thanks."

Why does every moment suddenly feel like I'm in a Hallmark Christmas movie?

I take a step forward. He reluctantly releases me, and we start the long trek down the mountain, with me leading the way.

I'm more relaxed during this walk than all the times I've tried before. Mostly because the likelihood of a bear or a wolf attacking two people has to be less than one, right?

I pause, recalling a nature show when a bear attacked two campers.

One guy ran off, but the other...

I glance down at my ankle—my *busted* ankle—and there's no doubt in my mind who would get away if Dean and I stumbled across a bear.

That person is not me.

"Why did you care what I thought about your breakfast?" Dean suddenly asks me.

I whip my head toward him. "What?"

He's squinting as he gazes off into the distance. It's a bright morning, and he's likely spent days or weeks glued to

his laptop. I'm surprised he's not flinching away from it or shielding his eyes.

"You cared what I thought of your cooking, even though you were trying to hide it. Why?"

"No, I didn't," I lie.

"You did," he says. "I could feel you watching me."

I step over a puddle and try to ignore the sharp, shooting pain up my leg when I land. We've barely been walking for ten minutes, and my ankle already doesn't like it.

"You mean even though you're blinking at the sun like a bat during the day?" I snort. "My weird dream would have made more sense if you were a vampire instead of a werewolf."

"Thanks." His voice is drier than stale bread.

"You're welcome," I say. "But seriously, how much sunlight do you get in a day? Vitamin D is kind of important."

"I have windows in my cabin," he says, a touch defensively.

"That little, huh?" I grin.

He makes no comment, which is answer enough. He also stops squinting, so either he's used to the sun, or he knows I'm watching.

Twenty minutes later, I'm actively trying to hide the fact that I'm limping. We're not even halfway down the mountain, maybe not even a quarter, and already, I can see where this is going.

Resigned and embarrassed by my failure, I stop.

Two steps later, Dean does likewise.

Without a word, I turn around and start back up the mountain.

"I was wondering when you were going to say something," he says, sounding surprised. "You're bull-headed enough that I was getting ready to throw you on my back."

“My ankle hurts, and we’re nowhere near town. The smart thing to do is go back. And I’d argue that I was determined. I’m also determined not to get eaten by a bear, so don’t look at me like that. There’s no way I’d outrun one with a busted ankle.”

Logical. Rational. That’s the way I make most decisions. I weigh up the option that makes the most sense, and I take it. Even if it’s not necessarily the thing that makes me the happiest or the thing I want more. I do it because it’s safe.

Which was what led me to accept a date with Hunter in the first place. He was my newly hired delivery driver. He was spontaneous, blond, and the complete opposite of what I’d look for in a guy. I’d ignored my instincts and the many red flags that hinted he might be a bad egg and said yes to his offer to take me to dinner. I figured that since I couldn’t have the career I wanted—or wasn’t brave enough to go for—I could spice up my stale and safe life in other ways.

In romantic ways.

Biggest mistake ever.

Now look at me. I’m hobbling up a mountain with a workaholic who gets his vitamin D through a window and practically stalking my graphic designer, all to avoid Hunter. How could things have gone so wrong?

“Hop on my back,” Dean says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I shake my head and keep right on hobbling. “I’m good.”

I’m really not, but we have to be close to the cabin now. I can ignore this throbbing pain a little longer.

“Bull-headed,” Dean mutters.

I turn to him. “I am not—*Hey!*”

Suddenly, I’m lying against Dean’s chest. He has one arm wound around my back and the other tucked under my knees. I have another flashback to my strange dream as his amber and wintergreen scent envelops me.

It didn’t happen, Madi, so stop thinking of it.

“You don’t need to carry me,” I tell him, wiggling to get free.

His grip tightens. “I know.”

“But I just—”

“You know, you’re proving my point the longer you argue, right?” He flashes me a brief smile. “And you don’t weigh anything. Stop complaining.”

Well, that isn’t entirely true.

I’m not a girl who’s curvy in all the right places. I’m curvy in all the places. Sure, I could do with hitting the gym more to get rid of my soft belly and wide hips, but I decided life was more enjoyable when I spent some of it actually, you know... living.

Part of it was how I felt in the gym, which, honestly, wasn’t great. Being surrounded by fit, toned gym buffs only seemed to make me feel more conscious of my curves rather than less. And all those mirrors... Nope. No, thank you.

I search Dean’s face for any sign of strain because I’m not a light person, and we’re going uphill at a pretty quick pace. He seems relaxed, not like he’s struggling to carry me.

“If you insist,” I eventually say and turn away to enjoy the brisk air, cooling wind, and soothing piney scents.

“You never said why you cared about whether I liked your breakfast,” he reminds me.

“Didn’t I?” I reply vaguely. “How strange.”

But after a minute, I glance at him and sigh. I’m not sticking around Colorado forever, so why not open up a little? It might even feel good to get some of these hopes, dreams, and disappointments out of me. Certainly, it’ll be cheaper than seeing a therapist like I know I should. “I’m a pastry chef. Not a real chef.”

“Any reason you can’t be both?” he asks.

“Where I’m from, you’re one or the other. And if you do pastry, you are not a real chef.” I mime quotes around ‘real

chef.' From the frown furrowing his brow, it's clear he doesn't get it. "I built up a reputation for baking some of the best cupcakes in the city. That's me. Madi's Cupcakery."

Sometimes, it's all I think I'll ever be.

"So do both," he says simply.

I frown. "It's not as easy as that."

He glances down at me. "Yes, it is. I wasn't a software engineer until I decided to be one."

My frown deepens. "It's not the same thing. To be a chef, you need qualifications, and you need someone to give you a chance in the kitchen. You need experience."

"*Cooking* experience," he says. "And you have that. Didn't you say you had a reputation for making the best cakes in the city? So, people know you can cook."

"Bake," I correct him. "People know I can *bake*. Not cook."

"So, prove to them that you can," he says simply.

If only it were so easy.

"It's not that straightforward," I say.

Dean stops and looks down at me. "I'm completely self-taught. Everything I know, I learned from a book and the internet. Do you know how many clients have asked me about what qualifications I have to do what I do? And I'm approaching a hundred at this point."

"Ten?" I guess.

"One," he says. "The first one. After I sent him a program I'd created to show I was capable of doing the job, he no longer cared about qualifications. People care if you can deliver. So deliver. It's as easy as that."

"It's not the same thing," I argue.

He continues his brisk pace up the mountain. "You're bull-headed enough to risk death by bear mauling or running into wolves while hobbling around on a twisted ankle. But you're

not bull-headed enough to actually go for the thing you love to do?”

My eyes widen in alarm as I dart a nervous glance into the surrounding forest. It’s quiet. For now. But it might not stay that way. “Wolves? Did you see...” My voice trails off when my brain highlights a pretty important observation Dean just made. “Why would you think I love to cook?”

“I could have turned into a wolf while you were making us breakfast, and you wouldn’t have noticed,” he snorts in amusement. “All you cared about was making the best damn shak-whatever known to man. There was a hint of this, a twist of that, taste, stare, a little more of this, a frown. It was like watching a scientist at work.”

I hadn’t realized he’d been paying so much attention.

“Weren’t you supposed to be working on that deadline?” I remind him, wondering when I started paying more attention to the man carrying me back up the mountain than to my beautiful surroundings. He needs to shave, but I like the faint dusting of stubble on his chin, and his scent is one I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of.

He shoots me a rapid glance, too fast to read. “I was.”

“But you were watching me cook?” I prompt, the thought making me feel warm inside.

What had he thought as I whirled around the kitchen like a madwoman? Had I looked insane? Or had he liked what he’d seen?

“I’ve never had a woman cooking in my kitchen.” He slows, and his expression turns thoughtful. “I hadn’t thought I ever would. My focus has always been on work. But you looked...”

I fight the urge to prompt him to continue. And I fail because I need to know. “I looked?”

He blinks as if returning from a daydream, shakes his head, and keeps walking. “As if you’d always been there.”

We're feet from the front door of his cabin when I summon a response.

"And that's a good thing?"

"It is," he says quietly as if he's surprised by it as I am.

"Because you like the idea of someone cooking you shakshuka," I ask, curious why his answer is so important to me. I just know it is.

When a sudden gust of air whips my hair into my face, he tucks the strand behind my ear and slowly shakes his head. "No. That's not it."

We stand there, feet from the doorway, in another one of those strange Hallmark movie moments. I'm not sure if he's planning on kissing me or if I intend on letting him when he shakes his head, gives me a wry smile, and pushes the door open. "I'll let you know when I figure it out. Come on, let me have a look at that ankle."

Back in the cabin, he helps me out of my coat and places me on the armchair. After carefully removing my sneakers, he puts more ice wrapped in a towel on my ankle, rises from his crouch beside me, and turns to the kitchen. "Wait here, I'll get you a—"

"No, thanks," I say in a rush and then frown when he heads for the refrigerator and not a cupboard. "Wait, what are you getting me?"

"Water for the ibuprofen." He glances over at me. "What did you think I was getting you?"

I shake my head. "A granola bar."

"You seem to have a real problem with granola bars," he says as he reaches into the refrigerator and pulls out a jug of water. "Is it a chef thing where you hate all processed food?"

I'm peeking over the back of the couch for our conversation. When he bends over to grab something, my cheeks flush, and I yank my gaze from his ass and stare up at the ceiling, where I'm in no danger of seeing anything exciting.

“They’re not real food. That’s my problem. Other than hikers, astronauts, or athletes, I refuse to believe anyone needs them.”

“That’s a very specific list,” Dean says. “And limited.”

I chew my lip as I consider my list. “Maybe people who hit the gym for hours every day. They could do with the energy before or after a hard workout.”

“That’s it?”

I think a bit more and nod. “Yep. Everyone else can get to a kitchen.”

“Everyone else can’t raid a person’s pantry and whip together the sort of breakfast they’d expect to eat in a fancy restaurant,” he says as something clatters in the kitchen.

I stifle my pleasure. “It wasn’t that good.”

Something else clatters. “It was the best damn meal I’ve eaten in years. Probably ever. If that’s what you can do with a few scraps and old spices, I can’t imagine what you could with a fully stocked kitchen.”

Oh. I flush with pleasure.

“Well, I—” I sit up and peer over the back of the couch. I can’t see what he’s doing in the kitchen from my position, but I’m curious. “Don’t you have that work deadline?”

“I do, but I figure I should feed you something and not let you starve to death because you refused to eat my granola bars. Ignoring a strange smell in the back of my refrigerator is easy to do. A dead body on my couch? Not so much.”

It speaks to my inability to see him as a killer intent on feeding me to wolves that his comment doesn’t unnerve me the least. I just shake my head wryly and move to get up. “You knew about the smell, and you still did nothing about it?”

“I was busy. Sit down. I’ll bring it over,” he says without looking up.

“And you’re sure it’s not granola?”

I know it's not. I've heard too much noise to expect him to whip out a white plate with a single granola bar in the center.

I'm smiling at the thought when he approaches with a tray. On it is a white plate, a glass of water, and a folded white napkin. "What's funny?"

"Just imagining a granola bar sliced and artfully arranged with micro greens for garnish," I say, shaking my head.

He snorts as he places a tray in my lap. "Yeah, well, maybe tomorrow. Take the ibuprofen first."

I study the tray, and I say nothing.

"What?" Dean is hovering over me. "It's nothing fancy, but—"

"This is nice," I interrupt, eyeing the plate of sliced cheeses, salami, green apple, and crackers. "Wait, aren't we sharing this?" I ask when he grabs his laptop from the kitchen island and moves to sit on the couch beside my armchair.

"Nope, that's yours."

I return my doubtful gaze to the plate. "There's no way I'm eating all this."

"There's not that much," he says and opens his laptop. "Eat."

Snorting, I make a cheese, salami, and apple sandwich between two crackers after taking the painkillers. "Maybe for you. This is way too much for me."

When I've eaten as much as I can, I put the tray on the table and get more comfortable, turning on my side so I can watch Dean working.

As my eyes drift closed, Dean is still typing away. I smile when I hear crunching as he eats. It's nice to know he doesn't subsist on granola bars. I'm not sure why, but it is. Must be the chef in me.



I don't intend to fall asleep on the couch, yet I blink my eyes open with no idea how much time has passed. Hours, likely, from how rested I feel and how dark the room is.

Dean is still typing away on the couch beside me, two corner lamps adding a soft, warm glow to the dark wood walls. Outside, an ominous rumble warns of an approaching storm.

That's not the only difference. Dean stopped working long enough to take my tray to the kitchen and cover me in a soft, fuzzy gray blanket right up to my chin.

Between my twisted ankle, my city-girl inability to get myself down a mountain, and now the weather, it's starting to feel like I'm going to be up here for the long term.

I watch him for a little longer, amazed at his focus. Sure, I'm aware it isn't healthy to work as much as he does. But, fresh from a relationship where I felt like Hunter's mom instead of his girlfriend, I can't help but admire Dean's work ethic.

There's only so much you can tell someone to pick up after themselves before it kills all attraction in a relationship. Once that was gone, it was easy to see Hunter for what he was. Not long after that, he showed me his true colors, and it was not pretty.

"Don't you get eye strain from all that computer work?" I ask.

My quiet question doesn't startle him in the least. "Sometimes. Do you get sore feet from standing in a kitchen all day?"

"Sometimes. After a while, you get used to it," I admit. "Why don't you want me to see Jenna?"

The typing stops. "What makes you think that?"

"You're holding me hostage," I tell him.

"You can leave anytime you want," he says. "I'm not stopping you."

Sighing, I push myself upright and swing my legs off the couch. "Everything is stopping me." I do a quick sweep of the room but can't spot any photo frames, romantic or otherwise. "Jenna's not your girlfriend, is she?"

I hold my breath as I wait for his response. His answer is strangely important to me. More than I thought it would be.

He lifts his gaze from the laptop to focus on me. "She's a friend. A good one. Why?"

I immediately look away. "Just wondered at the reason, that's all."

It certainly isn't because I'm jealous.

When he doesn't reply, I glance over at him to discover he's watching me with a thoughtful expression stamped on his face. "That's it?"

I nod. "Of course."

He gives me another probing look before refocusing on his laptop. "Well, there's nothing to it. Jenna has a ma—" He clears his throat. "A man in her life who isn't me."

But he's still acting protective over her. And why do I get the sense he was on his way to saying something else before he cleared his throat?

"I'm not here to hurt her if you think you need to protect her from me," I say.

A pang of guilt reminds me that isn't entirely true. I hope I've done enough to ensure Hunter doesn't track me here, but if he does, I could be putting Jenna at risk if he found me with her.

I chew my lip as I think about my decision to come here. As an only child to parents who had me later in life, I got used to being alone. My parents died when I was in my last year of high school, and since they were only children, too, I don't have any uncles, aunts, or cousins.

Hunter drove away the few friends I had before I realized how much I'd let him manipulate me. I couldn't think of anywhere else to go, and now I'm in Colorado, I still can't think of a place where Hunter wouldn't have eventually found me.

My only option had been Jenna or a nice, out-of-the-way Airbnb, where I could hide out for the next week or so. It didn't take long to rule out the Airbnb option. When you run your own business, if you don't work, you don't get paid.

With all the problems Hunter has been causing me the last few weeks, I've spent more time *not* working. My bank balance reflects that sad reality. Especially after I filled my truck with gas for the long drive to Colorado. That sucker is as greedy for gas as I am for coffee.

"You look troubled," Dean says.

I whip my head in his direction.

He's sitting back on the couch, his body twisted in my direction, and his laptop closed.

"Just thinking," I admit.

He gives me a searching look. "Anything I can do to help?"

"It's nice of you to offer," I tell him with a smile as I push the blanket aside and get to my feet. "But it's my mess, so—"

My ankle collapses under me, and I go down with a yelp.

I'm seconds away from crashing through the wooden coffee table when hard hands catch me and draw me against a

familiar male body.

Dean.

I blink up at him. “You’re fast.”

But he isn’t looking at my face. He’s focused his attention on the sleeve that’s slid down to reveal something I’d hoped no one would ever see.

A bruise.

It was easy enough to shrug off the fading bruises on my face as the result of my truck crash, but the one on the top of my left arm? The dark fingermarks? There’s no way a crash caused that.

I step back, wobbling as I yank up my sleeve. “Sorry about that. I shouldn’t have gotten up so fast.”

He’s silent as I test my ankle, realize I can *just* about walk on it, and start hobbling to the bedroom.

“You have a bruise,” he says.

“It must have been from the crash,” I lie and keep on hobbling.

“Those looked like fingers.” His voice is unreadable.

“Oh?”

“Did someone grab you?” There’s a growl in his voice that changes him from distracted workaholic to... well, someone else. Someone who might see a girl in trouble, tuck her behind him and then go to town beating the shit out of the guy who dared put his hands on her.

And that growl, strange as it is, makes me want to tell him I *am* in trouble. To have him tuck me behind him and go to town on Hunter.

I don’t because shit like that belongs in a movie. Maybe not a Hallmark one with the beating Hunter deserves, but a movie nonetheless, and city girls know guys like that—*heroes* like that—are created in writing rooms by underpaid writers. They’re not real.

So, I shake my head and keep on hobbling. “Like I said, it was from the crash. I’m going to lie down now.”

When I reach the bedroom and close the door behind me, I lean my back on it, staring straight ahead. I’m eyeing the bed, wondering if it’s too early to go to sleep, when a thought occurs to me. One I can’t believe I hadn’t considered until now.

Ignoring my throbbing ankle, I swing the bedroom door open. Dean hasn’t returned to his work. He’s standing beside the armchair, and he’s the one looking troubled.

“Where have you been sleeping?” I ask.

He cocks his head. “What?”

“While I’ve been here, where have you been sleeping?” He parts his lips, but I keep talking. “And don’t tell me you’re under deadline and you only need granola and coffee to fuel you. Have I been taking your bed?”

He doesn’t answer.

Shit, Madi. How could you not have realized this until now?

No wonder he didn’t care if I wandered off and got myself eaten by a bear. I’ve been taking his bedroom, and he was too nice to tell me.

“It’s fine,” he says, reading my mind. “You actually chose a good time to crash into a tree.”

I blink at him.

He gestures at his laptop. “Deadline.”

I slowly nod. “Right.”

The next time he gestures, it isn’t at his laptop but my arm. “Does it still hurt?”

Still?

“What do you mean, still?”

He points his chin at the refrigerator. “You were hurting when you reached into the refrigerator.”

How would he know that?

“I’m perceptive,” he explains before I can ask.

He must be, since he noticed when I had my head practically in the refrigerator at the time. “It’s okay. I bumped it, is all. I’m fine now.”

We silently study each other. I’m working out what to say when he clears his throat. “The bruises on your face weren’t all caused by the crash, were they?”

I hadn’t expected him to ask me outright. Hunter had driven all my friends away before he turned physical. If the owners of the businesses I delivered orders to noticed I was becoming increasingly heavy-handed with my concealer, they didn’t mention it.

It’s a strange thing to walk around with bruises on your face while the rest of the world pretends they don’t see them.

“No,” I quietly admit, a large part of me relieved to say it. Maybe it’s the thought of him giving Hunter the beating he deserves that makes opening up to him a little easier than it has been before.

He nods again. “Do you want to see my satellite?”

His *what?*

He gestures at his laptop. “My satellite.”

Frowning, I edge back. “If that’s a code word for porn, I think I’m good.”

“Not porn,” he says as the corners of his eyes crease with amusement. “Come on.”

I’d rather lie down and rest my ankle for my next trek down the mountain to find Jenna, but I wouldn’t mind seeing a satellite, so I hobble back to the couch. He pats the space on the couch beside him. I drop into it, eyeing him curiously as he brings up a video on his laptop and turns it toward me. “See?”

I lean toward the image of a small white satellite, my shoulder brushing his. “Oh, wow! That’s really cool. I honestly thought it was going to be porn.”

He barks out a laugh and angles the laptop so I can see better. “I bought it a while ago, and it’s been giving me nothing but grief. It’s not working properly.”

I bounce my gaze from him to the laptop and back again. “And you’re supposed to fix it from here?”

He shakes his head. “Not fix it. Figure out a piece of programming.”

“Wait, doesn’t NASA do stuff like that?” I ask, confused.

“Yes, if the satellite belongs to a government. This is privately owned.”

“I didn’t know you could just buy a satellite.”

“You can’t usually,” he admits.

“How come you can? You’re not like a government operative or something, are you?”

When he doesn’t respond, I glance over at him. He’s not looking at the satellite but at the bruise on my cheek, and he’s lost his smile. “Does Jenna know?”

I look away, focusing on the laptop as I shake my head. “I was hoping to stay with her for a little while.”

“To prevent more of the same happening again?” he asks.

Conscious that he’s still observing me, I nod.

“You can stay with me,” he says, so suddenly I whip my head toward him.

“What?”

“You can stay with me,” he repeats. “In fact, I insist on it. Stay.”

I shake my head. “I’m taking the only bed you have.”

His expression hardens. “I’m a workaholic who lives on granola bars. The bed is yours as long as you need it.”

I sigh. “I was scared you were going to say that.”

He frowns, confused.

I gesture toward the kitchen. “The granola bar habit. I’m surprised you’re not in a constant manic state, bouncing between sugar highs and crashes all day.”

He sticks his hand out. “So, we’ll make it a deal.”

I blink at his palm, confused. “What deal are you talking about?”

“You take the bed, and I’ll try to wean myself off my dependence on granola bars.”

I start to put my hand in his because I’d be a fool to pass on a deal that good.

But then I stop because, as far as deals go, this one is one-sided. *Too* one-sided. “You’ve done enough for me. Too much. I can’t agree to that.”

He arches a brow. “You said you were lacking cooking experience. That’s something I need. You can say on your resume that you worked as my private chef.”

A flutter of excitement forms in my belly, and I sit up. “That’s a really good idea.”

Working as a private chef would look *amazing* on my resume. “And you’d write me a recommendation?”

He nods. “As long as you don’t give me food poisoning.”

“I think I threw out the thing that would have done that.” I snort. “If you’re sure about the bed, then deal.”

And I take his hand.

The second he closes his fingers around mine, I lose my smile and get the sudden desire to keep my hand in his for a while. A long while.

“I’m sure about the bed,” he says quietly. “Deal.”

Seconds later, I realize we’re still holding hands, and neither of us is making any move to end the longest handshake in the world.

“This guy,” Dean says. “Do you still—”

“No,” I interrupt. “I don’t... Things ended a while ago. He just refuses to get the message.”

“Good.” He nods, looking pleased.

A new intensity enters his gaze, one that makes me suddenly shy. Cheeks hot, I pull my hand from his and push myself to my feet, slower this time, because I’m not looking to smash into his coffee table.

“Uh, I’m going to bed,” I say. “I’m pretty tired from the walk.”

Dean rises as well, his gaze watchful, and I wonder if he wasn’t getting ready to catch me again if I fall. I’m half-tempted to wobble just to see what he will do.

He’ll catch me. I’m sure of it. So maybe the wobble is less about seeing what he will do and more about giving him an excuse to wrap his arm around me again because that felt... nice.

