



Lucy's

LAWMAN

PINE HAVEN SHIFTERS

SARAH DINAN

LUCY'S LAWMAN

Pine Haven Shifters Book 1

SARAH DINAN

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Chapter One

“Now those are some grey clouds.” Lucy glanced at the sky warily while the shop owner loaded her car. She wasn’t a fan of storms and with the way those dark puffs were closing in around the mountains, the urge to get on the road was real.

It was at least a solid hour’s drive back to Pine Haven Falls.

Lucy grinned as she thought about her haul. Between all the stores she’d hit up today, she wouldn’t need to leave the cabin for weeks. Okay, maybe she’d need to get some more eggs or fresh produce, but after this trip to Pineberry Springs, she’d be stocked for a while. Which meant she could focus on her art instead of making her grandfather’s old cabin homier.

When she’d inherited the place, she’d thought of listing it as a vacation rental. But the moment she’d seen it in person again, she’d changed her mind. Tucked away near a river amongst acres of old-growth pines, Yayo’s cabin was a poster child for serenity in nature and a perfect place for Lucy to focus on her art. She was working on several commissioned pieces currently, and something about the remote location called to her. So, she’d sublet her San Diego apartment and made the trek from the bustling city to the pristine mountain forest in northern New Mexico with big plans to spend the summer painting.

The cabin was in such a remote area she didn’t have many neighbors. Aside from some shop owners and the service providers who’d helped with the renovations, she hadn’t met many people yet either. Everyone she’d met so far had been lovely though, and with their help, Lucy had turned her late grandfather’s retirement spot into her new home, and his old workshop into a state-of-the-art studio. It had taken a few weeks to get used to the slower pace and all the nature here, but she was settling in nicely.

As the sky darkened, Lucy scanned the road, worried about wildlife. There was no shoulder between the pavement and the dense spruce and pine forest on this stretch of the two-lane highway. Thankfully, it wasn't dusk yet, so there were no deer sightings.

Lucy tightened her grip on the steering wheel as a low rumble of thunder sounded. Glancing at the speedometer, she risked giving the car a little more gas. She didn't want to get caught in the storm.

"Looks like it'll be a big one." She sighed, catching the way the clouds were lining up.

Storms were not her favorite.

She used to love them when she was little. Her mom had told her thunderstorms were really angels bowling. That when there was a loud crack of thunder immediately after a bright flash of lightning, it meant an angel had bowled a strike. Lucy had loved the visual image. Now, though, she knew storms had nothing to do with angels and just wanted to get home and hunker down. She'd bet that's what all the animals were doing, bedding down somewhere safe and—

As a large black blur shot across the road, Lucy hit the brakes, swerving to avoid it. The impact was inevitable, though. Her car clipped the creature, the thick thud on her grill underscored by another rumble of thunder.

Anxiety and adrenaline flooded her system as she struggled to catch her breath and peel her hands from the steering wheel. Her fingers didn't want to respond, her knuckles whitening as realization set in.

She'd hit something.

Hard.

Lucy focused on her breathing, trying to calm herself, but it didn't help the shaking in her limbs or the swirling nausea in her belly. She struggled to swallow, fighting back tears as she got out of the car and saw the wounded animal lying on the edge of the road.

A dog.

She'd hit a dog.

It wasn't moving, but that didn't mean she'd killed it.

Lucy took another deep breath, wiping her sweaty palms on her shorts as she looked around for other dogs, or cars, or... anything. But there was no one else on the two-lane road, no one coming to claim this creature.

No one coming to help her. She was alone in this.

Story of her life.

With a heavy sigh, Lucy willed herself to focus. That storm was definitely on its way, but the dog still hadn't moved. She approached it cautiously, with her palms out in front of her, wondering how much damage had been done.

"I'm so sorry, doggie," she murmured. "I didn't see you until you were right in front of me."

She'd never even seen a dog out here before. Deer, elk, coyotes and foxes, sure, but not dogs. This stretch of highway went through undeveloped land, and to her knowledge, there weren't any houses nearby.

Lucy crouched down by the big dog, murmuring apologies while placing a hand on its side to see if it was still breathing. He opened his eyes at her touch, lifting his head slightly, and she pulled back, shocked at the startling shade of blue.

"Well, you must be part husky," she smiled.

She'd always loved the way huskies looked with their crystal blue eyes and wolf-like features. This dog's coloring wasn't like a husky, though. His fur was all black. She didn't see any blood, but one of his legs was bent at a funny angle.

He'd need medical help.

Lucy reached a shaky hand to pet the dog's flank, hoping he'd be okay.

“Where’s your collar, buddy