Really nice.

“Are you sure you’re not hungry? I could—”

“No,” I interrupt. “I’m not hungry. But thanks. Unless you want me to—”

“I’m good.” Now he’s the one interrupting me.

And we stop again, both of us just staring at each other.

You wouldn’t think I was twenty-five. I’m acting like a sixteen-year-old girl out on her first date, blushing and scrambling for something to say that won’t make Dean think I’m an idiot. What is up with that?

“I meant what I said,” he says. “Stay for as long as you need. There’s no time limit.”

“I don’t want to cause you any trouble. If Hunter were to track me down...” I think of what he would do. “I wouldn’t want you to get caught up in anything.”

When I said Hunter was lazy and vertically challenged, I meant it. His preferred place was on the couch in front of the TV, usually barking at me to get things for him. When he

wasn't doing that, he liked to work out. A lot. He could do some serious damage to Dean.

"If he were to track you down, it would be the last thing he ever did," Dean growls.

At that growl, I swear feminism leaves my body. All I want to do is crawl into his arms and let him protect me. "You're being very protective of a stranger who kicked you out of your bed," I tell him.

Did I seriously believe he was trying to kill me? This guy?

He lifts a hand to my face.

My breath catches, and I hold it.

"My bed is your bed for as long as you need it," he says quietly, his fingers gentle on my bruised cheek. "You're safe here. Okay?"

Why is it so easy to believe you?

I nod. "Okay."

I turn and head for the bedroom, feeling his eyes track me. And I think about this new situation I've stumbled into.

It isn't just the beautiful Colorado nature that's making me forget I have a life waiting for me. It's this guy.

Which is a problem.

His life is in Colorado, in the middle of nowhere.

My life—and my business—is in Nebraska. Even if this attraction led somewhere, there's no way it could lead to anything permanent.



*M*y growing attraction to Dean and his toward me keeps me tossing and turning for most of the night.

Early the next morning, I have a quick shower and brush my teeth before I tiptoe out of the bedroom.

Okay, so maybe I don't actually tiptoe because a long night of tossing and turning aggravated my already sore ankle.

I'm not looking to trek down the mountain this morning.

No. This morning, I have something else in mind.

I halt at the bedroom door. From the faint rumbling snores in the living room, Dean has finally set his work aside to sleep.

A smile settles on my lips as I study him, sprawled across the couch, one arm dangling and in a position I struggle to believe can be comfortable. But it seems to be for him.

He said he runs hot, so that must explain why he's sleeping in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt—no hint of a blanket in sight. It's a cool morning, so I quietly make my way over to him, snagging the blanket he used to cover me so I can drape it over him instead.

And even though I know I should leave him to sleep, I continue to study him, marveling how I could be so wrong about a person as I was about him.

Yesterday, he told me I was safe here. He's still mostly a stranger to me, but I believed *he* would protect *me*. Even now, I don't doubt it.

While I'd kill for a steaming mug of coffee, it's not worth it to wake Dean up. I hobble toward the front door and step out into a bright, slightly foggy, chilly morning. The bite in the air wakes my brain up. Exactly the sort of weather I'd hoped for.

I didn't come to Colorado looking to enjoy nature, but maybe it's time I focused less on what I'm running from and more on things to be grateful for. Like a beautiful forest, tranquility, and not the least of which, a guy who wants to protect me rather than hurt me.

After stepping into my sneakers, I pull the door closed behind me and find myself a nice perch on a fallen log. Wrapping my arms around my legs, I rest my chin on my knees and let myself sink into this quiet, beautiful morning.

I must have been more tired than I realized because I blink, and suddenly, I'm no longer alone. I'm also no longer in danger of freezing out here. The same fuzzy, gray blanket I draped over a sleeping Dean now rests on my shoulder.

I turn to the man sitting on the log beside me. He stopped to pull on the same khaki green sweater he wore the day before, a pair of blue jeans, and his hiking boots.

"We're just gonna keep on trading this blanket, huh?" I ask, my voice husky from sleep.

He snorts a laugh and offers me one of the two white mugs in his hands. "You should have put a coat on. Mornings around here are brisk."

I take the mug gratefully, wrapping my cold fingers around it, and sigh in contentment as I inhale the rich, yummy coffee. "You mountain folk say brisk. We city dwellers say freezing." I glance at him. "I bet you're going to say this is mild, perfect walking weather, huh?"

He's smiling as he peers into the distance. "For running, actually. Naked."

I snort with laughter. "Ha."

We spend the next several minutes gazing off into the distance, enjoying the view.

“Thanks for the coffee. And the blanket. I thought you’d be working,” I say, lifting the mug to my lips.

“I have been known to take a day off,” he says.

“After I saw the way you were squinting at the sun?” I raise my brow. “Now, why don’t I believe you?”

“Maybe not in a while,” he concedes, glancing at me. “But my work is important.”

I cock my head, curious. “How so?”

He sips from his coffee and eyes me for a beat as if weighing up what to tell me. “In my family, I’m not... Let’s just say my strengths aren’t their strengths. They are more... physical. I’m better at using my brain. They are protectors. I’m ___”

“A computer genius?” I guess.

I’m not sure I believe him. He says he’s not physical, but I have yet to see an ounce of fat on him. He’s muscled. Not overly so, but he clearly keeps fit, moves with more grace than I’ve ever seen a man move before, and he’s strong to have carried me up the mountain. Hunter has bigger shoulders, but there’s no way he could have done it.

Dean blinks in surprise. “I don’t know about that.”

“You’re fixing a satellite. I doubt that’s something everyone can do,” I say. “And why wouldn’t you think you were a protector? You’ve done more for me than anyone else has.”

A frown creases his brow. “No one did anything about the guy responsible for those bruises?”

I ask myself why I’m bothering to tell him any of this. Maybe it’s because I’ll be leaving in a few days. Maybe it’s because I should speak to a therapist and would if I could afford one. But I appreciate having someone to talk to. Someone who won’t judge me for a mess I walked into and out of far later than I should have.

“I had friends before. Not many, but some. Hunter chased them off. I realized too late he was doing it to cut me off from

anyone who would see the way he was treating me and realize it wasn't leading anywhere good. Part of it was on me, though." Lifting my mug, I take a sip as I stare into the forest. "I didn't see the red flags—or maybe I chose not to see them—until it was too late. By then, I had no one to go to for help."

He nudges his shoulder with mine, the brief contact more comforting than I thought it could be. "There's a reason we say hindsight is twenty-twenty. He's the one to blame here. Not you."

I nod.

"And you think he'll follow you here," Dean says.

I sigh. "I'm not sure. He's lazy. Driving ten-plus hours across state lines feels like too much effort for him. I'm hoping when he can't find me, he'll move on."

Dean is silent for a beat. "I'm assuming the cops were not helpful."

"They were," I say. "But only when there was a problem. Other than parking a patrol car outside my apartment to ensure he stayed away, there was nothing they could do. I filed reports, got a restraining order, the works, but he didn't care."

"So you came to Jenna?"

I nod. "I just needed somewhere to go that he didn't know about."

"And then you return to the city, to your job as a baker, when you'd rather be a chef?"

"I'm trying to be a chef. I guess I just haven't put as much effort into it as I did building my business."

"Well," he says. "If there's any recipe you want to test out, I'm happy to be a guinea pig."

"That's very generous of you," I say, smiling. "I'm a very experimental cook."

He's silent for a beat. "Have you thought about what you might do if you go back and he's still hanging around?"

My smile fades. “I’m trying to be optimistic.” I snort. “A realist when it comes to work and an optimistic dreamer when it comes to my romantic life. Should have been the other way around, and I’d have avoided all this in the first place.”

Dean stares at me blankly for several seconds.

His intense focus makes me nervous. “Uh? Dean? What is it?”

“Finish your coffee.”

It’s nothing less than an order.

“Huh?” I gape as he knocks back his coffee and shoves himself to his feet. I wince. Geez. The guy must have coal-like insides to be able to chug burning hot coffee like that.

He nods at the forest. “It’s a beautiful morning. I’m taking you out there.”

I blink. “But you have a deadline.”

“It can wait. Let’s go,” he says.

“I have a sprained ankle,” I remind him. Or a twisted one. I’m not entirely sure. “I don’t know that I can walk far.”

“So I’ll do the walking,” he says.

I don’t move. My eyes dart to the lush trees. They *are* beautiful. I’m not disputing that. But... “Is it safe?”

“It’s safe. I know these forests like the back of my hand since I’m out running in them most days.”

I study his lean, muscular physique. Maybe he doesn’t spend all his time hunched over a laptop twenty-four-seven, after all. “*Run* in the forest?”

His eyelids flutter. “It’s more like a fast hike.”

Hmm. Why do I have a feeling there’s more to it than that?

He peers down at me so innocently that I tell myself I’m reading more into things than there are. As usual.

I glance at the forest behind him. “But my ankle...”

“You can hop on my back.”

I hesitate. That would put us close together. Like, really close together. I'm not so sure how I feel about that.

As if recognizing my reluctance, he says, "It's just a piggyback through the forest to see nature."

"And if we run into a bear? Or a wolf?"

A flicker of amusement heats his gaze. "We won't run into a bear."

I don't move. "A wolf, then?"

"If we do, you have nothing to be afraid of," he assures me.

I dart a nervous glance into the forest. "Because?"

"You just don't. Come on." He turns around, offering me his back.

I look at his back, and then I take in the forest where untold dangers might await.

I remember Dean telling me I was safe, and I remember believing him. So I get to my feet with a sigh. "Okay. But if we run into a bear, you'd better not drop me and save yourself. Just know that I'll haunt you forever if you do."

I'm lifting my mug to finish my coffee when Dean grips my wrist, startling me.

My eyes fly to his.

He peers down at me with a seriousness I wasn't expecting from my terrible joke. "Nothing will happen to you, Madi. I promise."

He's a total stranger. A guy I could have sworn I overheard planning to kill me in my hazy dream-memory-*thing*. But the assurance in his voice and the promise filling his eyes make me want to believe him.

So I do.

"Okay."

He nods. "Then drink up, and I'll show you Colorado isn't only full of wolves and bears."



The second Dean has me buttoned up in his coat, I'm in his arms.

"This isn't a piggyback," I tell him as he strides into the forest.

His eyes are sparkling when he glances into my face. "Easier to show you more if I carry you this way."

Right.

"And the reason you're holding me so tight?" I ask, doing nothing to wriggle out of his grip.

I have my cheek pressed against his throat to the extent we're practically snuggling on the move. His hold around my back is... intimate.

"In case I stumble," he says. "I wouldn't want to drop you."

My eyes narrow with suspicion. "Hmm."

He glances down at me again. His expression is innocent. *Too* innocent. "Was there a problem?"

With a guy I'm attracted to who I believe is finding reasons to hold me far closer than he needs to?

No. I don't think there is.

Pulling my gaze from his, I focus on the forest. He seems to have a destination in mind, and while I could ask, I think I'd be happy to be surprised. As long as it's not a surprise liable to

bite me or maul me. “Why are you the one responsible for fixing this satellite?”

“I own it.”

He explained, but I still don’t understand how a person can just buy a satellite. It’s as bizarre to me as buying a piece of the moon.

“Was it expensive?”

“It was an investment,” he says.

Then pricy. Very pricy. Whenever people start throwing around words like investment, curated, or handcrafted, shit like that always comes with a high price tag. Sometimes far higher than the thing is worth.

“So that’s why you live like a bat? Don’t your family miss your face?”

“I’m not living like a bat,” he scowls.

I raise my brow. “You get your vitamin D through a window. If that’s not a sign of a workaholic, I don’t know what is. You work too much, and it takes one to know one.”

He glances at me. “You too, huh?”

“*Ex-workaholic,*” I correct him as a high-pitched chattering distracts me. I search the trees to discover the source of the sound. “What is that?”

“Magpie. Probably a black-billed one. They are loud.” He slows, his eyes probing the trees. After a moment, he lifts a finger and points. “See the black feather there?”

At first, I don’t believe he has eyes that sharp because those trees are tall. And then I see it. He said he had sharp senses, and he truly does.

A long black feather peeks between bright green leaves. As if the bird knows it’s being observed and is hungry for more of our attention, it flaps its wings, and the rest of its black-and-white body comes into view.

I smile. “Oh... pretty.”

“Sure is,” he mutters.

When I peer over at him, Dean isn't looking at the bird.

He's looking at me, and there's a softness in his eyes that wasn't there before. It makes my heart stutter, and I almost ask him what he sees when he looks at me. I don't because I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

If he says something sweet, it'll be more temptation that I don't need when I have a life and business waiting for me in Nebraska. Staying in Colorado isn't an option if I want my business to survive. If he says something not-so-sweet, it'll ruin this surprisingly perfect morning, and I'm not ready to do that.

Even if it's killing me not to know.

“You're not looking at the bird,” I tell him.

“Nope,” he agrees and resumes walking. “What made you change your workaholic ways?”

I study him, debating how much I want to open up about myself. Surprisingly, more than I thought I would. “I woke up one morning, and I didn't want to cook.”

His brow furrows. “And that was a big deal?”

I nod. “When I was a kid, I had one of those big plastic kitchens and would spend hours ‘cooking.’ My mom had to peel me away from it. I threw tantrums.” I smile as I think back to screaming until I was fully red in the face. My poor parents. “Many, many tantrums. And I'm an only child, so I hadn't learned to share anything. I was as obnoxious as that plastic kitchen.”

Dean points out a brown, floppy-eared rabbit sticking its head out of a warren, and I grin. “Cute.”

“So you always wanted to cook?” he asks, continuing our amble through the vivid green forest. Now that I'm not worried about running into a bear, flailing around in a puddle, or twisting my ankle, I can appreciate its beauty even more.

The mountain smells, all fresh, wild, and crisp, tempt me to suck in deep, long breaths like I never could in the city.

Well, I could have, but I'd have immediately regretted doing such a stupid thing when it triggered a coughing fit from filling my lungs with car exhaust fumes, cigarette smoke, or the sweet, sweet scent of dog shit.

"I was going to be Julia Child or open a gourmet eatery like Ina Garten. I was going to spend summers eating pastry in Paris and winters running a restaurant in New York where the wait list was two years long."

Dean raises his brow. "Two years, huh?"

"I had big dreams," I tell him, smiling. All too soon, my smile fades.

"Until?" Dean prompts.

"My parents died when I was in my senior year of high school. My whole life changed. I still wanted to cook, but suddenly, my dreams felt too big. I thought of all the things that could go wrong, and if I gave my dreams everything and it didn't work out, I'd have nothing to fall back on."

"And you gave up on your dream of two-year wait lists and summers in Paris."

"I'd been accepted into the Culinary Institute of America in New York. It was expensive, so I chose a community college where I wouldn't leave with a mountain of debt. During my last year of college, I spent the summer in Paris doing a three-month course in pastry at Le Cordon Bleu. That's where I earned my pastry certificate."

He arches a brow. "Paris? Sounds expensive."

"The Culinary Institute was nearly forty thousand a year," I explain.

His eyes widen. "A *year*?"

I look away. "It's prestigious. Paris was expensive, but it was way cheaper than spending years at one of the best culinary colleges in the country. And I thought it would look great on my resume."

"A resume isn't everything, Madi," he says.

I sigh. “I realized that when I struggled to get a job after college.”

“Why pastry when you were so set on cooking?” he asks.

“I’d heard it was easier to get a job in pastry than as a chef. Turns out it’s just as hard. It’s how I started my cupcake business. No one would hire me, and I was running out of money fast. With no idea what else to do, I spent a weekend baking and took a selection of cakes and pastries to the local coffee shops and restaurants in town. The owner of a café took a chance on me and helped spread the word. Before long, people were calling me asking to supply them. I decided I needed business cards, menus, proper packaging, all the things. So...”

His eyes light up. “You had Jenna design them for you?”

I nod. “She said I was her first proper client. She was affordable, and she did an amazing job. Her designs helped me get even more work. I worked hard, *too* hard.”

“And killed your love of cooking?” he guesses.

I smile at him. “It happened gradually. Suddenly, all my days were filled with endless to-dos, making deliveries, ordering more ingredients, and baking, of course. I was a machine. A well-oiled, on the fast track to breaking down if I didn’t slow down machine.”

He returns my smile. “So, what did you do?”

“I learned to take days off and started going to the gym.”

He blinks in surprise. “The gym?”

I snort. “Yep. Hated it immediately. I thought being a gym bunny would give me all those happy, feel-good endorphins that TV is always trying to convince me exist. Maybe I didn’t stick with it long enough. I lost a bit of weight, but it didn’t make me happy.”

“And then what?”

My amusement fades. “I went looking for that happiness in the wrong place. Or, I guess, with the wrong person.”

Dean stops walking and trails his fingers over a fading bruise on my cheek. “The guy who did this?”

I nod. “For a while, I was happy. I’d built my business on my own, and I was proud of it. Too proud to ask for help, but I was struggling to keep on top of everything. Hunter was one of the people applying to be my delivery driver, and it felt... I don’t know. Like it was meant to be. Like the universe was saying, here’s someone to help you with your business, Madi, and a guy to fall in love with at the same time.

“I ignored all his red flags until he’d separated me from my friends. He made me feel shitty for prioritizing my business over doing everything for him, and then... well, his control turned physical. So, I’m not a workaholic anymore, and you shouldn’t be either. I’m sure your family occasionally misses your face.”

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have had to learn a lesson that way,” he says, his eyes lingering on my bruise.

Behind me, a branch snaps.

I whip my head toward it, relieved Dean is holding onto me as tight as he is because I’m almost positive I’d have tumbled right out of his arms otherwise. “What was that?”

I see trees, leaves, bushes, and yet more trees, but I don’t see a bear looking to ravage us.

Dean drops his hand from my cheek and mutters, “Shit.”

I grip Dean and press my face against his throat, whispering, “What do you mean, shit? Is it a bear? Please tell me it’s not a bear.”

“It’s not a bear.” His tone is resigned.

I choke down my rising panic before I lose it completely. “It’s okay to leave me behind. I know I said I’d haunt you, but I promise I won’t. Save yourself.”

A smile tugs on one corner of his lips. “You promise, huh?”

“For as long as I have autonomy over my ghostly form. After that, you’re on your own. Sorry.” I dart another glance

behind me. No bear is creeping up on me. At least, not yet.

When I glance back at Dean, he's grinning down at me. "I appreciate the apology. But here's the thing." He slides a hot palm around the nape of my neck and gently shakes me. "I'm not leaving you. And you're safe. No one is going to hurt you."

"You say that like someone is." I grip his arms tighter. "It's right behind me, isn't it? Is it a wolf? No, don't tell me."

I squeeze my eyes shut and prepare to meet my maker.

"How about I introduce you to my family instead?"

My eyes fly open. He's smiling down at me. "Family? You mean the family you spend more time working than seeing?"

"We have a running joke that he needs to hug his laptop to fall asleep," an amused, commanding male voice says from behind me.

I whip my head around and meet the ice-blue gaze of a big, muscled blond man in his late twenties or early thirties. "Ah, sorry for scaring you."

His face isn't familiar, but his voice...

I could've sworn I heard his voice in my dream.

I'm pondering the impossible odds of having dreamed of someone before I met them when Dean's arms tighten around me. "Dayne? Talis? Is something wrong?"

I blink at Dean because that protective growl is back in his voice. Didn't he just say this was his family? So why is he acting like he's facing down a threat?

"No trouble. Talis and I thought we'd head up this way, see how you were," Dayne says.

"That's a long walk," Dean says slowly.

"We were in the mood to wander a bit further than usual." When Dayne's gaze sharpens, it's clear he didn't miss Dean's protectiveness, which only adds to my confusion.

“Talis?” I ask, wanting to break the strange tension in the air.

“He means me.” A petite, dark-haired, and dark-eyed woman in blue jeans, a black sweater, and a navy blue coat emerges from the forest with a smile and a wave.

I return her smile, suddenly uncomfortable that they’ve stumbled into Dean holding me. “Hi. Um, you can put me down now, Dean.”

“Madi twisted her ankle,” Dean explains, making no move to release me. “I was showing her some of the sights.”

I nod. “He lives like a bat. I’m trying to break him out of bad habits.”

Amusement warms Dayne’s eyes. “A bat?”

“Workaholic,” I correct myself. “I used to be the same. The walk was actually his idea.”

Dayne blinks once. “Dean’s idea?” His eyes slide from me to Dean and then back again. “Curious. Talis can have a look at your ankle while I catch up on a couple of things with Dean.”

Dayne’s expression is friendly, and his eyes are still warm, but I feel a sudden rise in the undercurrent of tension in the air.

“I guess so,” Dean reluctantly agrees.

Dean is still mostly a stranger to me, but I’d put money on the fact he’s not happy that Dayne and Talis are here and even less thrilled at the thought of bringing them back to his cabin.

I search Dayne’s face, trying to work out why his voice is so familiar and if he truly is a threat that Dean is trying to protect me from.

“Everything all right?” Dayne focuses on me as Talis approaches his side. Before she’s reached it, he’s holding out his hand to hers. She takes it, squeezing it. The action is so instinctive it’s clear they’re not just together. They’ve been together for a while. And when he draws her closer to his side? I see the love in that small gesture, and it makes me feel a little less afraid that he’s here to hurt me.

I smile. “Sure. Just thinking about a weird dream I had.”

“About?” Interest stirs in Dayne’s ice-blue gaze.

*Men changing into wolves and plots to silence me.
Permanently.*

I shake my head. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”



“Are you sure you’re up to this?” Talis asks me as she sits at the kitchen island. “I feel like I should be the one cooking.”

I lower my knife to glance at my ankle. “It’s not too bad, and I love cooking. This is like being on Top Chef.”

Outside, the low murmur of male voices continues. Dayne and Dean are still deep in whatever conversation dragged them outside when we got back to the cabin.

Talis and Dayne had a look at my ankle, and both seemed relieved the swelling I’d told them about had gone down. Good thing it had because I have no idea how I’d have gotten to a hospital if my ankle hadn’t gotten better on its own. Especially since Talis and Dayne trekked up here, and neither had a cell phone with them.

Their lack of cell phone reminded me all over again about the future of Madi’s Cupcakery. Although I’d briefly considered changing my cell phone number before leaving Nebraska, I’d realized that I couldn’t if I wanted my business to survive.

I’d recorded a voicemail message so anyone who called me would know I was out of the city due to personal reasons. Nothing that would tell Hunter where I was, but hopefully, enough of an explanation that I still have customers when I return to the city.

“I couldn’t help but overhear some of your conversation with Dean earlier,” Talis says.

After checking that the oil on the stove is hot enough, I carefully add the seasoned steak so it can sear before I turn the heat down.

The contents of Dean’s refrigerator were enough to make me want to cry before, but his freezer? A source of delight. I’d unearthed a couple of packages of steak I defrosted in a bowl of water in the sink before seasoning it. There’d also been a couple of bags of veggies. I prefer cooking with fresh, but at a pinch, frozen would do.

And for a side? I’m considering combining rice, spices, and stock to make savory, spiced rice. It’s a bit much for the simple lunch I told Talis I’d whip up, but I can’t say I’m not enjoying the challenge of seeing what I can throw together to make a tasty meal.

Finished adding the steak to the pan, I start gathering the spices I want for the rice. “Oh?”

“Honestly, I was surprised to see Dean out at all. He’s glued to his laptop usually.”

“I got that.”

“And you convinced him to get out and smell the fresh air?” Talis glances at my ankle with a furrowed brow. “Are you sure you’re okay? Maybe I could do the grabbing. Or the cooking? If you tell me what you want done, I can—”

I wave off the offer. “No need. I love to cook. And no, I didn’t convince Dean. He offered to take me out.”

Talis stares at me. “He *offered*?”

I nod. “To be fair, every time I’ve left his cabin, I’ve got myself into trouble.”

Talis’s smile is full of sympathy. “The twisted ankle?”

“Yep. That came after I nearly ran into a bear. Oh, and I tumbled face-first into a puddle.” I shake my head wryly. “I was starting to think Colorado didn’t like me.”

She laughs. “That sounds terrible. Why did you keep venturing out?”

I add the rice and spices to a pot I pull from the cupboard. “I was trying to get to town so I could see Jenna.” After I add the stock, I cover the rice with a lid and turn to face Talis, resting my back on the counter to ease the pressure on my ankle. “I had this weird dream where I saw Dean change into a wolf.”

Talis’s smile freezes. “A wolf?”

Laughing, I turn to flip the steaks and lower the temperature. “And then I thought he was going to feed me to a wolf called Gavin. Hence me nearly breaking my leg trying to get away from him. Crazy, huh?”

“A wolf called Gavin?” she echoes. “That’s a, uh, . . . pretty interesting dream.”

“I must have hit my head pretty hard on my steering wheel to believe something like that, huh?”

“Sounds like,” a male voice says from the door.

I jump, nearly dropping the spatula when I whirl around.

Dayne is blank-faced, standing at the open doorway. Dean is a step behind him, his expression impossible to decipher. “Sorry to scare you.”

“It’s okay,” I assure him. “You’re quiet.”

“I am that.” Dayne backs out. “Just wanted to let you know that Dean and I need a little longer out here.”

“That’s okay,” I assure him, glancing at Dean’s neutral expression. “Lunch isn’t ready yet, so take your time.”

“That’s great.” Dayne turns around, grips Dean’s arm, and squeezes before he nudges him back outside. He’s smiling at me, but his grip on Dean looks unbreakable. “Thanks.”

I glance at Talis after they’ve closed the front door. “Is something wrong?”

Talis smiles. “Nothing is wrong. Guess they hadn’t finished with—”

“She’s in trouble, Dayne,” Dean exclaims.

I frown at the closed cabin door.

Dayne’s response is too muffled for me to understand.

“No, I will not,” Dean’s voice is insistent.

Well, this is awkward.

I clear my throat, uncomfortable at eavesdropping on what must be a private conversation.

Talis glances at me and rises from the kitchen island. “I should let them know we can—”

“She’s in trouble, and she needs my help. I don’t care what you think,” Dean growls.

Talis stops moving. My eyes widen.

“Dean...” Dayne rumbles.

“I don’t care,” Dean snarls.

Yeah, this is really uncomfortable.

Talis offers me a brief smile, whirls around, and hurries out, closing the door firmly behind her. What she says out there is a mystery, but it shuts both Dean and Dayne up.

I’m still standing, staring at the door, when it swings open. Dean takes a step to enter, only to grind to a halt. “Madi?”

He was out there defending me. Or protecting me, and I’m not sure why, but... I think if it was just him and me, and Dayne wasn’t standing right behind him, I’d hug him.

Instead, I swallow hard and say, “Lunch should be ready in a few minutes.”

“Then I’ll set the table,” he says quietly. “Okay?”

I nod. “Okay. Thanks.”



We all sit on the four stools on either side of the kitchen island. I'm beside Dean, facing Talis, who's next to Dayne. Lunch starts off awkward. Mostly because of what I overheard Dean say.

"So, how's the big deadline coming along?" Talis asks, probably in an attempt to break the tension.

Dean shrugs. "It can wait."

Dayne stops digging into the savory rice to blink at him. "It can wait?"

"It's not that big of a deadline, anyway," Dean says offhand as he reaches for his glass of water.

Now, it's Talis's turn to shift her focus from her plate to Dean. "Not that big of a deadline?" she echoes. "No one saw you for days before that... that thing."

That thing?

What thing?

"The last time we all saw you, you were grabbing your laptop and running for your car, yelling that no one should bother you unless it was an emergency." Dayne offers more of an explanation, his voice dry as he briefly meets my eye and smiles. "And now you say it's not that big of a deadline."

I study Dean out of the corner of my eye as discreetly as I can, curious what his response will be because Dayne has a point. Not that long ago, he was staying up all night, letting the food in his refrigerator go bad. But now? The only time he's touched his laptop has been to close the lid. Clearly, his priorities have shifted along the way. But when? And why?

Because of you. They shifted because he cares more about making sure you're okay than about work.

I quiet the whisper in my mind and the pleasure it provokes, mostly so I don't get my hopes up. I won't say it doesn't feel good. Because it does. Pretty amazing, actually. I've always been the one compromising. For someone to drop something important to them to look after me is... rare.

And it's a temptation I don't need when I'm already struggling to remember I have to leave Colorado. One day soon.

"I just meant I'll get to it whenever," Dean says, cutting into his steak.

Dayne cocks his head as if he doesn't recognize Dean, and is trying to. As if he can feel my attention, his gaze swings my way. "So, Madi..."

Dean snaps his head up, shoulders tense, and his steak forgotten.

"Dean was saying you have a cupcake business," Dayne continues, seemingly blind to Dean's focused stare.

That's what they were talking about out there? My cupcake business?

I bounce my gaze between the two. "Yes. Back in Nebraska."

He nods as if unsurprised by my answer. "And you intend to return there?"

"Dayne," Dean growls.

What is going on here?

"Uh, yeah. I was just visiting Colorado for a couple of days. That's all. I'm not staying."

Dean's fingers tighten around his fork.

"Because you've been having some trouble back in Nebraska?" Dayne continues.

Suddenly, this is starting to feel like less of a conversation and more of an interrogation. Softly spoken, but an interrogation nonetheless.

“It’s nothing.” I lower my eyes to my plate, my appetite fast disappearing. I consider how I feel about Dean telling Dayne my business. And the answer is not good. Not good at all.

“I didn’t tell him,” Dean says quietly.

My eyes fly to Dean. He nods at Dayne, keeping his gaze fixed on me. He’s stopped eating as well. “Dayne is observant. Sometimes more than I appreciate.”

Dayne must have been waiting for me to look his way again because the moment I do, he resumes talking. “Someone saw your truck speeding through town, then you crashed into a tree.”

I brace myself for him to ask if I brought my trouble to Hardin. Mostly, I prepare to lie because opening up about Hunter—even only a little—wasn’t easy. To do it with two strangers? Dean’s family, but still strangers?

That isn’t happening.

I don’t say a word.

Dayne gives me one long, unreadable look before he trains his eyes on his plate while he cuts into his steak. After forking up a piece, he points his chin at Dean. “When he’s not busy forgetting what color the sky is while he’s neck deep in work, you couldn’t ask for a better person to watch your back.”

I feel Dean’s surprise at what must have been an unexpected compliment.

“Don’t be shy about asking for help when you need it. Okay?” Dayne prompts me with the tone of someone who expects to be told yes. It isn’t just his voice that’s commanding. It’s his presence as well.

I nod. “Okay.”

“And you have to give me the recipe for this meal,” Talis adds, smiling. “It’s delicious.”

“There’s no recipe,” I say.

Talis lowers her fork and leans toward me. “Tell me I did not just watch you throw ingredients together on the fly and come up with this? No fair.”

Dayne flashes me a grin. “Talis isn’t a cook. She can throw ingredients together, and the result would be an explosion that tears a house apart. That, or a meal so bad the local wildlife would fly on by.”

Talis whirls her head toward him, glaring. “That was one time. I’m way better now. Regan has improved me.”

Dayne nods, but when Talis looks away from him, he meets my eye and subtly shakes his head.

I bend my head to hide my smile.

After the initial awkwardness, lunch is nice. Our conversation about life in Colorado and how it’s different from my more hectic pace of living in a Nebraska city flows easily. And by the time all our plates are empty, it’s as if the initial tension and awkwardness from before never happened.

Although Talis and Dayne offer to help clean up before they leave, Dean shakes his head and offers to do it himself as he leads them to the door.

“And Dean...” Dayne drawls, pausing at the open doorway.

Dean’s shoulders stiffen. “I know what I’m doing. Everything is okay.”

Dayne glances at me. “Nice to meet you, Madi, and I meant what I said. If you have trouble, let Dean know. Better yet, have him call us. We’re a pretty close-knit bunch.”

Maybe that’s what all this is about. Dayne doesn’t want my trouble to affect his family, and Dean was reassuring him that it won’t.

“I will, thanks,” I say. Though, I’m not sure I will. Or even can. My phone is in my truck, and I’m almost too afraid to ask what state my truck is in. I need it not to be a big, mangled—and expensive—repair job so it can get me back home to Nebraska.

After Dayne and Talis have left, I get to my feet so I can get started on cleaning the kitchen. I've placed one foot on the ground when Dean passes me on the way to the sink. He pauses just long enough to nudge me back into my seat. "I've got it."

I eye the mound of dishes sitting beside the sink. "That's not fair. I'll help."

"I can do it."

He doesn't sound like he has a problem with it. The thing is, I do.

I take in his back, realize I'm not going to sit here and watch him clean up—*again*—and get to my feet. After stacking our dirty plates, I turn to walk them to the sink when my arms are suddenly empty.

"Hey!"

Dean places the plates back on the counter. "I said I've got it. You cooked. I'll clean."

"I made a big mess. Let me help," I say, turning to grab the dishes.

He grips my wrist and nudges me back in my seat. "You made the best lunch I've ever had in my life. I refuse to punish you for it by letting you do the dishes."

I strangle my smile. "You make it sound like you don't get any decent food here."

"That's because I don't," he says. "Sit. Feel free to direct me if you want to feel useful."

A smile twitches my lips. "You're bossy."

His eyes dip to my lips and linger there. "And you are bull-headed. I have a feeling I'm going to have to learn to fight my corner."

My need to smile grows. "Determined," I correct him. "I am occasionally determined."

My business wouldn't have survived if I hadn't learned to be determined.

“Semantics,” he counters, not lifting his gaze from my mouth.

“I—”

He presses a finger on my lips, silencing me. “Stop arguing.”

His finger on my mouth changes things. Or maybe the mood was already changing before he touched me. It’s like there’s a charge bouncing from him to me and back again, a pressure building between us as the sound of my heartbeat grows louder in my head.

When he takes his finger from my mouth, I know it’s because he’s going to kiss me. He wouldn’t be gazing down at me with that much heat in his eyes if he wasn’t.

“Madi?” His voice is husky.

“Yeah?” So is mine.

But Dean doesn’t move. Does he think I don’t trust guys because of what happened with Hunter?

Maybe.

Do I need to give him a little hint that this is what I want?

Also, maybe.

So, I rise a little, stretching toward him so he knows this is what I want.

Only for him to blink, turn away, and gather the plates before striding to the sink. “I’ll get started on these.”

As I stare after him, I ask myself whether this is the dating equivalent of sticking your foot into your mouth. Whatever it is, not only is it making my cheeks burn with humiliation, it really fucking hurts.

I thought he liked me. Clearly, this is mountain hospitality, and I’m seeing something that isn’t there. He didn’t want to kiss me at all. It was all in my head, and now I’ve made things awkward.

“You should sit down and rest your ankle.” Dean starts the faucet. It’s as if he’s determined to not only keep his distance but to not even look at me.

“I think I need to lie down.” I swing away and head for the bedroom.

The sooner I’ve rested my ankle, the sooner it can mend, and the sooner I can leave this humiliation.

“Madi?” Dean calls after me.

Cheeks still burning with embarrassment, I don’t slow. “My ankle hurts. I’ll see you in the morning.”

It’s the middle of the day, and I’ve never been the napping type unless I’m sick. I’m fully aware of that. If there was a time to start, I can’t think of a better one than now.

I push the door closed behind me, lean my back on it, and try to ignore the man in the next room I’d wanted to kiss more than he wanted to kiss me.



*P*atience has never been my virtue. I try, I really do try to lie in bed and sleep.

Even though it's the middle of the day.

Every sound conspires to make sleep more impossible with each passing minute. The chirping birds don't help. Neither do the faint sounds of Dean washing up in the next room.

But worst of all, the thing driving me insane is the utter certainty that he was going to kiss me.

I wouldn't have moved toward him if he wasn't moving toward me. But something made him stop.

Was it Dayne's subtle, wordless warning before he left? Or something else?

What?

I have to find out.

Scrambling out of bed, fueled by determination—and not a small amount of embarrassment—because yes, it was several minutes ago, but it's still fresh, I stalk toward the door. Then I hobble because I still have a busted ankle.

I swing the door open, halting before I've taken one step out of the bedroom.

While I was working myself up to confront Dean, he must have finished doing the dishes. His hands are still red from the water, and he splashed himself good.

And he's standing two feet from the bedroom door.

"I was going to kiss you," he admits quietly.

My throat is dry, and I have to clear it before I can get my words out. "Why didn't you?"

"A couple of reasons, but the biggest was I didn't want to make things uncomfortable," he says.

Really?

"How would kissing me have made things uncomfortable?"

Because I genuinely don't see it.

He gives me a long look. "I told you that you could stay for as long as you wanted. I didn't want you to think this was a condition for your staying."

Oh.

"I didn't even think of that," I murmur.

"You didn't?"

I shake my head. "No. I thought you didn't want to kiss me, so that's why I wanted to come to bed early. Not because I'm tired or my ankle hurts."

His shoulders lift, and hope fills his gaze. "You wanted me to kiss you?"

I nod. "I did."

"And do you still want me to do that?" he asks, taking one step forward.

I nod, my mouth going dry. Taking a step forward makes me hide a wince. Evidently not well enough because Dean frowns.

His brow furrows, making me nervous. Or it would if he didn't move closer. "You spend altogether too much time on your feet than anyone should with a sprained ankle," he mutters, still frowning.

"It's not that—" I yelp when I'm suddenly airborne.

I grab his shoulders, holding on as he wraps his arms around me. He's surprisingly muscled for a guy who has such a sedentary job, but I like how good it feels in his arms.

"Better," he says softly as he carries me over to the kitchen island and seats me on top.

"You don't need to keep picking me up," I say. "I know you say I weigh nothing, but I do."

He slides a palm under my hair. "You feel good in my arms, Madi. I can't say that I'm not unhappy to have a reason to put you there."

For a workaholic, he sure does have a way with words.

His words draw a smile to my lips. "I'm distracting you from your work," I remind him.

His eyes dip to my lips and linger there as his head slowly descends. "Is that what you're doing? Because it feels an awful lot like you're—"

He stops. Speaking *and* dipping his head.

Has he changed his mind? Did he throw his back out, carrying me across the room?

Anxiety flutters in my belly. "Dean? What is it?"

He shakes his head. "Just remembered something a friend said a little while ago."

"About?" I prompt.

"About not making time for the things that can make your life brighter." His eyes catch mine. "Things that make a life worth living."

I gulp at the intensity reflected in his brown-gold eyes. "What things are those?"

Please let the thing he's talking about be me.

"Things like a cupcake baker who makes the best damn steak I've ever eaten in my life."

As his head lowers, my breathing slows. "It was a little overdone."

He stops, and he breathes the next words against my lips. “It was perfect. Like you.”

And then he kisses me.

I hadn’t thought workaholics who stayed up all night and let their food rot away in their refrigerator feet from where they worked would know a thing about romance, kissing, or how to woo a girl.

I was wrong.

This one knows all that and more.

I melt into his kiss and slide my palms up over his strong shoulders before I rest my hands on the nape of his neck.

Groaning into my mouth, his hands tighten around my waist, and he draws my body flush against his as he deepens the kiss.

As our tongues tangle, I mentally start screaming for him to take me to bed.

He inhales and groans even deeper as he crushes me tighter against him. A second later, he breaks away from me, his breathing heavy as he stares down at me. “We have to stop, Madi.”

I blink up at him, warring with myself not to drag him back. “Why?”

I don’t want to stop. I want him.

Without warning, he pulls me against him. *Hard*. Slanting his mouth over mine, he gives me a series of long, deep, drugging kisses.

Just as quickly as he grabbed me, he releases me and backs up. “We have to stop.”

I lick my lips, and they feel swollen from his kiss. “You keep saying that, and then you kiss me like that.”

My voice isn’t steady, and I keep thinking about him picking me up, carrying me into the bedroom, and stretching his body over mine. Naked. And then I want to know how it

would feel to have him kiss between my thighs with the same intensity he just paid my mouth.

His hands spasm on my hips. “What are you thinking, Madi?”

I blink at him. “What?”

His nostrils flare, and he steps toward me, eyes burning. “What were you just thinking a second ago?”

Something that made my panties wet.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

His hands grip my hips and he slides me across the counter toward him, his cock resting flush against my core. “Tell me.”

He claims my lips in a deep, sexy kiss that I lean into as I wind my legs around his hips. “It’s kind of X-rated.”

He drops a kiss on my throat, and when he lifts his head, his eyes aren’t just heated. They’re amused. “Does it involve me, you, and a bed?”

I return his smile. “It might.”

He studies me. Then, cradling the nape of my neck with a large palm, his smile fades, and he sighs. My tension returns. “I want that too. But it’s not a good idea.”

When I think of our future, I sigh. “You’re probably right. I mean, I’ll be leaving soon and you—”

His hard kiss silences me. And then he’s framing my face with both hands, his eyes intense. “I don’t want to let you go because one kiss and you feel like mine.”

My eyes widen. “I... what?”

“You feel like mine, Madi Sawyer. I should stop, but you are not making it easy to want to.” He groans again.

I don’t know why those feral-sounding groans are making me so aroused. “So why do we need to stop?”

As if he can’t help himself, his lips find mine again in a long, deep, hungry kiss before he breaks it, and after picking

me up, he strides toward the couch. “There are things about me you should know first.”

He places me on the couch, drawing the blanket to just under my chin.

“You’re not an ax murderer who decided to live in the middle of nowhere to avoid a trail of bodies you left behind,” I say, only half-joking. “Are you?”

“Nothing like that.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and gently kisses my forehead.

It’s such a sweet thing to do that I smile.

“What?” he asks, an answering smile tilting up the corners of his mouth.

I shake my head. “Nothing. What is this important thing you think I should know?”

He sighs. “I’m not sure how to tell you. If your ankle is up to it, maybe we could go on a walk tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t you have to work?”

“It can wait,” he says.

My smile returns. “Am I curing you of your workaholic ways?”

“You might be.” He hands me the TV remote. “Soon, you’ll have me flinging all my granola bars out for the bears to become addicted to the stuff. Rest your ankle while I finish cleaning, and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

I eye him. “And you’re not a serial killer?” I ask, sensing it’s something serious. Something big.

But what?

He rises from his crouch. “I’m not a serial killer.”

I smile. “Then I don’t see what could be so bad that you think I’ll want nothing to do with you.”

He doesn’t return my smile. “Rest your ankle and watch TV.”

As he returns to the kitchen, I observe him quietly as I try to puzzle out what could be so bad that he couldn't tell me now.



The next morning, it isn't typing that wakes me, but the sensation that someone is watching me and the scent of rich, strong, delicious coffee.

I flutter my eyelashes open. I'm not surprised to find myself in bed with the sheets pulled up to my chin because I have the vaguest memory of falling asleep on the couch. Then, an even briefer sensation of arms lifting me from it, cradling me against a familiar male chest.

It feels like a dream, but I remember catching his hand when he moved to stand and saying... something. I must have been half-asleep already.

But he stopped and kissed my forehead before he said, "You'd hate me if I stayed. We need to talk first."

He'd sounded sad.

Why had he thought I would hate him? What secret is he keeping that makes him think I would want nothing to do with him if I knew it?

I search his expression as I sit up, resting my back on the headboard as the sheets settle on my lap. There's no trace of the sadness I'm almost positive I heard last night. If I wasn't so certain it was real, I'd believe I'd dreamed up the whole thing.

He sits perched on the side of the bed, his hair still damp from his shower, a mug of steaming coffee in hand, and a faint

smile tugging on the corners of his lips. “I wanted to kiss you awake, but I didn’t want to scare you.”

“So instead, you decide to wake me with the most amazing-smelling coffee ever?” I yawn and wiggle my fingers eagerly for the mug.

He hands it over with a smile. “How’d I do?”

I take a sip of the coffee and sigh happily. “I think I’d have preferred the kiss.”

He leans toward me. “Duly noted,” he murmurs before his lips find mine in a far too brief kiss. “Time to get up.”

When he rises from the bed, I blink in surprise. “Up? Are we not talking now?”

He shakes his head as he crosses over to the dresser, pulling out a pair of sweats. “Not yet. I want to show you something first. It’s cold today, so you need to bundle up.”

I watch him, frowning as I think about my hazy memory from last night. “You sounded sad.”

He glances over at me. “Sad?”

I nod, lifting the mug to my mouth. “After you put me in bed. I think I was trying to get you to stay.”

His eyes slide away from me to focus on the thick, dark gray sweater and sweatpants he places at the foot of the bed. “You remember.”

My tension and anxiety rises as he heads for the bedroom door. “Would you ever hurt me? Physically.”

He pauses with his back to me and shakes his head. “No, Madi. I would never do that.”

I offer him a smile, but he doesn’t turn to see. “Then I don’t see how bad this thing could be.”

He turns to meet my eye, and his expression is so serious I get nervous all over again. “Finish your coffee, and I’ll show you something. We’ll talk after.”

I study the closed bedroom door he leaves through, frowning as I again try to work out what this terrible thing is. But I can't think of anything worse than him being a killer or abusive, so I tell myself he's probably being dramatic, gulp my coffee, and head for the bathroom.

After I've showered and dressed in the sweats he set out for me, Dean insists on helping me into my sneakers, taking a second to examine my ankle first.

"The swelling is almost gone," he says.

But he clearly doesn't think I'm capable of walking because no sooner has he helped me into his coat than he's swinging me into his arms.

"I can walk," I argue half-heartedly. Because really, there are worse places to be than snuggled in the arms of a man who knows how to kiss as well as take care of you.

"I'm not saying you can't. Just that I like having you in my arms." He glances down at me now, a smile lurking in his gaze. "I think I mentioned that before."

I loop my arms around his shoulders as he pulls the front door closed behind us and heads into the forest. "Was this version of you always there?"

He angles his head, his brow furrowed in confusion. "This version?"

"Like Superman, before you had the whole Clark Kent persona going on."

He snorts. "Do I want to know where this is going?"

I smile. "I'm not calling you boring or uninteresting. Just..."

"Just?" He slows his long strides to peer into my face.

"I wasn't expecting a guy who would do my laundry for me, have coffee waiting for me when I woke up, and likes to carry me around even when I can walk."

It's romantic. And I've had precious few romantic moments before now.

My smile fades.

His finger brushes my jaw, and I blink myself back into the present.

“You were smiling before. Now you’re not. What’s wrong?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“Madi...” He doesn’t look like he believes me, and he’s right not to.

There *is* something wrong. I keep forgetting a big part of my coming to Colorado was the temporary nature of my stay. I keep finding reasons to stay even longer when it would kill my business if I did.

Most of all, I’m starting to think it was a good thing Dean stopped things from going further last night. We’d have maybe a couple of days before I left and went back to Nebraska. And then what?

“What did you want to show me?” I ask instead.

After giving me a doubtful stare, a sign he doesn’t believe me, he resumes walking. “Something that might make you nervous, initially.”

“Nervous?” I glance into the bright, early morning forest. “Why would I be nervous?”

“You have no reason to be. I won’t let anything happen to you,” he assures me.

“You say that like there is a potential for something to happen. It’s not a bear, is it?”

Is it too late to make up an excuse so we can return to the cabin?

I note Dean’s ground-eating strides as we leave the cabin far behind us and release a quiet sigh. Probably.

“Hmm?”

My nerves increase. “You didn’t answer me. Please tell me it’s not a bear.”

He glances at me as he slows. “It’s not a bear. You have to be quiet now, okay?”

I’m not hearing any sound up ahead, so when he suddenly stops, my already taut nerves make me go on high alert. “What —?”

Dean places a finger over my mouth, a sign to stay quiet.

It also reminds me of his kisses on the kitchen counter last night. He must remember it, too, because his eyes darken, and he tugs his finger away and replaces it with his lips.

I’m starting to think this outing was an elaborate attempt for us to make out in the forest when he breaks his soft kiss and angles his head to whisper in my ear.

“It’s a wolf.”

If he wasn’t carrying me, I’d be sprinting back the way we came, like someone set my ass on fire. I’d probably fall into another puddle or break my ankle. But you know what? I wouldn’t care because I would not be near a wolf.

Dean must recognize how close I am to erupting into full-blown terror because he tightens his arms around me. “You’re safe,” he whispers into my ear.

Is he insane?

His lips twitch in a smile as he walks two soundless steps forward and stops. We’re still standing behind a towering tree when he drops into a crouch and settles me on his lap. I’m not sure why until I get a glimpse of what’s on the other side of the tree.

He lied. It isn’t a wolf. It’s two.

I bury my nails in his thick sweater, prepare to pry his arms from around my back so I can do the smart thing and run, when he kisses me softly on the lips.

It’s so sweet that I instantly stop moving as he skims his palm up my back, cradles my head, and breaks away to whisper, “You’re safe.”

I'm still gripping the front of his thick sweater as I search his face for any hint of deception. He looks calm. Not like he's making all of this up. When I consider that he's probably lived in this area all his life, maybe he knows more about bears and wolves, I nod, releasing my death grip on his jumper.

Smiling slightly, he angles my head back to the two wolves on the other side of the tree. I stare, holding my breath at the sight of two wolves play-fighting in a clearing beside a small pool of water.

Dean presses his mouth to my ear, making me shiver with awareness as he breathes, "We're upwind, so they won't smell us. A mated pair."

I watch, entranced by the two wolves wrestling. If Dean hadn't told me otherwise, I would have believed they were enemies and not mates. The longer I watch them, the slower my heart pounds, and the more I see.

The larger wolf is heavy with black fur, muscles, and a piercing blue stare. The female is leaner, light brown, with a playful look in her brown eyes.

"Wolves mate once. For life," Dean whispers right into my ear. "This pair is playing, but the male never lets his guard down. He will always put her protection above everything else."

We're watching wolves playing with each other. And yet, this intimate moment is making me more aware of the fact I'm sitting in Dean's lap, his mouth at my ear, his soft words stirring the fine hair on the back of my neck. It's making me... aroused.

Dean's arm tightens around my waist. "Do you see?" he whispers.

See what? All I feel is you.

As if aware of my growing distraction, Dean briefly smiles and kisses me on the throat. "You're not looking."

Cheeks burning, I yank my eyes from him to take in the wolves. They've stopped playing to stretch across the grass as they groom each other with long, rough-looking tongues.

The female wolf's pose is more relaxed, her eyes half-lidded in pleasure as the male wolf laps her shoulder.

Although the male wolf seems focused on grooming the female, he has one ear cocked. Even now, as they relax from their play, he's alert for threats to his mate.

We stay tucked behind the tree for several minutes, our heads resting against each other. Dean's warm hand is strong and secure around my waist. We observe the mated pair groom each other and then stand before they sprint off into the forest.

Long after I've lost sight of them, I turn to Dean. He's watching me. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Wolves are predators. They will hurt you if you threaten them, but they will not lash out for no reason. Never forget that they have wants and needs just like you do."

I recall his words from before. "Like bears protecting their cubs?"

He nods.

I frown. "I don't see how this relates to this thing you didn't want to tell me last night. Unless you keep wolves as pets, and I have to get used to them wandering into your cabin."

When he doesn't immediately respond, I recall my strange dream.

"Dean? You're not going to tell me that you have a pet wolf named Gavin, are you?"

"There's beauty in wild things, Madi. Just because a thing is terrifying doesn't always mean it will hurt you," he says quietly.

"Yes," I concede. "But when the wild thing has teeth, claws, and the ability to maul me, it's hard to focus on the beauty when all you see are the teeth."

He gives me a searching look. "Would you stay?"

My heart lurches in my chest. "What?"

The hand he slides around my nape isn't only hot, it's frankly possessive. "Could you see yourself staying here in Colorado with me?"

My heart lurched before. Now, it races. "That's, uh, kind of a big decision to make. We don't know each other, and you still haven't told me what this thing is about yourself you think will chase me away. Or about why you would show me these wolves?"

He parts his lips.

A low hum makes my ass vibrate, and I jump.

Dean curses. "Sorry, I'm getting a call."

Hold up.

"A call?" My eyes narrow as he moves me, presumably to reach the cell phone that should not be ringing at all. "I thought you said you didn't have any—"

He moves me onto something I wasn't expecting.

That thing is *not* a vibrating cell phone.

Our eyes lock. He freezes, and I stop breathing as a burst of heat sweeps over my cheeks.

"Signal up here," I finish weakly.

The phone keeps vibrating, and he makes no move to answer it. "I wasn't being entirely honest about that." Now, he's the breathless-sounding one.

We stare at each other, both breathing hard as we work out what we're going to do about this situation.

I'd like for him to put me on the ground and then climb on top of me, but that doesn't seem like a good idea. Mostly because of the wolves who might still be in the area and also because of the things he said before.

His hold on me felt possessive, and now I know why. He's asking me to give up my life to move to Colorado. I'm not sure I'm ready to embrace that future or if I ever will. So I move to get up. "You should probably answer that."

His arm tightens around my waist, and a frown creases his brow. “You shouldn’t put pressure on your ankle. I can reach my phone from here.”

I nod, looking away as I think about how to tell Dean my life is in Nebraska and not here in Colorado with him.

He’s watching me as he re-settles me on his bent thigh to answer his cell phone. “Marshall, is it ready?”

Whoever Marshall is, I don’t hear his response. I’m focusing on the stubble forming on Dean’s jaw and wanting to touch it. Or maybe it’s the man I’m having problems keeping my hands to myself.

Dean’s call is over in seconds. Approximately two exchanges later, Dean is tucking his cell phone back into his pocket and getting to his feet with me still in his arms. “This talk is going to have to wait. I have something for you. It’s going to mean heading into town.”

Frowning, I glance over my shoulder because he’s leading the way to the cabin. “But you said we were stuck on the mountain. To get off it means going in the other...” My voice trails off when I take in his sheepish expression.

“You weren’t being entirely honest about that either, were you?” I bite out.

He stops and meets my eye. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look as serious as he does now. “My family means everything to me.”

I blink. “I don’t see what that has to do with—”

“Jenna isn’t just a friend. She’s family.”

“Wait? She is?” My eyes widen.

He nods. “And she’s pregnant.”

I read between the lines. It doesn’t take me long, and it’s like a punch to the gut when I realize what he isn’t saying.

“You thought I was trouble, and you were trying to protect her from me.”

When he doesn't immediately respond, I try to shrug off my hurt. And my guilt. "I'm not here to hurt Jenna. I just..."

But you thought you saw Hunter in town.

The thought silences me because maybe Dean was right to keep me from Jenna.

"You looked like you needed help," Dean says. "I... My first response to seeing you wasn't a good one."

I lift my eyes to his. "And that response was?"

He shakes his head. "Is not one I want to admit. But I wanted to make amends. I wanted to help you if I could."

"And now?" I whisper.

He claims my lips in a brief kiss. "Now, I want to keep you to myself. Come on, let me show you your surprise."

"What if I'd have made it to town?" I ask him as he resumes striding back to the cabin.

"You wouldn't have," he says so confidently that I narrow my eyes.

"How can you be sure?"

"You were going in the wrong direction."

"Which you know how, exactly?"

And why do I have a feeling I already know the answer to that question?

"I followed." He glances down at me, amusement flaring in his eyes. "I had to make sure the beautiful woman who makes a man forget the deadline he's lived and breathed for weeks doesn't get eaten by a bear."

It takes me a second to work through what I'm feeling, and even then, I'm still not sure what my response—or my reaction—to this revelation is. "I don't know whether to kiss you or punch you."

"I half-expected the punch. But the kiss?" His brow furrows in a frown.

I sigh. “Kiss you for wanting to make sure I was okay. Punch you for letting me wander in the wrong direction and into a puddle.”

“To be fair,” he concedes. “I saw the puddle, and it didn’t look that big until you disappeared into it.”

He surprises a laugh out of me. I lift my right hand and give him a soft tap on his chest.

“Hey!”

You’d think I’d delivered a knock-down, boxing match-ending uppercut at Madison Square Gardens from his wide-eyed stare.

I grip the front of his shirt, pulling his head down to kiss him lightly on the lips. “Decided you needed a little of both. Let’s go get my surprise. It had better be a doozy after what you put me through.”



My surprise is indeed a doozy.

“So, what do you think? More importantly, how did I do? Finding the right color match wasn’t easy, but—”

I hobble past the long-haired blond man in the navy grease-stained mechanic overalls toward old Stella, my big pink truck. There’s not a dent on her. Immaculately repaired when I thought I’d have to write the thing off, smashing her into a tree. “She’s perfect.”

Placing my hand on the front, I struggle to find any sign of imperfection. “How bad was she?”

“She wasn’t the worst I’ve ever seen,” Marshall says slowly.

I turn to smile at him. “That bad, huh?”

“It’s what I do,” Marshall says, shrugging.

My gaze returns to Stella. There’s no expressing how good it feels knowing she’s okay because, without Stella, I don’t have a business. Well, I do, but it would have meant either hiring a delivery driver or buying a new truck since I make such regular deliveries. When I wasn’t making deliveries, I was out buying supplies or hunting for new business opportunities.

If Marshall had to repaint the front, the damage must have been extensive.

And expensive.

There's no way I can afford this. Even if I maxed out all three of my credit cards, I probably still couldn't afford this. But I head for the driver's side door, hoping my purse is somewhere inside and that the bill won't send me to my knees.

"How much do I owe you?"

"It's taken care of," Marshall says.

I turn to him, frowning. "But the parts alone would have cost hundreds, and the labor... no. Seriously, how much do I owe you?"

He shakes his head, wiping his hands on a small black towel. "Like I said, it's all good."

My eyes slide to Dean, standing beside Marshall in the mechanic shop in the center of Main Street.

Marshall is refusing money, and Dean was the one talking up a surprise before he drove us down into town. I think I know who is responsible for the fact I'm not currently holding an expensive repair bill.

"I can't let you pay for this, Dean. What do I owe you?"

He crosses over to me, cradles a palm under my hair, and leans down to kiss me on the lips. "That."

While I'd like to extend the kiss, I press my hands flat on his chest and nudge him back. "Money. I meant *money*."

"There isn't a price, Madi."

My frown deepens. "Even if Marshall were to waive the cost of the labor, he'd have had to replace parts. Those cost money. I refuse to believe it's free, and it shouldn't be. I pay my way."

Always.

"No charge." Dean backs up and shoots Marshall a rapid glance. "I need to talk to Marshall about something. I won't be long."

"To pay for all these expensive repairs?" I peek over at Marshall to gauge his response.

Dean shakes his head. “Just need some advice. Completely unrelated to trucks.”

Behind him, Marshall lifts a blond brow, doing nothing to hide his curiosity.

So, whatever this conversation is about, it’s as much of a surprise to Marshall as it is to me. “About?”

“Rule-breaking,” he says simply.

Marshall’s eyebrow rises even higher.

I blink. “Rule-breaking?”

“Give me a minute, Marshall,” Dean says.

Marshall nods toward the back of the shop. “Come find me when you’re ready for this advice.”

Dean takes my hand and tugs. He doesn’t put much effort into it, but I’m learning that just because he likes to station himself in front of his laptop doesn’t make him a weakling.

I’m flat against his chest a split second later. “You don’t strike me as the rule-breaking type.”

“I’m not.” Wrapping his arm around my waist, he takes a step back so I have my spine flush with my truck. “It’s why I need advice. So I live through the consequences.”

“And you didn’t think to ask the other guy, Dayne, for advice?”

Dean winces. “It’s one of his rules I’d be breaking. I know I have a lot of explaining to do. The cell phone, wanting to keep you with me in my cabin, among other things, and I will explain,” he says.

A sick feeling forms in my belly. “You’re being dramatic about the living through the consequences part, right?”

He’s silent for a second too long. “Mostly.”

It suddenly feels like someone clenched a fist around my heart. Something about him being hurt, or worse, is downright painful to consider. “Dean?”

He squeezes my hip, flashing me a reassuring smile. “It’s nothing to worry about. Don’t go anywhere, okay? We’ll grab some food from the grocery store and head back up to the cabin.”

I search his face to discover what’s coming next, but his expression is impossible to read. “To talk?”

He releases me. “To talk.”

“Okay.” I smile, still nervous but trying not to show it.

He heads to the back, Marshall holding a door open to let him into what must be an office. Dean says there’s nothing to worry about, but from the heavy frown creasing Marshall’s brow, I’m not so sure I believe him.

Whatever rule he’s thinking about breaking sounds like a big one.

As they disappear into the back room, the door clicking shut behind them, I chew the inside of my cheek as I turn around to take in my truck.

Marshall did an incredible job. Not only repairing the damage and painting it. If my eyes aren’t deceiving me, he also gave old Stella a little TLC in the cleaning department as well. And after the long drive from Nebraska, boy, was she in need of a little tender loving care.

I head for the driver’s seat, figuring there’s no time like the present to check my messages.

My cell phone is right where I left it, switched off and tucked in the glove compartment. Before I press the power on button, I hold my breath, preparing myself for the countless missed calls and text messages probably clogging up my phone.

“Well, here goes,” I mutter.

My phone vibrates endlessly as message after message flashes across the screen, almost too fast to read.

Fortunately, only a handful of the messages are from my customers wanting to know when I’ll be back in the city so they can place a new order with me.

I still have customers, which is a relief, even if I'm not as excited about returning to normality as I thought I would be.

The messages from Hunter number dozens, each one growing more and more enraged. I delete those, barely looking at them. I have voicemails, too, but I decide to leave those alone for now. Mostly because Dean has proven he has good hearing, and I'd rather he didn't overhear Hunter screaming and cursing me over the phone.

For the first time in months, not only do I feel good about myself, but I don't have Hunter's criticisms flooding my mind. Because of Dean.

When I'm somewhere more private, I'll go through the voicemails and delete those as well. Hopefully, in a way that means I won't have to listen to his insults.

I'm getting ready to switch my cell phone off when it vibrates in my hand. Panicked that it's Hunter, I fumble to end the call when I spot the number.

It's not Hunter.

It could be one of the cafés or restaurants I supply, but I've been working with most of my customers for years now, so I should recognize the Nebraska number. After hesitating for a moment, I answer it, telling myself that if it's Hunter calling from a different number, I can just hang up before he gets too nasty.

"Hello?" I ask timidly.

"Madi Sawyer?" an older, gruff man with an Italian accent asks.

"That's me."

"You're a hard woman to pin down," he says. "I've been calling for the last couple of days."

And then I place his voice. I picture the gruff, olive-skinned restaurant owner with a thick mustache, a trim figure, and intelligent brown eyes. "Mr. Dimario?"

He's the owner and manager of a restaurant I used to supply. They stopped ordering from me when Mr. Dimario

decided it would be cheaper to hire someone to do the restaurant's baking onsite.

I wasn't offended he hired someone else. I wasn't cheap, and I could understand a business decision that made perfect sense. Especially since he offered me the job, but I refused, telling him I wasn't interested. But if he was looking for a new chef...

He smiled and was polite about it, but made it more than clear I was wasting my time. In his eyes, a baker and a chef were two different things. It's an opinion I've run up against more times than I could count.

For him to be calling can only be because of one thing. His new baker must not have worked out. "I'm not in the city at the moment. If you needed to order—"

"Oh, no, we have a baker, and he's working out great for us," Mr. Dimario interrupts. "Should have hired one years ago."

Dimario's initially started as a purely Italian restaurant. When he took over from his father, he gradually started adding different cuisines. Now, it's the sort of cozy, flavorful, and rustic family restaurant I'd kill to work in. If they'd have me. But they didn't want me. Just my cakes.

Frowning, I sit back in my seat. "Then I don't understand what you need from me."

"You said you wanted to cook, didn't you?"

I stop breathing. Literally. For about three seconds. And then I drag air in because he's waiting for a response. "Um, you mean in the kitchen? Just so we're clear about this. Actual food and not baking cakes?"

He chuckles. "That's right. You'd be doing me a favor."

I swallow hard, trying to stay in control. "And what favor would that be?"

This is a trick. Has to be.

"Well..." Leather squeaks. He must be reclining in his seat. "We lost a chef a few weeks back. The ones we've found

have been lacking a fundamental thing.”

“Experience?” I ask.

“Passion.”

I blink. Okay, I wasn’t expecting that.

“I remembered you wanted to work in my kitchen, and you have passion and drive. Is that something you still want?”

Holy crap, this is not a trick. This is actually happening.

To me.

Right fucking *now*.

My sweating palms tighten around my cell phone. It’s a miracle I don’t drop it. Feeling antsy, I slide out of my truck because I need to walk this nervous energy off. “Yes. Yes, it is something I want.”

“Then I want to see what you can do.”

I gulp as I pace from my truck to the open front door and back again, unable to keep still. “Like I said, I’m not in Nebraska right now. I’m doing some private chef work out of state.”

Mr. Dimario whistles between his teeth. “Private chef work?”

“It’s just a short-term contract,” I add hastily. “Nothing fancy, just—”

“Experience is experience.” Mr. Dimario falls silent, and I pick up a faint tapping on the other line. From a pen, maybe? “Well, when do you get back into town?”

“Um, a few days,” I say vaguely. Before he can take my vagueness as disinterest, I keep talking. “But I can give you a call when I’m back unless this position is urgent?”

I hold my breath, hoping it’s not urgent because I need to talk to Dean first. He deserves an explanation, especially since he gave me a place to stay.

“Nothing like that.” Mr. Dimario speaks slowly. “This might work out even better. Prove yourself capable in the

kitchen, and we'll see about progressing you up from sous chef."

"But you haven't even seen me cook yet," I argue and then tell myself to shut up before he can change his mind and take back his job offer.

"Experience counts for a lot, and so does passion. You've carved out a successful business here, Miss Sawyer. It shows you're not afraid of hard work. Repeat customers prove you know how to bake, and passion is something not everyone who works in a kitchen possesses. I'm excited to see what you can do in mine. Call me when you get back to the city."

He hangs up.

I stand at the front door of Marshall's mechanic's shop, cell phone in hand, trying to re-learn how to breathe. Because this is it. This is really it.

It's happening.

My dream of working in a professional kitchen is being realized right this second.

Ohmygosh.

"Mr. Dimario wants me to work in his kitchen," I breathe. "A dream come true."

"That's all it will be," says a male voice from my right. *Close.*

A familiar male voice. One I came to Colorado to avoid.

I spin around to face it and glimpse Hunter's sneering face before pain explodes in my temple, and all the lights go out.



“*Y*ou’ve made me go to a lot of trouble for you.” Harsh words rumble through my foggy mind as my head pounds with each heartbeat.

“Are you listening to me?” Hunter demands.

I pretend I’m still unconscious as I scramble to work out how bad my current situation is. Only to yelp when a fist tightens in my hair and yanks my head back, peeling my face off his car window.

My eyes fly open to clash with Hunter’s deep blue stare. “I asked you a question.”

Wincing, I try to pry his fist away and ease the pressure pulling at my scalp. “Yes.”

He shoves me away. Just in time, I stop myself from smashing my head against the passenger window. Now that my eyes are open and I see where I am, I fully comprehend how bad my current situation is.

About as bad as it could be.

Hunter followed me to Colorado, and he must have been waiting for an opportunity to grab me. It didn’t seem to matter to him that it was the middle of the day on Main Street. That didn’t stop him from taking me from outside Marshall’s mechanic’s shop.

In a town as small as Hardin, no one will know where I am, and no one will care.

Dean might care.

But what can he do about it when he doesn't know where you are?

I dart a rapid glance at the door handle, my one way out if I time it right.

Hunter is driving fast, away from town. From the shadows darkening the sky, we could have been on the road for an hour or more.

Maybe throwing myself out of a moving—a *speeding* car isn't smart, but it's all I can do. If I wait much longer, there's no way I'll be able to get back to town—and my truck—by foot. Especially with a busted ankle.

As subtly as I can, I reach for the handle.

The click of a bullet sliding into a chamber floods my body with adrenaline. And terror.

“Try it, Madi, and you'll force me to use this on you.” Hunter's voice punctures my terror enough that I can think.

He brought a gun.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, not wanting to look as I speak through a dry mouth. “You didn't have a gun before.”

“My girlfriend didn't try to get me tossed in jail before.”

I'm not his girlfriend anymore. I haven't been in two months, but he doesn't want to accept it. He didn't want to accept it when I called the cops and had them stand by to ensure he packed up his bags and left our apartment. He still doesn't want to accept it after countless calls to the cops, culminating in a restraining order.

If I hadn't been wearing so many bruises the day the cops agreed to stay while Hunter packed, maybe they wouldn't have done it. But the cops stayed by my side until Hunter had taken all his belongings and left.

I packed up immediately, moving into a new apartment across town. For three days, I thought Hunter had gotten the

message, and I was free to start my life all over again. Then he turned up at my new apartment in the middle of the night, screaming at me, banging on the door, and waking up my neighbors.

Now he has a gun.

I turn my head and take in the small black handgun he's clasping with his left hand.

And I swallow. *Hard*. "Where did you get that?"

I don't ask him what he intends to do with it. Because I know. He's already doing it.

Intimidating the hell out of me.

"The where isn't important, Madi. The why is." He rests the gun on his thigh as he continues speeding through Colorado's quiet mountain roads. "You threw me out. You tried to get me arrested, and you left town. You've been making out that I'm the bad guy in all this."

How can he think he's the good guy? What world is he living in because it isn't anywhere on Earth?

I don't respond.

"Well?" He glares at me.

I inch away from him, pressing my side against the passenger door. "What?"

"My apology," he bites out. "For all those accusations you've been flinging around."

"You hit me," I whisper.

His hand tightens around the gun, and I forget to breathe.

"Some guys have girls who cook for them, who clean for them, and treat them right." He throws another glare at me. "I get a girl who treats business as if it's all she gives a fuck about."

"You knew my business was important to me when we first met. It's how I make my money. What was I supposed to

do? Close it down the second we started dating?” My voice rises with my anger.

“You were supposed to treat me right, Madi. This is on you.” He waves the gun toward me, and I swallow a scream as I lean as far away as I can in this enclosed space. “This is all on you.”

There’s a new note in his voice, one I’ve never heard before.

Finality.

It makes my heart spike as a cold sweat forms on the back of my neck.

I take in the gun resting on his thigh, and I don’t see myself living through this. I don’t know what Hunter expected from me, but no matter what I did to please him, it never would have been enough.

Even if I were to beg and promise to be the girlfriend he wants me to be, it wouldn’t be enough. There are some people you can never please because they don’t want to be pleased. They want all your attention, and even then, it’s not enough.

They don’t want you to breathe.

The only person who might have protected me can’t. Dean was in the back of the mechanic’s shop with Marshall. He won’t know what happened to me, just that I promised him I wouldn’t go anywhere, and I lied.

My truck is still there. Maybe my cell phone as well, if Hunter made me drop it when he grabbed me. Dean will know something is wrong.

But he won’t know where you are, Madi, and he won’t be able to save you from this. No one can.

“What are you going to do to me?” I ask.

He shoots me a rapid glance, and a slow smile stretches across his full lips. Once, I thought he was handsome, and I loved it when he smiled at me. Not anymore. “Not sure yet. Depends how well you make it up to me for forcing me to come all this way to get you.”

I don't tell him I didn't make him do anything. It was his choice to come after me.

He was supposed to get the message, go away, and forget all about me.

He wasn't supposed to follow me to Colorado.

"How did you know I was here?" I ask instead.

My eyes keep wanting to linger on the gun, and it's almost impossible to keep my attention on his face and not it. I'd rather he had both hands on the steering wheel, especially on this long, winding mountain road, but I'm not about to say anything. I'm not eager for him to shoot me or pistol-whip me for saying the wrong thing.

"You have friendly neighbors in your new apartment," he smiles. "And thin walls."

"I didn't..." *Tell any of my neighbors where I was going.*

But then I remember. I called my bank as I was packing. I didn't want them to assume someone had stolen my card when I used it on my long drive to Colorado.

So, while I believe Hunter about the thin walls, I don't believe him about the friendly neighbors.

"I don't believe you," I say. After the way he'd scream at me to let him into my apartment, none of my neighbors would have opened their doors to him.

He barks out a laugh, and I jump. "Smart. I saw you hurrying out to your truck, and I asked myself where my girlfriend could be going so early."

Shit. Why hadn't I paid more attention to the cars around my apartment before I left Nebraska?

"I thought she couldn't be making deliveries so early, so I followed."

I take in the lush forests around us. Hunter has untold places where he can dump my body. No one will miss me. Worst of all, he'll get away with it and torment some other girl the way he did me.

Unless you get the gun first.

The sly thought weaves through my mind.

I don't know what gives me away. My sudden tension, alertness, or if Hunter is just plain psychic, but his hand tightens around the gun.

“Try it, Madi, and you *will* pay for it,” he warns, his eyes glinting with malice.

I lean against the passenger door, as far away as I can get from him, and I think about how I'm going to escape Hunter.

There's only one way I see myself living through this.

Dean.

If Dean realized something was wrong and came after us.

Then I take in the grip Hunter has on the gun, and I hope Dean forgets all about me because he won't stand a chance against Hunter.

No one would.



We've been on the road for an hour when I realize I've got to try something. We're getting farther and farther away from Hardin, and that's dangerous for me. If we're approaching another town, I've seen no sign of it so far.

"Can we stop?" I ask, pressing my hand against my belly. "I need to use a bathroom."

Hunter, who hasn't set aside his gun even once, barely glances at me. "We stop when I say we stop. That isn't now."

"Please, I just want—"

"To escape." He glares at me. "Don't think I haven't noticed the way you keep looking at my gun. You're staying put."

Shit.

It's a battle not to deflate and give up all hope. But I can't.

These roads are quiet. I had one brief moment of hope that was soon extinguished several minutes before when a car I'd heard speeding behind us overtook us and kept going.

It had unnerved Hunter until the driver, who I couldn't see through the car's tinted windows, repeatedly blared their alarm. Eventually, Hunter slowed his car to let the driver pass us on the narrow mountain road. Hunter had only fully relaxed when the driver floored it past us and kept going.

Clearly, someone was in a rush to get somewhere. It hadn't been Dean coming to save me, as I'd initially thought.

“You haven’t said where you’re taking me,” I remind him. “Is there a cabin that—”

“Stop. Talking,” he bites out.

I stop talking.

Hunter might not be ready to kill me yet, but he could do some serious damage with that gun. I can’t let him knock me out and potentially sleep through any opportunity to escape.

I go back to staring out through the windshield, conscious that time is running out. Is he going to drive us back to Nebraska now? Did he rent a cabin nearby? Or is he just looking for the perfect place to kill me and bury my body?

I wasted all that time terrified Dean was the one who would hurt me. My priorities were completely wrong. It’s Hunter I should have been concerned with. And I should have trusted my instincts. I thought I’d seen him in Hardin days before. Instead of leaving Hardin immediately, I’d convinced myself I was wrong.

My fear is building by the second as I desperately think of what I can say or do that’ll mean I live through this.

I’m so distracted that I almost miss it.

A brown wolf with golden eyes, on Hunter’s side of the forest.

As soon as I make eye contact with it, the wolf bolts out of the trees, spinning to face Hunter’s car. Dean said wolves don’t attack for no reason, but this one seems to have a real problem with Hunter or his car.

A scream lodges in my throat when it puts its head down and charges.

Hunter, probably as shocked as I am, slams on the brakes. Tires squeal. Something thumps, and glass cracks.

The car screeches to a sudden stop, flinging me against my seatbelt. I wince at the sudden pressure on my shoulders and between my breasts.

We were both wearing seatbelts, so neither of us goes through the windshield. I'm groaning in pain from the hard pressure of the seatbelt strap yanking me back into my seat when I realize what the thump was. And the crack.

I lift my head and take in the fine crack in the windshield, and then I notice Hunter has both hands on the steering wheel, which means he isn't holding his gun anymore.

This is it. My chance to get away. It's one I can't waste because I won't get another.

I fumble with my seatbelt, tearing it off as I shove the passenger door open and fling myself onto the concrete. I crack my elbows on the hard surface, scraping skin, but I barely feel the burn.

Hunter is yelling at me as he yanks on the seatbelt with his left hand and stretches his right toward something on the floor between his legs. I don't wait for him to reach it.

I scramble to my feet, and I take off into the forest. My left ankle throbs with each step I take.

Please hold out until I find somewhere to hide from Hunter.

Hunter's furious yell follows. Moments later, I hear the heavy pounding footsteps of him in fast pursuit. Probably with the gun he will use on me.



Sharp pain slices up my left leg with every hobbling step. Ignoring it isn't easy, but I'm out in the Colorado mountains, no one knows where I am, and I have an abusive ex with a gun and a nasty temper in fast pursuit.

I don't even think of slowing.

The farther I descend into the forest, the darker the interior until I'm in real danger of tripping over a root.

Hearing isn't a problem, though I wish it were. Hunter is crashing through the trees behind me, his threats growing nastier as he promises to make me pay for all this abuse I'm putting him through.

I'm putting him through abuse?

Sweat drips down the side of my face. Gasping for breath, I hobble as I search for an elusive hiding place to stuff myself. All the while, I silently plead with my throbbing ankle to carry me just a little farther.

And then the inevitable happens.

My left leg gives way beneath me.

I fly forward, palms outstretched.

Smack.

I crash into the ground, crying out at the jarring impact that makes my teeth snap together as my hair flies into my face.

Ignoring my screaming palms from my collision with the ground, I'm shoving myself to my feet when I see it.

Gold eyes.

A brown wolf with gold eyes is staring at me. Its expression is curious. Not as if it were planning which of my organs it's going to savor first, even though that's what it must be doing. Wolves are predators, and a human woman—namely me—running through a forest is prey. Right?

I forget how to breathe. I think I even forget my name.

Close behind me, Hunter curses. The wolf blinks, and then it's moving. Its eyes narrow as it propels itself toward me, hind legs driving it up into the air...

Toward me.

A scream bursts from between my lips as I throw myself to the ground, fling my hands over my face, and brace myself for a wolf to tear into me.

I wait.

And wait.

Crack.

I wince.

What was that? My leg? My arm? Which part of me is the wolf—

A scream more blood-curdling than the one that passed my lips makes me curl into a ball.

It takes another second before panic releases its hold on me enough so I can breathe. Because that scream? And that bone cracking? Neither of those sounds came from me.

The gurgling moan of an animal in pain or dying makes me peel my hands from my face, and I forget I should be huddling into the tiniest ball in the world.

The wolf leaped over me to get to Hunter.

I know because the wolf is currently standing on top of Hunter's chest, and Hunter isn't moving.

The forest is dark, but it's not so dark that I miss the deep red blood seeping into the earth.

The wolf leaped over me to kill Hunter, I repeat in my mind.

Why would it do that?

As if the wolf feels my attention, it turns its head, piercing me to the spot with its liquid gold stare.

My eyes snag on the gun on the ground. It's closer to me than the wolf, within a long stretch-and-grab distance. Hunter must have dropped it when the wolf attacked.

I make no move to dive for the gun, even though it's the only thing that can save me now. Maybe not even then.

I wish Dean was here to tell me what to do. He seemed to know something about wolves. What do I do? Run? Dive for the weapon? Scream and hope it flees from the sound?

The wolf swishes its tail.

You'd think it had shown me its teeth with the way my heart constricts.

I surge to my feet.

My abused ankle has had enough.

It immediately crumples beneath me, and I cry out as my ass hits the ground, tears welling in my eyes. Through my watery sight, I watch the wolf stalk toward me.

Not knowing what else to do, I form myself into a ball, cover my face, and wait for the inevitable.

Something hot, wet, and rough touches my ankle. I cut off a scream as every muscle in my body tightens in terror.

That same rough, wet... thing touches my abused ankle again. More hesitantly this time.

The wolf chuffs, and I feel its nose nudge my leg.

What the hell is it doing?

Peeling one finger from my eyes, I risk stealing a peek at the wolf. It's sitting on its haunches, peering down at me.

Why is it doing that? What does it want?

Please don't let it be thinking of eating my kidney.

I'm trying to read its expression when a naked blond man steps out of the forest.

I don't mean to look where I look, but it just happens. My cheeks flush, and I yank my gaze upward because that blond man is familiar.

Marshall. The mechanic from the shop.

"Hey, Madi. Are you okay?" he asks as if he's out on a casual walk and doesn't seem to even notice he's naked.

I keep my eyes glued to the sky. It might be the only way I live through the next five minutes. I'm certainly not going to be running to freedom with the way my ankle is throbbing. "There's a wolf. It's next to me."

Honestly, I shouldn't need to be telling him this, but maybe he's short-sighted to have missed the wolf close enough to gnaw on my leg.

He huffs in amusement. The man, not the wolf. Thank God.

"So, there is. He's no threat to you."

"It has sharp teeth," I say, still staring at the sky. "Anything with sharp teeth will always be a threat to me."

"Well, this one isn't." Marshall's footsteps approach before they stop a foot away. "Are you sure about this, Dean? Dayne isn't going to be happy about it, and I should know. I've pissed him off more times than you have."

Dean? Dayne?

What the hell is going on here?

The wolf chuffs.

Why does it sound like Marshall is talking to the wolf? He certainly isn't talking to me.

The wolf hasn't attacked Marshall—or me—at least not yet. I take it as a sign we both might live through the strangest

wolf attack ever.

I dart a rapid glance to my left, where Marshall is sitting on his heels near my legs. He's still naked, which poses yet another question. Why is he walking in the forest buck naked when I left him fully dressed in town hours before?

And why is he talking to the wolf?

Marshall turns to me, and his expression is serious. "You're going to see something no one else should, but Dean trusts you. I hope his trust isn't misplaced because it isn't only his secret he's sharing with you."

I'm puzzling over his confusing words when the wolf chuffs, drawing my gaze.

And I watch, eyes growing wider, my breath coming louder as, in slow degrees, the wolf loses its fur, then its ears, its tail, and finally those terrifying claws.

Minutes later, a naked man is crouched in front of me.

A *familiar* naked man.

Dean.

He offers me a small smile. "I told you that you had nothing to fear from wolves."

My brain does the only thing it can when faced with the impossible.

It shuts down.



A cool cloth on my brow makes me sigh.

“Madi?” Dean murmurs.

Suddenly, I remember.

Everything.

My eyes fly open.

I’m no longer in the forest with two naked men crouched in front of me and a dead, abusive ex-boyfriend lying feet away.

I’m back in Dean’s cabin, in the bed I woke up in days before. Because of where I am, the strange dreams that I refused to believe made any sense shove themselves to the forefront of my mind, and this time, they make sense.

Because they were not weird dreams.

I saw Dean turn into a wolf—a werewolf—and I ran away. Crashed my truck.

That’s what happened.

He’s studying me warily as if he senses how close I am to losing my mind. He’s pulled on a pair of black jeans and a green t-shirt. Which is a relief. If he’d been naked, I’d have lost my marbles the second I peeled my eyes open.

“Madi?”

I slowly sit up, pushing away from him until I have my back to the headboard. At no point do I blink. “You’re a

werewolf.”

“Shifter,” he quietly corrects me. “But that’s not all I am.”

“It’s a pretty big part,” I retort.

After a beat, he nods. “It is.”

“You laughed with me when I said werewolves didn’t exist,” I say.

Now I know he wasn’t laughing *with* me as much as he was laughing *at* me.

His expression is blank. “I did. But I—”

“*No!*” I shove myself away from the hand he stretches toward my leg.

He freezes for a second and then rises from the side of the bed, backing away from me. Three steps away, he stops. It’s still far closer to me than I would ever want him to be. “I didn’t want to scare you.”

“You just wanted to know what I saw so you could... what? Silence me if I threatened to talk to someone?”

That must have been what all this was about. The watchfulness when I woke. The relief when I told him I remembered nothing from my crash.

And the kiss... was that all pretend as well? Just a need to have a little fun with the clueless baker before he sent her on her way back to Nebraska?

Why does that hurt so fucking much?

“I wouldn’t have hurt you, Madi,” he assures me, his eyes so serious that I want to believe him.

If he hadn’t been lying to me all this time, maybe I would. Now I know better than to trust a word he says.

“You were going to kill me,” I whisper.

It’s dangerous to even say it because, with the way my ankle is throbbing, confronting him like this can’t be a good idea. But the thought that he’s been lying about everything,

that his kisses meant nothing, that *I* meant nothing means I can't stop myself. I have to say something.

I *trusted* him.

With my past, my body, my... *everything*. I even told him about Hunter, and I've never opened up like that before. I trusted he was one of the good guys, and he's not. How could I have been so wrong about him?

And the worst thing is, even now, even knowing he lied, that he is probably *still* lying to me, I want to believe there's an innocent explanation for all this. That I can trust him after all.

How much of an idiot could I possibly be?

So I sit taller in bed, wrapping my arms around myself as I steadily meet his gaze. "I heard you say you were going to kill me. Was that real?"

When he doesn't immediately respond, the back of my eyelids burn. It's a strange reaction when I should be screaming and flinging myself out of the nearest window.

"I panicked," he says quietly.

But he doesn't deny it.

"I saw something I shouldn't have, and you were going to kill me. Weren't you?"

He swallows hard. "It's not only my secret to keep. When you saw what you saw, I took you to my pack because I had no idea what to do. I didn't want to hurt you. I just didn't know what to do."

I recall Dayne and Talis's watchfulness.

"Your friends were here to make sure, right? If I saw something, you were going to kill me," I say.

"Madi..."

I slash my hand in the air. He immediately falls silent. "No need to explain. I get it. Your job was to keep me here until you knew—for sure—whether I'd seen anything. But then, what, you decided to take a break from your work deadline

and have a little fun with the clueless baker?” My voice is hard enough to cut through a diamond, and my laugh is brittle.

He takes a step toward me. “It wasn’t like that. I—”

I scramble to the edge of the bed, stumble, and nearly fall when my ankle doesn’t want to support me. So I lean against the wall beside the bed to keep myself upright. “I’m leaving. Now.”

And then I wait for him to kill me because how could he let me leave now I know his secret?

He studies me, breathing hard as he squeezes his hands into fists. If his eyes weren’t so bleak and his shoulders so slumped, I’d think he was getting ready to attack me. “I... like you, Madi. More than like you.”

“No, you don’t.” I lift my chin as I give him another brittle smile. My heart hurts, and I want to crawl under the nearest blanket and sob for hours. First, I have to get out of Colorado and go home to Nebraska. Then I can cry for a whole day if I want to. And I want to. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone what I saw, not that anyone would even believe me. No need to continue with your games.”

A long moment passes in silence, and then he nods. “I’ll drive you back to town and your truck.”

He’s letting me go. I breathe a quiet sigh of relief, but I don’t venture any closer to him in case this is a trick to get me to lower my guard. “I’d appreciate it.”

He waits, probably for me to move. When I don’t, he turns to the open doorway. “I’ll go first.”

It’s awkward between us in a way it hasn’t been since I first woke up to the sound of furious keyboard-tapping in the next room.

I was thinking of staying. Before Mr. Dimario’s phone call, I was actually thinking of staying because he made me feel things no one else ever had before. I’m not sure what those feelings are he stirred to life, but I’m glad I don’t know.

Maybe it’s better that I don’t know.

Whatever it is, it's all gone now. Forever. All that's left is this strange tension, awkwardness, and the need to keep as far away from him as possible.

My eyes never leave his back as I hobble out of the bedroom, then across the cabin to the front door.

He bends to scoop up my sneakers from beside the door. "Do you want me to—"

"No," I interrupt sharply. "Leave them there. I can do it myself."

His face falls. "I won't hurt you, Madi."

Too late. You already have.

Stuffing my feet into my sneakers is so painful that it's a miracle I manage to stay upright. It takes a long time to hobble outside, around the back of Dean's house, to his car.

Our progress is even slower because every time he pauses or turns my way, I immediately back up and prepare to meet my maker.

No amount of reassurance that he won't hurt me does a thing to silence the fear in my heart or ease the sting of pain he left there too. All I want is to get as far away from him—and Hardin—as I can and never think of him again.

By the time I'm sliding into the backseat of his car, my ankle is screaming at me. I'm probably red in the face, trying not to cry with pain *and* hurt. Not only because of my ankle.

I don't know how I could have misjudged Dean so badly, but there you go.

Dean is standing a few feet away, having opened the door and retreated to give me space to get in. "I can get some ice for the drive into town."

I turn away from him, facing the front. "No, thanks."

In the car, on the drive down to town, we're both silent for the first several minutes.

"I wanted to tell you, Madi," he says, his fingers turning white as they tense on the steering wheel.

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Look, if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather we didn’t talk.”

So I can pretend I’m in an Uber getting a ride from a stranger I will never see again. Not with a guy I’ve spent the last several days falling for.

He sighs. “I understand.”

The rest of the drive into town is silent. Thankfully, it’s late enough in the day, nearly evening, and Main Street is quiet. Other than my big pink truck parked in front of the mechanic shop, no one is around. Not even the blond mechanic, who must be a werewolf as well.

Dean pulls to a stop beside my truck and cuts the engine before climbing out. “I found your phone on the ground outside. That’s how me and Marshall knew something was wrong and came after you. I think it’s broken since it wouldn’t turn on.”

Hunter knocked me out and likely shoved me in his car. He probably wouldn’t have had time to pick up my broken cell phone after.

“That’s okay, I can get another,” I say, following him out and waiting for him to move away from my truck so I can get in.

From his pocket, he pulls out a familiar set of keys with a hot pink cupcake charm on it—mine—and an equally familiar cell phone.

I watch him as he unlocks the driver’s side door and sets the keys and the cell phone with a cracked screen on the seat before backing up. As if he knows I won’t go near the truck until he moves away first.

He’s right. I won’t. Any trust I have in him is gone now.

He backs up another step and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry about... well, everything.”

I realize then that the car with the tinted windows which overtook Hunter must have been Marshall and Dean. I want to ask Dean about it, but I want to leave more.

I turn to climb into my truck, but something compels me to stop. “It is what it is. Thanks for the thing with Hunter. You didn’t need to come after me, but I appreciate that you did.”

I hesitate.

With the way Hunter treated people, I doubt anyone is going to be worried enough to look for him. But someone might. Should I ask what they did with his body? Do I really want to know?

“It’s over now,” Dean says, reading my mind. “You don’t need to worry about that coming back on you.”

Because there must be plenty of places to hide a body in the Colorado mountains, right?

I nod. “I’ll send a check for the work your friend did to my truck.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I insist,” I cut in. “I’ll just—”

“*No!*”

I nearly fall out of my truck as I’m climbing in it.

He shakes his head in apology. “I didn’t mean to startle you. It’s taken care of. Think of it as another apology for all this shit. Okay?”

After a long stare, I grab the door and prepare to close it. “Okay.”

The moment stretches until I slam my door shut, lock it, and stick my keys in the ignition. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him.

As I start the engine, I realize Marshall didn’t just fix up my car and clean it. He filled up the tank. Not completely, but enough that I can drive for a couple of hours before I need to stop for gas.

Should I say thanks for that?

Briefly, I consider rolling the window down. My eyes are burning again when I think of all the lies, the kisses, and how

Dean made me feel things I'm terrified I will never feel again.

Leave, Madi. Leave before Dean watches you fall apart.

As I pull away from the garage, Dean is still standing outside, hands stuffed in his pockets, watching me.

Not a minute later, the first hot tear hits my cheeks. The rest follow in fast succession, blinding me to the man still in my rearview mirror.

I drive away from Hardin, Colorado, a place where there are werewolves, and back to my life in the city. And I wonder when, or if it's even possible to forget what happened here as easily as it is to drive away from it.



“*H*ey, lady?”

An image of a man—of *Dean*—changing into a wolf takes shape in my mind. The wolf opens its mouth and, in Dean’s voice, says—

“*Lady!*”

Lady? Why would he—

And then I remember I’m not in Colorado anymore. I’m back in Nebraska.

The post office, to be exact.

Blinking rapidly, I yank my gaze from a ticking clock and focus on the assistant impatiently gesturing me forward to the hatch separating us. The man in front with the towering stack of parcels has been served and left apparently because it’s my turn.

Cheeks hot, I step forward. “Sorry. I was distracted.”

It’s been three days since I returned to Nebraska, and I’m still distracted.

“Easy to do on a Monday morning.” His eyes dip to the slip in my hand. “Here to pick up a package?”

Nodding, I hand the slip over. “It wouldn’t fit in my P.O. box.”

Like Jenna, I have my business mail sent to a local post office to avoid anyone learning where I live. I’d wanted to stop

in and check it when I first returned to the city, but with a busted ankle and a desire to crawl into bed with a tub of ice cream, I've put it off until now.

After he scans the barcode on the slip, he turns away. "I won't be long."

As I wait, I go back to thinking of werewolves. And Dean. Between resting my ankle, getting a new phone, returning my customer's calls, and cleaning my apartment, I've done little else.

But soon, I need to focus. I start at Dimario's in a couple of days, and I don't want to ruin the future I've always dreamed of by being caught staring into space.

"Lady?"

I yank my eyes from the clock, smiling apologetically as I take in the brown A4-sized letter with 'Do Not Bend' in his hand. Since most of my mail is usually invoices or thin letters, I didn't want to pay for a bigger P.O. box than I needed. Anything larger than a small packet would need to be wedged in there. An A4 envelope would be a tight fit. One with a Do Not Bend stamped across the front? No chance.

"Sorry," I say.

"No problem. Have a nice day!" He smiles and nods, probably hoping I'll soon get out of the way so he can deal with the queue forming behind me.

"Have a nice day." I take the letter from him, eyeing it curiously before I add it to my canvas bag of invoices and the mail that accumulated while I was out of the city.

The handwriting isn't familiar, and I'm not expecting any mail from anyone.

It's probably a catalog from a new baking company.

Not that I'll be needing it. If everything goes well at Dimario's, Madi's Cupcakery won't be ordering baking supplies again. I'll have a new career as a chef.

Pushing the door open, I step out into a gray, overcast morning. I'd have thought most people would be at work on a

Monday morning. But the streets are bustling, so it takes me a minute to make my way to my truck in the parking lot.

I still have plenty of errands to get to today. Hitting the grocery store is next on my agenda, followed by picking up my dry cleaning.

As I settle into the driver's seat with my canvas bag beside me, the thick, handwritten envelope is too tempting not to open now.

It's just a catalog, I tell myself as I tear the package open with more eagerness than I ever have before. *No need to be so excited to open it.*

But I can't help but think it's something more exciting than a baking supply catalog.

Letter of Recommendation

I stare at the boldly written words across the top. My heart leaps because even before I turn the letter over to see who signed it, I know who sent it.

Dean.

It's not the only letter of recommendation.

There's another from Dayne and Talis. All three of them go into detail about my ability to create exciting meals with limited ingredients. That I'm a talented cook they would hire again in a heartbeat and who they would have loved to have stayed.

Permanently.

"Permanently?" I mutter as I grip the letters in both hands. "What does that mean?"

Is this another apology? One last way to convince me to stay silent about what I know?

Maybe.

But these letters weren't scrawled down in a hurry. Thought went into them.

Dean told me he would write me a letter of recommendation, but I didn't believe he would after I left. He doesn't know about Mr. Dimario's job offer because it came right before Hunter abducted me, so I don't even need it. I have a job.

Yet he still did what he promised he would.

I continue to hold the letters when I should tear them up or toss them in the nearest trash. "It's a bribe, Madi. He just wants to make sure you won't tell anyone about what you saw. Don't read more into it than that."

But he asked Dayne and Talis to write a letter of recommendation when that wasn't part of our deal.

"Why would he care?" I whisper as I remember him watching me drive away.

A car horn shatters my thoughts.

Shaking my head, I toss the letters on the seat beside me and start my truck. I have way too much to do to waste time speculating over something with such an easy explanation.



Nearly two hours later, I'm struggling under the weight of my grocery bags when my cell phone rings.

I freeze.

My cell phone is in my back pocket, and I'm halfway up my apartment steps, so there's no reaching it until I get to the top.

Yet, I'm tempted to fling my bags down the stairs and dive for my phone.

Because of who it might be.

I never gave Dean my cell phone number, but he figured out my business address to send me the letter of recommendation, and he's friends with Jenna.

Jenna has my number.

Is he calling to make sure I received the letters?

My heart pounds. Or is he calling for another reason? A more personal one?

I hurry up the stairs and literally dump my bags beside my front door, probably breaking my eggs. But I don't reach for my apartment keys. I yank my cell phone from my back pocket, stab the answer button, and have it pressed against my ear too fast to see the caller.

"Yes?"

"Madi," Mr. Dimario says. "I was calling to confirm you were still coming in at two."

I slump against the door and have to dig deep for a smile. "Sure, Mr. Dimario. I'll be there. Did you need me to come in earlier?"

He chuckles. "It's good to hear you're so eager to start."

"Of course I am, Mr. Dimario."

"Two is fine. It'll be a long day," he warns.

I glance at my ankle. The swelling has gone down, and it doesn't throb at all now, so I'm hopeful I can handle long days on my feet. "That's okay. I'm not afraid of hard work."

"Excellent," Mr. Dimario says. "I'm excited to see you work, Madi. I have a good feeling about this."

So did I. Until Dean's letter of recommendation turned up.

We say our goodbyes, and I hang up.

For several seconds, I do nothing but stand at my front door, staring at the pale blue painted wood, lost in thought.

This is the thing I've always dreamed of. An offer of a job in a kitchen, the possibility of promotion, and of working my way to the top.

My dream.

So why was I disappointed it was Mr. Dimario calling?



Working in a professional kitchen isn't easy coming off the back of a sprained ankle.

It's downright exhausting.

And hot. Did I mention it was stinkin' hot? Because I'm sure I sweat through my white chef's coat within thirty minutes of stepping foot into the large, windowless room.

I show up thirty minutes before my shift. Everyone is too busy prepping for the dinner service, so I get a scarce head shake and an even scarcer smile. Hands are busy, eyes are busier still.

I don't complain or argue when I mess up and have to do it again.

I chop and mince and dice anything the head chef tells me to. Stir until my arms scream at the relentless abuse. And then I stir some more because this is my dream, so damn my sore shoulders. I push through the pain and get my reward in a nod of approval from Mr. Dimario, lingering at the door with arms crossed, watching me. I get a smaller nod from the head chef, who's observing me a little less openly.

It's overwhelming.

Stews and soups simmer. Steaks, fish, and chicken crackle as they sear in smoking-hot stainless steel pans on the stove. The head chef never stops barking orders across the expanse of stainless steel.

We punctuate any commands with a yelled, “Yes, Chef!”

At no point is it ever quiet in Dimario’s kitchen.

And the smells are as overwhelming as the sounds. Spicy, rich, and savory. Delicious. My stomach growls and rumbles endlessly from the incredible meals served up for the dinner service.

This isn’t like cooking at home or trying to pull together a meal in Dean’s mountain cabin. I have spotless walk-in chillers and freezers with any ingredient I could dream of. There’s no wanting for anything in this kitchen. It’s all right there.

All the instruments I’d dreamed of using are lined up on metal shelves. There’s even an entire storage room dedicated to other kitchen supplies. Anyone else would come close to crying—the way I do—if they’d dreamed for as long as I have to get here.

Through all the heat, the barked orders, the breaks I skip over because there’s so much to do, I work fucking hard.

The first day is so relentless that I struggle to believe I will ever remember the dishes or I can keep up. Or that I’m good enough to last a week.

The second day goes much better. Icing my ankle after my eleven-hour first day shift helps.

By the end of my third shift, I know I can do it, and do it well. It’s on this day that Mr. Dimario stops finding reasons to come into the kitchen to check up on me.

And now? At the end of my fourth shift in Dimario’s kitchen? I know it isn’t only myself or Mr. Dimario I’ve impressed. It’s the rest of the chefs who did nothing to hide their head shakes, their bemused smiles, and their expectations that I wouldn’t be able to cut it.

And you know what? I fucking love it.

It’s everything I hoped it would be. It truly is.

But it doesn’t feel like enough. There’s something missing.

I finish wiping my station, aware that I'll be icing my ankle again tonight.

I'll go home, pull together a quick, easy dinner, and sit on my couch with my foot in a bucket of ice water with the TV on in the background as I eat.

I won't actually watch the TV. As I fork pasta or ramen or eggs into my mouth, I'll be thinking about whether Dean finished his deadline. I'll be wondering if he's still working too hard and getting his vitamin D through a window. Most of all, I'll be asking myself why the thought of him being alone up there bothers me so much.

He's a werewolf, and he lied to me from the moment I opened my eyes in his bedroom.

I shouldn't care if he sits glued to his laptop and pecks at his keyboard all day and night.

I should be focusing on building a new life for myself, the sort of life I always wanted.

But I'm not.

More and more, I think about the day I woke from my nap on his couch and watched him work. As the wind whipped through the trees outside his cabin, I'd never felt more content anywhere or with anyone in my life.

"You know, when we heard you'd be starting, we'd written you off," Shaun says as he wipes the counter beside mine. He's the sous chef who's been working at the kitchens for a couple of years and has spent the last few days training me on prepping the side dishes.

I arch my brow. My back is killing me, my feet too, and I'm genuinely concerned that if I stop working, I won't be able to get started again. "Is that right?"

As if I could have missed the whispers that I wouldn't be here for long. The kitchen is big, but it's not that big.

The three other chefs, busy with their own cleaning tasks, listen from the kitchen's corners. In the restaurant itself, chair

legs scrape along the hardwood floors. Dishes clatter, and laughter from the serving staff cleaning drifts in.

Usually, the door between the restaurant and the kitchen is closed, but Mr. Dimario lets us wedge it open, and I love him for it. All our cheeks are flushed red, and I'm not the only one sweating, so this part of the night is always bliss.

"We thought you were just a baker who wouldn't know a steak knife from their elbow." Shaun grins.

Laughter rings out.

"You know, baking is just a different kind of cooking, right?" I say dryly when the laughter dies down. "No need to make it sound like all this time I've been slicing bread with a spoon."

My comment draws laughter from the others.

"You know what I mean. Bakers choose to bake because they can't hack it in the kitchen," Ted, another chef, calls out.

I turn to him, angling my head. "So it has nothing to do with the fact that maybe they can't get a job in a kitchen? Or they just like baking more? Or—"

"We get it," Marley, our head chef, interrupts from the stove. "Bakers aren't bakers because they can't cook."

"And *you* can cook, Madi Sawyer. There's no doubt about that." Mr. Dimario's voice comes from the door. "Leave Shaun to clean that section. I want a word with you."

Curious and a little nervous at what I've done wrong, I offer Shaun my cloth.

He drags a finger across his throat and shakes his head, his expression sympathetic. "So long, Madi. Nice knowing you."

I toss my cloth at him, knowing he's only messing with me. "If anyone is in trouble, it'll be you when Head Chef spots that."

I nod at his shirt.

He glances down. "What?"

As he lifts his head, I flick his nose. “Bakers also know how to tell a joke,” I grin, leaving him laughing.

“I’m promoting you,” are Mr. Dimario’s first words when I follow him into his office.

I stare across his desk, gripping the edge as my mouth gapes open. “You’re *what?*”

He grins at me. “I’m promoting you.”

“But I haven’t even been here a week,” I remind him, trying to work out if I’m liable to get into trouble if I sit down before I fall down.

“I’ve had plenty of time to gauge whether you can hack it in the kitchen.” He leans across the table, piercing me with his deep brown gaze. “And you can more than hack it. I’ve also had plenty of time to learn how you cook and how you work with others. You’re not sous chef material. You, Madi Sawyer, are head chef material.”

My eyes bug out.

“I’m what?” I breathe, sinking into the seat as my knees wobble and my legs buckle, threatening to send me crashing to the floor.

“That comes later. For now, I’ll be putting you on a fast-track route to promotion. I don’t want you working anywhere but in my kitchen. You still have a lot to learn, but there’s no doubt in my mind that you can do the job. Nor in the head chef’s.”

“You spoke to Marley about me?” I whisper.

“*He* spoke to *me* about you. You’re eager, you’re bright, and you go all-out with everything you do. Said you should be running a kitchen, not relegated to chopping vegetables. I agreed.”

I can’t believe this is happening. If my feet weren’t throbbing and my hands raw from wielding a knife all day, I’d be sure this was a dream.

“You want to make me a head chef?” I ask, wanting to make sure we’re on the same page.

He pushes himself to his feet and stretches his hand across the desk. “I do. So, what do you say, Madi Sawyer? Can you see a future running my kitchen one day?”



I pull my truck to a stop outside a small, dark wood cabin nestled deep in the Colorado mountains and cut the engine.

I'm getting out of the truck when the front door swings open, and Dean's figure fills the entryway.

There's no hiding his surprise. From his rumpled t-shirt, red eyes, and the way he flinches from the bright sun overhead, he must have returned to his workaholic ways.

"Madi?" He scrubs his eyes with the back of one hand. "Are you in trouble? Is there—"

I grab the handwritten letters of recommendation from the passenger seat and stalk toward him, waving them at him. "Why did you send these?"

His concern smooths away. "I told you I would."

Not good enough. I need more of an explanation than that.

"Did you send them because you wanted to make sure I wouldn't tell anyone about your secret?" I demand.

I've been on the road for most of the night and the morning. There's no telling how bad I look in my calf-length black skirt and pale pink blouse—with a no-chance-of-missing-it coffee stain—over my left boob. Both items of clothing are rumpled and creased from my long drive.

I'm not even wearing my boots. Just my socks. I toed those suckers off when they kept pinching my feet. I had the

foresight to tie my hair back, so at least it isn't as much of a mess as the rest of me.

But the closer I approach him, the more my exhaustion melts away, and adrenaline takes over.

Anger, too, because despite all his lies and the fact I don't know if I can ever trust a word he says, seeing how badly he takes care of himself pisses me off. If he's slept a wink since I left, I see no sign of it. It's like a trigger I never knew I had until I met him.

He shakes his head. "That isn't why I sent them, Madi."

I stop a foot away from him, trying to read him.

My eyes drift over his shoulder, and I take in his laptop sitting on the kitchen island, an empty glass beside it. A navy blanket lies on the floor beside the stool as if he dropped it in his haste to answer the door.

And then I spot another blanket on the couch, a gray one, and a half-eaten granola bar on the coffee table.

I took his bedroom before, so why does it look like he's been sleeping on the couch?

My eyes return to the man in front of me—the thoroughly exhausted-looking man—scratching his hair as he swallows a yawn.

"The deal was a bed for a couple of days in return for a letter of recommendation." I wave the papers at him again. "Not one from Dayne or Talis. Did you ask them to write it?"

He pauses for a beat.

My lips thin. "Don't lie to me. Not again."

I'm surprised he hasn't demanded to know why I would drive all the way from Nebraska to demand an answer from him that I could have gotten another way.

It isn't like I don't have Jenna's cell phone number. She could have done the asking for me, saving me hours on the road, hundreds of dollars on gas, and more bad coffee than you can shake a stick at.

“They were happy to do it,” he says quietly. “And you know they loved your meal.”

“You’re not answering my question.” I step closer. A bad idea when I know he’s a werewolf, and anything with sharp teeth is something to fear. I should be backing away from him, not stepping closer. “Did you ask them to write these?”

“Yes.” His eyes dip to my lips, and hunger fills them.

“Why?” I breathe.

He’s thinking of kissing me, which is reminding me how good it felt—how *right* it felt—when he kissed me.

“If there was anything I could do to help you get you closer to your dream, I wanted to do it,” he says.

“You asked me to stay.” I can’t make myself tear my eyes from him. He’s a werewolf. A liar. And I still want to be closer to him than I want to be to anyone else. “When you took me to see the wolves, you asked me to stay.”

“It was selfish.”

I blink, surprised at his soft admission. “Selfish?”

He nods, stuffing his hands in his pockets as his eyes briefly drop from mine. “It was a selfish thing to ask you to give up your dream in the city to come here instead.”

“And yet you still did it.”

This conversation is not going at all how I thought it would. I expected him to admit that everything he did was to get me to keep his secret. Or for him to change into a wolf and eat me. Instead, we’re talking about something that’s been keeping me up most of the last few nights.

I’ll never forget how it felt sitting in his lap with his arm slung around me. His soft breath had tickled the back of my neck on that beautiful early morning as he told me about wolves mating for life.

And I remember him asking me to stay.

That’s when I realize why I’m here, and it’s not to talk about the letters of recommendation. At least, not only.

The reason I drove all this way is because of that morning. I need to know I didn't imagine the soft look in his eyes that made me think he was asking me to stay because he couldn't see a future without me.

"I couldn't help myself," he says.

"You said wolves mate for life."

"I did," he admits.

He's going to make me ask what must be the most insane question I've ever asked in my life. Isn't he?

"Is it the same for werewolves?"

Am I yours? Is that why you asked me to stay?

"Shifters," he quietly corrects me as his eyes return to mine. "And the answer is yes."

I take in a breath, releasing it as my fingers tighten around the papers in my hand, making them rustle. "Am I yours?"

He doesn't answer for so long, I swear I'm close to losing my mind when he shakes his head, his expression impossible to read. "No."

A surprising burst of... disappointment? Hurt? I'm not entirely sure what the feeling is that settles heavily on my shoulders, making them sink.

"Then why would—"

"You're mine," he interrupts, the mask behind his eyes falling away. He takes my free hand and gently squeezes. The air is crisp and cool. He's barefoot and wearing a t-shirt, so he should not be this hot. And yet, it's like someone lit a fire under his skin. "When I have you in my arms, I never want to put you down. You are not my mate, but you are mine."

My heart stutters at the simmering intensity in his eyes. And then it races.

I shake my head. This is just another lie. Another way to convince me to keep his secret. Some other thing he has said I want to believe, but I can't.

“You’re lying,” I whisper. “You just want me to—”

I don’t see him move. Suddenly, his hot palm is cradling the back of my neck, and his lips fused to mine. No one could call what he does next a kiss. I know I can’t. It’s a branding, and it sets every single nerve in my body on fire.

He slants his head, deepening the kiss as the letters of recommendation fall from my fingers, and I grab onto him instead.

As suddenly as he moved, he breaks the kiss, his breathing unsteady and his lips hovering an inch from mine. “Tell me again that I’m lying.”

Still, I shake my head weakly this time because my lips are still burning. “You don’t mean—”

“I fell in love with you so quietly. I didn’t realize it had happened until it hit me when I was watching you smile at a magpie. I didn’t care what I had to do to make you smile again, but I knew I wanted to do it every single day for the rest of my life.” He stops, resting his forehead on mine. “And I knew I could never go back to my normal life because it wasn’t what I wanted anymore. I didn’t care about my job. I didn’t care about the satellite I’d been obsessed with all this time. All I wanted was you.”

This is why it hurt so badly when he lied to me and why I couldn’t move on with my life—and my dream career. My dreams hadn’t changed, but I had. I wasn’t the same Madi Sawyer anymore in the same way Dean wasn’t the same person either.

Something had changed. Something big.

I think that something was love.

So I stare at the man with the exhausted brown eyes flecked with gold. I inhale the scent of amber and wintergreen deep in my lungs. And I remember how it felt to be with him, laugh with him, have him hold me, take care of me, and make me feel like I wasn’t so alone in the world.

“I got my dream job,” I tell him.

The mask slips back over his face, hiding all the passion I saw moments before. “As a chef?”

I nod. “You were right about the experience. And the need to prove myself. I did, and I got a job as a chef in one of the best restaurants in the city. The owner offered me a fast-track promotion to head chef.”

I feel Dean’s withdrawal the second before his hand slips from my nape, and he nods, his smile sad but trying not to be. “I’m glad. You deserve it. I hope you’ll be—”

“I turned it down,” I interrupt.

He freezes.

“It’s my dream job,” I explain, as I ask myself if I’m not insane for doing what I’m about to do. “Yet I couldn’t stop thinking about the guy with a fridge so filthy it would send any cook running away, and who prefers granola bars to real food.”

His hand grips the edge of the door frame as if to steady himself.

I’m tempted to do the same because I’ve upset my entire life for a future I never saw coming. “Even though he lied to me, and even though I asked myself why I should ever trust a word he said, I could believe the way he held me, kissed me, and made me feel loved.”

I lift my fingers to my heart, and they hover there. “And I could trust the feeling here that told me I loved him, and I couldn’t see myself anywhere he wasn’t.”

He does the moving without seeming to thing again. I’m crushed against him, my face tucked against his throat and his hand cradling the back of my head, holding me close.

His heart is crashing against my chest, and he’s breathing so hard I’m seriously concerned he’s about to have a heart attack.

“I don’t deserve you, but I’ll make it up to you,” he whispers against my hair, his voice vibrating with his promise. “I swear it.”

There's not an ounce of doubt in my mind that he means it.

Peeling my face from his throat takes effort when he doesn't seem to want to let me go. "Dean?"

Reluctantly, he releases me and sets me back on my feet. Close. He leaves one arm wound around my waist, and it feels like it's always been there. Like it belongs there.

"Madi?"

I clear my throat. "What happens now? Because I don't think I want to be a wolf."

"I can't change what I am, Madi," he says quietly with no hint of amusement at my half-amused comment. "I've always known and never wanted that to change. But when I met you and realized that I would most likely lose you because of what I am, for the first time, I wished I wasn't."

If I stay with him, I have to accept that side of him. That's what he's saying.

"Do you ever change in the middle of the night?" I ask.

He cocks his head, confused. "What?"

"I want to know if I'm in danger of waking up and finding you chomping on my leg like a chicken drumstick because you were hungry," I explain.

A glimmer of amusement floats in his gaze. "Why would I chomp on your leg?"

I shrug. "I don't know. It's the first thought that came to mind."

Because I'm still afraid of the wolf side of you that I need to learn to accept if we're going to have a future together.

Dean searches my face. "I would never hurt you."

"I know." Smiling, I lift my hands to rest them on the front of his chest, absorbing his warmth through his thin cotton shirt.

But you have a wolf inside you who might.

After giving me a probing look, he takes a step back into the cabin and grips my hand, tugging. “Come on. I need to do something about that fear.”

“What fear?”

“The fear you’re trying to hide from me.”

Damn, this man is way too perceptive.

Inside his cabin, he closes the door behind us and turns to me. “I think it’s time I introduced you to my wolf. *Properly*. It’s time to show you there is nothing to be afraid of.”

He can’t mean what I think he means, can he?

When he drops my hand and reaches for the bottom of his shirt, I realize he’s about to do what I think he’s going to do. My heart spikes in alarm. Nope. In terror.

I’m about to come face to face with a wolf.

Again.



Dean prepares to lift his shirt.

“Wait!” I grab his wrists and hold on as my heart lurches at the thought of sharing a small cabin with a wolf.

He frowns, concerned. “What is it?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “You won’t, uh, forget that I’m supposed to be a friend, and you know... try to bite me instead?”

His eyes soften, and he presses a kiss on my lips. “You’re a lot more than a friend. And I will not bite you. Just don’t pull my tail.”

I shake my head so vigorously that my ponytail comes loose, and hair flies into my face. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

A smile ghosts across his lips. “It’s a joke. Pull my tail if you want. I won’t bite you.”

“Not even accidentally?” I glance at the closed door behind me. Maybe this show and tell would work better if I was on the outside and he was on the inside.

He turns my face back to him. His eyes are twinkling. “I don’t think there’s a way of accidentally biting a person.”

I’d return his smile, but I’m too busy asking myself if maybe this isn’t a good idea.

He loses his smile. “I’ll still be me, Madi. And I will still love you, even as a wolf.”

My insides turn to jelly. “Really?”

He kisses my forehead, and I lean into the caress. “Really.”

Forehead kisses are about to join the trinity of nice guys, good coffee, and good food, no doubt about it.

For a long moment, he holds me against him, his arm around my waist and his lips on my forehead as if he wants to reassure me that I’m not agreeing to something suicidal. “You ready to meet the other half of me?”

I take my time thinking about it. He doesn’t rush me, just waits patiently for me to decide if this is something I can do or not.

I’m agreeing to stay here with Dean. If I can’t trust him not to maul me when he’s a wolf, then we’re never going to work. Especially if, like he said, being a wolf is such a big a part of him. Hunter tried to mold me into his idea of a perfect woman. I refuse to mold Dean into a less scary version of him.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay,” he echoes but doesn’t release me.

“You’re not changing into a wolf.” I smile.

“I have you back in my arms when I thought I’d lost you forever.” His voice is soft, amazed. “It’s proving close to impossible to let you go.”

Winding my arms around his hips, I squeeze him back. “You’re pretty sweet for a guy who lives like a bat.”

He barks out a laugh, squeezes me again, and then releases me. “I promise to change my workaholic ways right after I toss out every granola bar from my kitchen, Madi Sawyer.”

“I’ll hold you to that, Dean Blackshaw.”

And this time, when he reaches for his shirt, I don’t stop him.

I chew on my lip, forcing myself to keep my hands at my sides instead of twisting my fingers together so he won’t know how nervous I am. A wolf has sharp teeth. They are predators.

If anyone were to see me on a treadmill, they wouldn't view me as anything but prey.

Then I forget I'm supposed to be nervous when he tugs his shirt over his head and tosses it toward the couch.

My eyes land on his muscled chest, and all the moisture from my mouth is just... gone.

South, I think. In the vicinity of my panties.

"You looking at me like that isn't helping." Dean's tone is dry and, unless I'm mistaken, a little husky.

"Sorry," I mumble. But I keep staring at his chest as I clamp my arms to my sides. This time, not because I'm nervous. I want to touch him. More than touch.

I want to taste him. All over.

His hand grips my arm, and he hauls me toward him, my eyes flying to his as his lips crash onto mine in a far too brief kiss.

And then I'm free again, blinking up at him as my lips tingle.

"After," he says with a sexy timbre in his voice. "I need to prove to you that you have nothing to fear from me. So... after."

I don't ask what will happen after. How could I not know with the way he just kissed me? Or the way he's staring at me as if he's looking to gobble me up for breakfast, lunch, and dinner?

"This is important." I agree.

If we don't do this, my fear will linger, maybe become permanent.

I refuse to let that happen.

There's no way I'd have had the courage to accept Mr. Dimario's offer without Dean's belief in me. So, I will try to believe in the fact that he won't change into a wolf and eat me.

As soon as he reaches for his pants, butterflies form in my belly, and I curl my fingers as I wait, knowing I'm about to see something impossible happen. Something very few people ever have.

And then he stops. "Oh, and don't touch me while I'm shifting."

My heart lurches in my chest. "Because you'll bite me?"

"Because I need to concentrate," he gently corrects me. "And I have no hope in hell of doing that if I have your hands on me."

Oh.

My cheeks flush. "I won't touch you."

When he unbuttons his pants, I aim my eyes at the couch because... well, I'm not so sure I could keep my hands to myself if I looked.

It's only when he drops into a crouch, which makes it impossible to see anything exciting, that I turn back to him.

The change doesn't look painful. Not that it did when I watched him do it after he saved me from Hunter. I hadn't fully absorbed how smooth the transition is and how natural it looks when it happens. Now, I do.

Minutes later, I have a lean, brown wolf standing in front of me with Dean's eyes.

"Holy crap," I mutter as I study the wolf. I clear my throat. "Uh, you're still not going to bite me, are you?"

I'm talking to a wolf. How insane is this?

The wolf shakes its head. It will not bite me.

"Good," I whisper. "That's good."

When it takes a step toward me, I flatten my back against the door. My eyes are wide as I fumble for the handle and breathlessly demand, "What are you doing?"

I don't have a chance to grab the handle before the wolf is gripping the bottom of my skirt gently between its terrifyingly

sharp teeth and tugging downward.

“What do you want?” I whisper.

The wolf releases me, backs up, and sits on its haunches.

It can't possibly mean...

“You want me to sit down?” I whisper as my palm closes around the handle.

The wolf nods.

Am I crazy for even considering sitting down in front of a wolf?

“And you promise you won't bite me in the face?” I pause. “Or anywhere else?”

The wolf shakes its head.

I eye the wolf closely. It doesn't look like he's getting ready to kill me.

I hope.

Then I decide that yes, I am crazy because I let go of the front door and sit down, cross-legged, less than a foot away from a wolf.

We study each other.

Every second it doesn't attack is another second that I breathe a little easier.

“You're pretty,” I say before hastily adding, “I know you think I'm only saying that so you don't eat me, but I mean it.”

The wolf's fur isn't a flat brown as I'd initially thought, but a mix of several shades from a deep chestnut to a lighter dark blond. It looks soft as well, tempting me to touch. I won't be doing any touching, though. My craziness only extends so far, and I think I've reached my limit.

The wolf chuffs in amusement, and its eyes—Dean's eyes—grin at me.

“It's really you, isn't it?” I whisper. “You're a wolf, but you're still you.”

I don't think I'd have believed it if I hadn't seen him grinning at me with that exact same look in his eyes before.

The wolf gets up, and I freeze until it pads over to the couch. I frown as it takes something in its mouth and returns to drop it in my lap.

A half-eaten granola bar.



My loud bark of surprised laughter fills the cabin.

As if that was what the wolf—or Dean—was waiting for, he backs up, and I watch him change from a wolf to the naked, grinning man I’ve fallen in love with.

“You got me a granola bar,” I tell him.

He shrugs. “It was all I could think to do to get you to realize it was still me.”

“Just the wolf version,” I say, placing the half-eaten bar on the floor beside me.

He nods.

“This is nuts,” I mumble, not sure if I’m talking to me or him. “You change into a wolf. I walked away from my dream job. And I love you. This is insane.”

“I hope not the loving me part,” he says, eyeing me curiously.

“No. I think that’s the part that makes the most sense.”

“It does?” His voice is as soft as mine.

“As weird as it seems, being with you feels like it’s where I’m supposed to be. I’m not sure what I’m going to do here, but—”

He leans toward me, claiming my lips. “We’ll figure it out together.”

I consider the implications of what staying means, not only for me but for him too.

“If you were to bite me, would I be one too?”

He cocks his head, his expression unreadable. “Is that what you want?”

I swallow and shake my head. “No, I don’t think so. But if we’re together, does that mean when I’m an old lady you’ll be ___”

“We age the same. I’m just a little harder to kill. I can heal from most wounds in seconds or minutes, and I don’t get sick. Oh, and I have sharper senses.”

I raise my brow. “It sounds an awful lot like you’re selling this shifter dream life to me.”

He snorts. “Not selling it. I won’t say it doesn’t come with benefits. But it comes with its dangers as well. We live with the fear that someone will learn what we are and wipe us out. As we find mates and have children, our fear grows because it isn’t only ourselves we must protect but our children, too. Talis and Dayne had twins several months ago, and we had trouble around the same time. It made us all realize how much we stand to lose.”

With the way the world treats people they view as different, it’s easy to understand why they would worry. “Will their kids be able to turn into wolves as well?”

“They will,” he says. “They won’t shift until they’re at least sixteen, but they’ll start to gain enhanced strength and heightened senses before then.”

“This is the weirdest conversation I’ve had in my life,” I admit.

He grips me by my hips and lifts me so I’m straddling him. “It is. Do you have any more questions?”

I slide my palms over his chest, looping them behind his shoulders as I try not to react to this new intimate position or the husky note in his voice. “Like what?”

He kisses me lightly on the lips. One soft kiss and it has me leaning in to claim another. “Anything.”

I smile against his lips. “That’s kind of hard to do with you kissing me like that.”

He stops, and I wish he hadn’t. But this conversation is an important one, so I consider what else I want to know.

“I do have one.” My cheeks burn, and I glance away. “Will I…”

“Will you?” he prompts when I don’t continue.

I dart a rapid glance into his face. “Will I have a baby that can change into a wolf if we take things further?”

His fingers grip my chin and lift so we’re eye to eye. Though his gaze is hot, it’s serious as well. “I’ve never heard of it happening before. But just because I haven’t, doesn’t mean it won’t or it can’t.”

I nod, sensing he hasn’t finished yet.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Generally, mated shifter couples get pregnant quickly. Birth control doesn’t work, so if it’s going to happen, it will happen.”

“And between me and you?” I ask. “What then?”

He strokes his hand up my back. The slow caress makes me aware all over again that I’m sitting in his lap. This conversation is making him excited, and it’s making me the same way.

His nostrils flare, and his eyes linger on my lips. “I don’t know. But I’m eager to find out.”

“So, you want kids?” I ask.

“Before now? It never entered my mind. With you?” His eyes return to mine, and his smile is soft. Contented. “Yes. I think I do.”

His smile burrows into my heart. I haven’t had an expression hit me as hard as that one does. I don’t think any ever will.

“Me too. There’s a lot we don’t know about each other,” I say.

The thought of having kids is attractive to me for so many reasons.

As an only child, with no family left, I’d be lying if I said having a family of my own didn’t appeal to me. It does. Dean is so caring and supportive of me. I know he’ll be a great dad. I’m not sure I’d be ready for kids tomorrow, but one day.

He presses his fingers against the nape of my neck and draws me so close my pebbled nipples brush his bare chest. His eyes darken, and his voice is husky as he says, “Then I can think of a great way for us to get to know each other a little better.”

My softer body melts against his as he slants his mouth over mine.

I’m forgetting about the need to do anything but kiss Dean forever when a question wiggles into my mind, distracting me.

I break the kiss, my lips swollen. “Dean?”

His heated stare doesn’t move from my mouth. “Hmm?”

“Why are you still sleeping on the couch? I left, and you still...” My voice trails off the second my eyes connect with his. I’m not expecting the sadness in them. Or the pain. “What?”

“I couldn’t do it,” he admits. “It smelled too much like you.”

I frown. “But you could have washed the sheets. Oh, wait, are you saying I stink?”

One corner of his lips kicks up in a crooked smile. “You do not stink. You smell of sweet caramel and coconut. Delicious.” He studies me for a beat. “I couldn’t look at my bed without seeing you in it.”

“You missed me,” I whisper.

He tugs me close. “I couldn’t breathe without you, Madi Sawyer.”

Okay, so I was wrong. I don't think heroes are only created in writing rooms because I'm looking right at one, and he's real.

“Madi?”

I lean toward him as a slow smile stretches my lips. “If we weren't already on the floor, I think I'd have tackled you to it, Dean Blackshaw. You have the most incredible gift of saying things that make me want to jump your bones. Repeatedly.”

He returns my smile, his arm tightening around me before he kisses me again.

I wrap my legs around his hips, moaning into his mouth as he cradles the back of my head and holds me against him.

He's turning to lay me down when he breaks the kiss with a muffled curse. “We can't do this here.”

I kiss his throat and rub the tip of my nose along his stubbled jaw. He could definitely do with a shave, but I don't think I would mind if he left the stubble. I like the way it feels against my skin. “Why not? I don't care.”

He groans. “It's the floor, Madi.”

I kiss him again, wanting a repeat of that same rumbling groan. “So?”

“Hold on. I'm picking you up. You deserve a hell of a lot more than a cold, hard floor.” He wraps his arms tight around me and lifts.

He does it with so little effort, I can't help but wonder if it's because he's a shifter. Despite his talk of me being light, he couldn't be further from the truth.

“Oh. Where are we going?” I ask between soft kisses on his throat.

“To the—”

I nibble his earlobe.

He halts, groaning. “Madi, *stop*. I'm going to drop you.”

“You don't like it?”

“Too much. I nearly walked into the doorframe,” he admits.

Laughing, I stop kissing him as he carries me to the bed and places me on top of the covers.

Before I can return to kissing his throat, he settles over me. Bracing his weight on his elbow, he kisses mine. “Now, where were we?”

I swallow a moan as his lips feather over my skin. “This isn’t where we were. *I was kissing you.*”

He nuzzles my throat. “So you were. I think it’s my turn, don’t you?”

I stroke my hands up his back. “I think—” Gasping as he nips my earlobe, I forget what I was on my way to saying, “*Dean!*”

“Did you want me to stop?”

“Now, I didn’t say that,” I moan.

After a series of soft, feathery kisses up and down my throat, I’m ready to sink into the bed and probably the floor. I’m not sure how I can be this relaxed while so aroused, but Dean manages the impossible.

When he stops kissing me, I blink my eyes open to find him studying me with a new look in his eyes and a half-smile curling one corner of his lips.

“What is it?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Just reminding myself you’re here, and I didn’t pass out on the kitchen island and dream all this.”

I frown. “Please tell me you’re not in a regular habit of doing that. You could really hurt...” My voice trails off. Not only because his smile widens but because I remembered what he was. Shifter. And shifters have supernatural abilities. “I bet you wouldn’t feel a thing if you fell, would you? Or what? You could save yourself even when half-asleep?”

He takes my hand and drops a kiss on the very center. “It would hurt. Probably not much. But I’m glad you care.”

Before, he was reminding himself I was here. Now, as I peer up at him, I remind myself that I have a whole new future waiting for me that I'm not the least bit prepared for. And you know what? It's not as terrifying as I thought it would be.

I'm not afraid of hard work. Maybe this time, I can build a new business that gives me the satisfaction that was missing from Madi's Cupcakery.

And I'll be with Dean. That's the best thing about Colorado.

"Madi?" Dean threads his fingers through my hair. "I'd ask if something was wrong, but you have the most beautiful smile on your face. What are you thinking?"

"About my life in the city," I quietly admit. "I wasn't happy, even though I had everything I wanted. A job in one of the best restaurants in the city, chef whites, and a head chef occasionally screaming in my face. It should have been perfect."

He blinks. "A chef screaming in your face would have been perfect?"

A smile twitches my lips. "It was one of those experiences I thought I would have on my path to achieving my dreams. I think I watched too many episodes of Hell's Kitchen. Who knows?" I shake my head. "Anyway, I kept thinking about when you took me to see the wolves and how content I was listening to you type when I lay on your couch."

A smile briefly tugs on the corners of his lips. "I wasn't working. If you saw the gibberish I was typing..."

I grin up at him. "You were very convincing."

His amusement fades. "I had a beautiful woman who I wanted almost from the moment I saw her. Concentration was impossible. And when you moaned as you drank your coffee? Someone could have picked up my laptop, clubbed me over the head with it, and I wouldn't have noticed."

I wondered how much attention he was paying me before. Now I know.

He lowers his head, and his lips find mine in a sweet, lingering kiss.

He moves to grip the bottom of my shirt at the same time I do, and our hands crash together.

I pull away, embarrassed. “Sorry, I was...” I sigh. “When I’m not in a kitchen, I can be awkward. And clumsy. Diving into a puddle was probably a big hint, huh?”

“I’m the same when I’m not in front of a laptop.” He grins at me. “I once stepped off Dayne’s back porch and didn’t know it until I smashed into the ground.”

I laugh. “Were you okay?”

He sighs. “Me? Yeah. My cell phone I was too busy focusing on? It didn’t survive.”

We smile at each other, our shared memories breaking the awkwardness.

“Let me.” He nods at my shirt.

“Okay,” I agree.

He sets to work unbuttoning the front of my shirt, his eyes bouncing between my face and my chest as it slowly gapes open. His gaze grows more heated, and his breathing deepens until my shirt is fully open, revealing my white cotton bra. If I’d known this was where things would go today, I’d have taken a little more time to slip into something sexy.

Not that Dean seems to care about white cotton from the way he’s staring at me.

He slides one hand down my side, hooks my right leg around his hip, and, with his eyes fixed on me, rolls us.

Then I’m straddling him as his hands brush the shirt from my shoulders.

“You have smooth moves for a guy who likes to peck at his keyboard.” I grin, reaching up and behind me.

Dean snorts as he strokes his hands over my hips and belly. “You are a sight to behold, Madi Sawyer. And I do not peck at my—” He swallows hard as I shrug out of my bra.

“Keyboard,” I finish when he does nothing but stare up at me, his eyes full of hunger. I’m not curvy in the right places. I’m curvy in all the places, so there’s a lot to look at. And feast on, because that’s exactly how Dean is staring at my breasts. As if he’s eager to taste.

He cups my breasts. His fingers are gentle but firm as he massages the heavy globes, making my breath catch as I release a soft, breathy moan.

“Who cares about keyboards?” he groans.

Sitting up, he angles my body back to drop a kiss on my throat and then my nipples, one lingering caress at a time.

I wrap my legs around his hips, letting my eyes drift closed to absorb the heated touch of his mouth on me. He rakes his teeth over my nipples, and I moan, throwing my head back as I grind myself on his erection.

His fingers find my hips and tighten, halting my desperate motions. “Madi...” He groans in his throat and thrusts once as if he can’t stop himself. “Jesus, you have to stop doing that.”

“And if I don’t want to?” I breathe, stroking my hands up and down his back as I urge him closer.

“Not yet,” he groans, and his lips claim mine.

His hand steals under my skirt, his hot fingers brushing the sensitive skin on my inner thigh.

I gasp in his mouth at his first touch.

His thumb edges under my panties, gliding through my damp folds to brush my core with a firmer touch.

I rock against him, wanting more.

When he pulls his hand away, I groan in frustration until fabric tears and then suddenly, I’m no longer wearing panties.

I break the kiss immediately, my heart in my throat as I stare at Dean with wide eyes. “Dean Blackshaw, did you just rip my panties clean off me?”

He’s breathing almost as hard as I am as he furrows his brow. “Did you not want—”

I grip him by the side of his face and drag him close, claiming his lips in a hard kiss. Then I break away. “If you ever decide you want to do that again, I won’t stop you. In fact, I positively encourage it.”

I didn’t believe that could be so hot. And it was. It truly was.

He flashes me a grin, cups my nape with one hand, and urges me back for a kiss he controls.

I break the kiss again when an idea shoves itself into my mind. An idea that could elevate that far too arousing pantie-ripping into something more. “And growl.”

He blinks at me. “Growl?”

“Next time you rip my panties off me, I want you to growl when you do it.”

His chest vibrates against mine with his silent laugh. “Will do,” he says and hauls me back for another simmering kiss as his hand delves between my thighs.

His fingers are strong, sure, and knowing. And if he keeps on, I won’t last much longer.

I’m riding his hand before I know it, my breath coming in ragged pants as my release edges closer.

“Dean,” I groan against his lips as I tighten my fingers in his hair.

When he pulls his hand away to grip my skirt and shove it out of the way, I stare into his lust-filled dark eyes as he urges me onto his lap and pumps his cock into me.

My head goes back, a moan bubbling up from somewhere deep within me. “Yes!”

He presses his mouth to my throat, his hands sweeping up and down my back as he growls. “Fuck, Madi.”

God, those growls will be the end of me.

Wanting more, I roll my hips as he thrusts. Looping my arms around his shoulders, I move when he moves, riding him slowly as he pumps up to meet each of my downward motions.

Our pace is slow, easy, and perfect.

As his cock stretches me open, his motions make me so breathless, so desperate to come that I don't know how much longer I can keep up.

"Dean," I whimper.

His lips brush over my sweat-dampened forehead, his hands settling on my hips to drag me closer until he buries himself fully in me. "Do you have any idea how good you feel, Madi? How perfect?"

He doesn't need to ask. With the way he's throbbing inside me, the husky note in his voice, and how much his hands are trembling, I feel his want for me. His need.

"I don't want to move," he groans. But he eases out a half inch and thrusts anyway, pulling a groan from us both. "I need to come, baby."

I tighten my arms and legs around him as he growls again, right into my ear. And then he's moving me down and onto him with increasingly hard tugs.

My stomach clenches with the rapid approach of my climax. "Dean!"

He's slapping into me. His pace is fierce. Relentless. My head goes back, my thighs quiver, and I start to fall apart in his arms. "Oh, God!"

Suddenly, he rolls us and settles on top of me, hooking my right leg up over his arm as he drives me over the edge.

"Now," he groans, hammering into me. "Come now, baby. Come for me."

Close now. So close, I wiggle beneath him, eyes flying open to clash with his. "*Dean!*"

He angles my hips up, pulls away, and slams himself home again, holding himself there.

That's it.

My back arches, and my mouth falls open in a soundless scream as I ripple and spasm around Dean's cock.

He chokes out a groan as he twitches in me, filling me with heat.

I'm still trying to steady my breathing when he rolls us so we're on our sides and gathers me into his arms, nearly heart-to-heart.

Dropping a soft kiss on my hair, he sighs. "Perfect," he breathes, awe and contentment all rolled into one. "You're absolutely perfect."

My cheeks flush with pleasure. No one has ever said anything like that to me before. But modesty and embarrassment compel me to shake my head. "I'm not—"

His kiss silences me. So does the serious look in his eyes. "You are. I never want to hear you say otherwise, okay?"

My lips kick up in a smile. "Bossy."

He dips his head. "Bull-headed."

And then he's rolling me onto my back again as I feel him harden inside me.

"Dean?" I whisper.

"You were on your way to saying something just now." He claims my lips in a hard kiss. "I think I need to prove to you that you're perfect in just about every single way there is. Otherwise, you might not believe me."

I don't need to ask how he intends to do that. And even if I wanted to, I wouldn't want to waste words when we could be kissing and I could be lifting my hips to meet Dean's.

What use are words at a time like this?



It's later in the day, and we're still tucked in bed, the sheets pulled up to our hips as we lie face to face. Neither of us shows any indication we ever intend to leave this bed.

Stamina. That's something Dean skipped over when he was giving me a rundown on a shifter's ability. They have buckets of stamina.

Dean is observing me with a soft look in his eyes, and a faint smile curls his lips as he runs the tips of his fingers up and down the small of my back.

"If you keep doing that, I might have to jump your bones," I warn him.

He dips his head and kisses me. "Then I think I know what I'll be doing for the rest of the day."

I smile against his lips.

"You were thinking something interesting a few seconds ago," he says, pulling away. "What was it?"

I eye him curiously. "When?"

He combs his fingers through my hair, and his rumbling growl of pleasure arrows right to my core. "You were thinking of something, and it excited you."

My eyes widen. This isn't the first time he's said something like it. Before, I was sitting on the kitchen island,

and he was trying to convince himself—and me—we should stop kissing before things led to the bedroom.

Now that I know he's a shifter, I get why thinking sexy thoughts would make him look at me like he's getting ready to throw me down on the nearest surface.

“You can smell when I'm...” My cheeks flush.

“I can. And it is the most intoxicating scent in the world.” He gives me a lingering, toe-curling kiss. “There's a reason I spent as long as I did with my face between your thighs.”

Words like that produce the expected result. When he groans and his fingers spasm in my hair, I guess he worked out what that result is.

He shakes his head. “You need to rest, Madi. I've barely let you come up for air.”

“Well, I'm game if you are.” I grin at him. “I'm willing to take one for the team.”

Laughing, he tucks me against his chest.

I think he's getting ready to fall asleep, something we could probably do with when he asks, “Have you thought about opening a place here?”

“I don't understand,” I say, frowning.

Pulling away from me slightly, he glances down at me. “You could be Hardin's answer to Ina Garten. I'm not entirely sure who that is, but I'm assuming it involves opening a restaurant.”

Smiling, I snuggle up against him, wanting to be closer. “She owned a fancy gourmet store called the Barefoot Contessa, and she had a cooking show on Food Network named after it. I used to watch it when I was younger. I don't know how well fancy olives and pasta salads would do here, though.”

He's silent for a beat. “So, make your own version. We only have a diner that most people go to for breakfast and lunch. There's an Italian restaurant, but it's more of a date night spot. You could do something else.”

“Something like what?”

He shrugs and resumes stroking my back. “I don’t know. Something for people like me who would rather live on granola than work out how to use their oven.”

I suck in a deep breath, horrified. “You don’t know how to ___”

Grinning, he silences me with a brief kiss. “I’m joking. I know how to use my oven. Just lack the motivation to use it. Probably like other people in town.”

I fall silent, considering it because Dean’s idea isn’t crazy.

Initially, I envisioned having my own place, but over the years, it segued into wanting to work in a professional kitchen for someone else. It felt safer than starting up on my own. I could see if they’re looking to hire in the restaurant here, but I’m not sure I want to because I love owning my business.

I poured so much love and energy into it, nearly making myself sick in the process. And I made a success of it when baking isn’t even my passion.

What if I did the same, but for something I truly love?

Instead of Madi’s Cupcakery I could be Madi’s Kitchen?
Or Madi’s Meals?

Hmm, I’d need to think about the name a little more. But I could do it.

Cooking for Dean, Dayne, and Talis was fun. When I recall her mishaps in the kitchen, my brain goes into overdrive.

I could focus my business on creating meals for couples who want to spice up their evening with a romantic meal but lack cooking experience.

Meals that would only need to be heated. Not like a ready meal you could pick up from the store. Something special with local, in-season produce. All homemade. Just not made in their kitchen.

“From my kitchen to yours,” I murmur.

That could be my slogan, or something like it.

Dean kisses the tip of my nose. I barely notice.

“Madi?” Dean is smiling at me.

I’m thinking too hard to respond. This germ of an idea is sprouting right in front of me.

There’s no reason to stop at a meal. I could go further.

Maybe even throw in a cake or a French pastry and a bottle of wine. I mean, who doesn’t like a little something sweet after a delicious meal?

They could have a nice, fancy dinner that someone else had gone to the trouble of cooking for them. All they’d need to do is the easy, sticking it in the oven and plating it up part. With detailed instructions, even someone who doesn’t know their way around their oven could do it.

As the idea continues to take shape in my mind, I tease out all the possibilities.

Including the negatives.

“I can’t imagine a lot of people live in Hardin. The business might fail,” I say.

Dean shrugs. “So deliver to the other towns nearby. Or even further afield. Test out a few different things. You’ll figure it out.”

“I might not earn enough to live on,” I tell him, the realist in me rearing its head.

“We live in the mountains. Whatever you needed to survive in the city is not what you’ll need to live comfortably here.”

He’s right. Not only about living in the city being so much more expensive.

One of the reasons Madi’s Cupcakery succeeded was because I wasn’t afraid of trying out new things. I tested recipes constantly and changed my menus so it wouldn’t get stale. And I researched new trends, flavors, and techniques. If I applied that same mindset here...

It could work.

No, I would *make* it work.

I wouldn't have to stick with romantic meals for two. I could try out meals for different occasions. Like a picnic hamper for a gentle hike in the forest or an English-style sandwich and cake lunch to have tea with friends.

The possibilities are endless.

And exciting. So, so exciting.

"Setting up in town would be expensive," I remind him as my fingers itch with the need to get started on this business right now.

I'm also asking myself why the hell I never thought to do something like this before.

Because you were afraid of failure. And you were afraid to take a chance on your own cooking. Dean gave you the confidence you were missing before. That's why.

I'd have fun creating new recipes, which is the part I love most about cooking. And it would be all on my own terms. My business. My rules.

Jenna could help me design cute boxes for the meals, and I still have Stella. There's no reason I couldn't deliver meals right to people's doors myself. It could be... amazing.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Don't get too excited, I tell myself.

Too late.

I can literally see this dream business in existence. In my mind, at least.

Succeeding, even.

Dean shrugs. "So open one later when you've built up a regular customer base, and you need a place bigger than the kitchen here."

I freeze. "The kitchen here?"

He rolls me onto my back and braces his weight on his elbows beside my head. His expression is impossible to read. “I was hoping you would move in here with me.”

“Move in together?” I whisper.

Dean gives me a crooked smile. The line forming between his brows suggests my answer is important to him. “I guess you could keep your apartment in Nebraska, but I figured the commute to Colorado might not be so fun.”

He surprises a bark of laughter out of me. “Yeah, you got that right.”

We fall silent, studying each other. I stroke my palms over his back as he waits for my answer. “This is a big deal. What if things don’t work out?”

“They will.” His response comes without hesitation.

“You sound pretty sure of yourself, Dean Blackshaw.”

He gives me a soft peck on the lips. “I am. And I’m also pretty sure that when the locals get a taste of your cooking, there’s going to be a stampede. So I want to invest in it. It’ll be like investing in Apple right from the start.”

I shake my head as a smile pulls up the corner of my lips. “It was only two meals.”

“Both were so good I haven’t looked at a granola bar the same way since. Anyone who can pull together what you did out of the scraps I had in my refrigerator and cupboards has talent.” His faint smile fades. “I know I’m asking you to give up a lot. Despite my workaholic nature, Hardin is home. My family—my pack—is here, and I can’t leave them.”

“Your pack,” I echo quietly. “That’s going to take a while to get used to.”

“Do you think you can?”

I consider it.

Not only Dean being a wolf, but staying in Hardin, our future together, and this potential new business Dean is so sure I will succeed at that he wants to invest in it. And me.

“I think I can, and I know I want to.” I smile up at him.
“Dean?”

He feathers his lips across mine. “Hmm?”

“Now that I know my strange werewolf dream wasn’t a dream at all, would you have silenced me?” I know what the answer will be before I’ve finished asking, but we’ve talked about everything else. I’d like to talk about this too.

“No.” He lifts his head, and his eyes soften. With love. “For shifters, the most important thing is keeping the secret. Protecting the pack. You stumbled into my garden and changed my life. Suddenly, I was lying to Dayne—he’s our Alpha, and leader, by the way—to protect you. His trek up here with Talis wasn’t a casual one. He was here to find out what you saw. I knew what his response would be if he found out you’d seen me shift into a wolf. My priorities changed. All I cared about was protecting you.”

I narrow my eyes, studying him.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I’m trying to imagine you killing me, and I just can’t. Even if we hadn’t fallen in love, I still couldn’t see you doing it.” Hunter’s face flashes in my mind. “I’ve met someone capable of that, and you are nothing like him.”

“Hunter?”

I nod. “He would never have stopped. I thought about him these last few days, and I realize he never would have left me alone, and if, by some miracle, he had, he’d have just moved on to torment another girl. It’s an awful thing to admit that I’m glad he’s dead, but I am.”

“Me too. I’m sorry it took me so long to get to you.”

“You were there at exactly the right time,” I say, smoothing my hands over his back.

His expression shifts from relief to guilt. “I made you crash your truck.”

“You fixed it.”

“I’m the reason you sprained your ankle,” he says.

“And you took care of me. I’m not saying those were fun things to go through. They weren’t. But I understand you were trying to protect your family.”

He kisses my forehead before gathering me in his arms. “I’m no protector. It’s the reason I bought the satellite in the first place. To protect my pack. My strengths lie in coding and programming.”

“How much was it?” I ask curiously.

He tells me, and I curse for a good minute, making his lips twitch. “You weren’t kidding when you called it an investment, were you?”

“Nope.” His smile fades. “I figured it could protect us from afar. Instead, it’s become an almost constant source of frustration.”

I press my fingers into his back, urging him down. “You’re wrong, by the way.”

“About?” he breaks our kiss to ask.

“Being a protector. You did a pretty good job of protecting me. I could be wrong, but from what your family said the last time they were here, I think they would rather see your face than have a satellite watch over them. I know I would.”

He releases a heavy sigh. “I have a beautiful woman in my arms who cooks like a dream and who cleaned out my refrigerator instead of running when she was still afraid of me. Now she’s paying me compliments? I’m never letting you up from this bed.”

“Who said anything about getting up?” I grin.

EPILOGUE



ONE WEEK LATER

A week passes at a blink-and-miss-it speed. At no point does Dean pick up his laptop.

We just talk. We talk about everything.

Dean helps me brainstorm names for my new meal delivery business. I try not to think about how much work it's going to take packing up my apartment in Nebraska, winding up Madi's Cupcakery, and re-settling in Colorado.

He's still insistent about wanting to invest in my business. More so since he told me he was selling the satellite, which gave him so many sleepless nights.

I'm not ready to take his money, despite his generosity. But I love his encouragement and his faith in me. It's priceless.

But maybe one day.

When I get too overwhelmed with everything I need to do, Dean is only too happy to distract me from my monumental to-do list by dragging me to bed. He does this often. And I never stop him. Sometimes I'm the one doing the dragging, and sometimes, we don't even make it to the bed.

But we don't spend all our time making love or talking. He takes me out on brisk, beautiful mornings, and I fall a little more in love with Colorado, and him, with each passing day.

On one of those early morning walks, he tells me about a cookout his family is having. Not only am I invited, but I'm the guest of honor. A frankly terrifying prospect when I know all of them can change into wolves.

After many assurances that everyone will be in their human form and no one will be looking to take a bite out of me, I reluctantly agree.

Wolves are social, Dean told me during one of our first morning walks, and so are shifters. And I've been keeping Dean all to myself. It's time he saw his family.

So, one late afternoon, Dean drives us deeper into the mountains, and we eventually pull up in front of a three-story house with a wrap-around porch. Taking my hand, Dean helps me out of his car, drops a kiss on my lips, and leads us away from the house and to a clearing beside a lake.

I smell the rich tang of barbecuing meat, hear the tinkle of laughter, babies giggling, and muffled conversation long before I see them.

Dean's family. His pack.

He'd told me that no one would be a wolf for this meeting. And he was right. It's a perfectly ordinary scene with a group of men and women in their mid to late twenties. They're dressed comfortably in jeans, sweats, or dresses as they stand chatting near a smoking grill.

Two toddlers, a boy in green and a girl in a yellow dress, are sitting opposite each other on the grass. Patrick and Angel. Dayne and Talis's twins. They giggle, apparently having their own conversation as Dayne and Talis watch over them with faint smiles on their faces.

The scene is so normal that I struggle to believe they're shifters.

"My family," Dean says as we step into the clearing. "Everyone, this is Madi."

It's a little intimidating when they all turn to face me. More so when they leave the grill and approach me.

They're smiling, but that doesn't change the fact they're all wolves, and I'm not.

"So you're the woman who distracted Dean so badly he forgot he's a workaholic, huh?" A dark-haired guy grins at me. "I'm Gavin."

I stop on my way to shaking the hand he offers me. "Gavin?"

He nods. "Yep."

"And you're a wolf?" I ask, shaking his hand.

He slings one arm over a pretty red-headed woman's shoulders. "Some of the time."

I study him as my dream of a talking wolf named Gavin fills my mind.

"Are you okay?" The woman beside him asks.

I shake my head. "Just remembering a weird dream I had."

She eyes me curiously before she offers her hand. "I'm Blair, Gavin's mate."

"Mate?" I recall Dean's cough halfway through him explaining how Jenna had someone in her life. "You mean like Jenna has a mate and not a man in her life?"

Dean wraps his arm around my shoulder and tucks me against his side, provoking several surprised blinks from his family. "Exactly. Madi accused me of keeping a pet wolf named Gavin. That's why she's looking at you like that."

Everyone stares at me.

My cheeks burn at their focused attention. "I thought it was a fever dream."

Dean grins at me. "She also accused me of keeping chinchillas for their fur."

"I'd crashed my truck into a tree. I was probably concussed," I say.

He kisses my forehead. "I never did show you the mice I trained to perform circus tricks, did I?"

"Ha-ha," I deadpan, wrapping my arm around Dean's hips and leaning against him.

When I turn to the others, they're gazing at Dean as if he were a stranger. "What?"

"Just not used to seeing Dean this happy or without a cell phone or his laptop in hand." Talis grins. "It's a good look on him."

"And on you, too." Dayne is studying me. "Dean and Marshall said they'd dealt with that Nebraska trouble."

He's the leader here, Dean said. The Alpha. I guess he wants to make sure his family is safe.

I nod. "It's all over now. Dean asked me to stay, and I said yes."

"Hi, Madi." The blonde woman standing beside Marshall greets me with a shy smile. I recognize Jenna from a photograph on her website. She has the beginnings of a baby bump under her short-sleeved, knee-length blue dress.

"Hi Jenna, nice to meet you." I return her smile. "Finally."

"You too. What about your cupcake business?" she asks. "Are you going to run it from here?"

I glance up at Dean, who's smiling down at me. "No, I think it's time I did what I truly love. But I wanted to speak to you about designing some packaging for me."

Jenna's eyes brighten. "I'd love to. I'll give you the family discount."

"What's that?" I ask.

Marshall grins at me. "Free. Family discount means it's free."

Are they saying I'm family? Because the thought is making the back of my eyelids burn.

Before we can continue our conversation, a ringing cell phone interrupts us. Dayne fishes his cell phone out of his back pocket, glances at the screen, and answers it.

"Hey, Jackson. What's up?"

"I might need a favor from you," an unfamiliar male voice says loudly enough for me to hear.

I lean into Dean, capturing his attention to whisper. "Who's Jackson?"

"Extended family," Talis answers as she bends to pick up Angel, who's whimpering, a sign she's not happy about something.

“They’re based in Dawley,” Dean explains. “We don’t get to see them as much as we all wish we could.”

“Are they like you?” I ask as a man with fall leaves-colored hair and bright green eyes starts bickering with a beautiful mink-haired woman with dark eyes.

“Those two...” Dean gives them a resigned look and sighs.

“What about them?” I whisper.

“Hallee and Nathan.” Dean doesn’t even try to keep his voice down. “If an asteroid were heading right for us, they’d spend their last precious seconds arguing with each other.”

The objects of our focus snap their heads our way.

“*Hey!*” they call in unison as everyone laughs and agrees.

Hallee glares. “Not true. I’d kiss Kier.”

The tall, dark-haired man standing beside her, Kier presumably, sighs. “Baby, there would definitely be some arguing before that kiss.”

I smother a smile as, in the middle of denying any such thing, Nathan says something about a blank journal that soon has them returning to their bickering.

Kier meets my eye and shakes his head, his expression resigned.

I’m not the only one who grins at him.

Jackson is still talking loudly enough that even though Dayne doesn’t have the loudspeaker on, I can hear everything he’s saying. Since everyone else has their head angled Dayne’s way, I figure it’s okay to listen in to their conversation as well.

“Dayne, we’ve had a couple of women join our pack,” Jackson says. “One is settling in all right. The other is struggling to find her place. I wanted to know if you’d be willing to take Clara in.”

Dayne glances at Talis. They share a thoughtful look before Talis half-shrugs, and Dayne nods. “What does Clara want?”

“Regan thinks she’s working up the courage to ask to leave but isn’t there yet. If you’re amenable to it, you’d need to send someone down to collect her. I can’t spare anyone right now,” Jackson says.

Hallee and Nathan’s bickering grows so loud that Patrick whimpers, and Dayne bends to pick up his son. When he has Patrick resting against his chest, he focuses on Nathan, and his eyes narrow. “Leave it to me. I know exactly who to send...”

We’re heading to Dawley—and the Stone Pack—in Possessive Alpha.

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EXCERPT FROM THE WEAKEST WOLF

I'm at the back of the room, but that doesn't mean I can't feel the intensity of our new alpha's verdant stare.

It's an electric current that runs through me like a live charge under my skin. When goosebumps spring up over my bare arms, I lift my hands to rub at them.

Remember where you are, Sierra.

Just in time, I catch myself and curl my fingers into fists so tight that I won't forget again. The pain will help me remember.

You're the same as everyone else. Act like it.

In a dining room too small to hold sixty shifters, when Galen Hunt howled, we crammed ourselves in it with room to spare. That doesn't mean it isn't stifling, as I'm once again reminded that only a handful know what hygiene means. Some scents are clean, others less so, but most are downright nasty.

Galen's eyes make another slow circuit of the room.

Mine continue their journey over the expanse of golden muscle he's poured into an insubstantial wooden dining chair.

Who takes over a new pack and introduces themselves wearing nothing but blood-splattered skin? Did he lose his clothes along the way or just plain forget them? Not that I'm complaining, but still.

He's almost perfect. Too bad his one obvious flaw is one I could never overlook.

Finished with my perusal while he's still busy with his, I inch back. One small step at a time. Not fast enough to attract attention, or slow enough that it'll take forever to get out. At the right pace. A speed I've had years to work on.

Whatever else he's called us here for has nothing to do with me. And I have plans to make.

Three steps back, two to the right, and I'll hit the hallway. From the hallway, it'll be another handful of steps to the front door of the farmhouse, and then I'm out.

Just like all the other times the old alphas have howled at us to gather, I was one of the last to arrive. Last one in means the first one out. It also means an almost bearable distance between me and whichever alpha happened to be in charge at the time. Tonight is no exception.

I take another half step back, my full attention on the new alpha in our midst whom I'm slowly backing away from, just like all my packmates.

"Sierra Stone." The new alpha's voice is a low growl that electrifies me.

My packmates twist and turn just enough that suddenly the only thing between us is empty space.

Piercing green eyes, framed with long dark lashes a shade darker than his chestnut brown hair, land on me—*directly* on me—for the first time. And I do what no self-respecting wolf shifter would ever do: I freeze like a deer caught in headlights.

EXCERPT FROM THE ALPHA'S SILENT MATE

The cold penetrates so deep into my fur that shivers shake my body, and I know I'll never get warm again. But the will to fight, the strength to pull myself free, evaporated long ago. Now I just wait for death.

It never comes.

Suddenly it's no longer day, but night. The cold remains because it touches my soul.

A man's vicious swear cuts clean through the silence, and a small whimper slips free before I can stop it. Voices can only mean one thing: He's here. He found me.

When footsteps move toward me, my heart beats in time to each heavy tread, the last beat harder than the first.

I try not to breathe.

If you don't move, he will leave.

The weight pinning me to the ground is ripped away and I swallow a scream, already flinching before I realize it isn't him. It's someone I've never seen before—but that doesn't mean I don't know who he is.

Or *what* he is.

A bond snaps into place. An unbreakable one.

Mate.

A naked man with shoulder-length, white-blond hair and a blue-green stare gazes down at me, his eyes widening with the

same realization. He stretches a hand toward me, and panic gives me the motivation I was missing before.

Staggering to my feet, I back away but lack the energy to go far.

A step.

That's all I can manage, and even then, it takes everything I have. My muscles tremble and I sink back to the wet ground, panting with exhaustion.

The man draws his hand back with a gentle smile before sinking into a crouch so close to me that I know I'll never relax. "It's okay. I won't hurt you."

It's a lie.

The last man smiled as he said it. Now my pack is gone. Everyone but me.

"Shay!"

I don't look away from the man with powerful shoulders and the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in my life.

He doesn't rise from his crouch, and he doesn't move away. All he does is angle his head a little to the side, in the direction the shout came from. "What?"

The same man shouts back. "We have a live one. He—"

I know it can't be my pack. I know it can't be my family, because I'm wearing their blood on my fur.

"Find out what you can, and kill him," Shay interrupts.

After his last words, he seems to no longer care. His eyes refocus on mine. "Can you shift, pup?"

He'll never learn that I'm no pup, because I'll stay a wolf until I've forgotten what it feels like to be a human girl. Or he kills me. Just because he's my mate, it doesn't mean I can trust him.

His eyes soften. "That's okay. You must be cold."

A red-haired man, just as naked as Shay, approaches before he jerks to a stop, his face twisted in horror. "Fuck,

she's covered in—”

Shay's smile doesn't shift. “Get me a blanket. Use language like that around her again and I'll cut out your tongue. Go. *Now.*”

My eyes widen.

He must be the alpha, even though he doesn't look like he's older than twenty-five. That means he's the strongest and the fastest. It means he's the one I should fear.

Once I've lowered my guard, he'll attack. That's what he must be doing. So I can never relax. But he studies me with a faint smile on his face and makes no move toward me.

In moments, the same man returns with a thick blue blanket he hands to the alpha. After a rapid glance at me, he backs up, this time not saying a word.

The alpha—Shay—opens the blanket and holds it up. “Come on, let's get you warm.”

I don't move.

When his smile fades, I tense to run. I won't get far, but I have to try. “Pup, I would kill anyone who tried to hurt you. With me, you will always be safe. *Always.*”

I want to believe him. With every fiber of my body, I want to believe what he says is true. But I can't. I can't trust anyone. Not even myself. I only have to take in all the death that surrounds me, scents the air, and covers my fur to know that.

If I could run, I would never stop.

“Can I come to you, then? Just to wrap you in the blanket. We can stay here for as long as you want.”

Seconds turn into minutes. But when he doesn't lunge or do anything to threaten me, I nod once.

Just as he said, he shifts a little closer and wraps me in the blanket. The moment he's done it, he retreats, this time further away. To a distance where I think I might be able to relax. A little.

Instead of dropping into a crouch, he rests his back on the nearest tree with his legs stretched out in front of him.

I keep my gaze trained on his face. The forest is dark, but it could never be dark enough to hide all the bodies I desperately don't want to see.

It takes a long time for the warmth of the blanket to reach my bones, but eventually—hours later—it does. Wherever the rest of the alpha's men have gone, I don't know.

For now, it's just us in the dark and the cold. He never complains about the soggy ground or when a biting wind lashes him. He merely sits with his eyes fixed on a point in the distance.

I think he could stay that way forever.

The sun is peeking through the trees when I stir.

His eyes return to me. "You ready for me to take you somewhere warm, pup?"

After a long moment, I nod.

Moving slowly, he lifts me in his arms and carries me away from my dead pack.

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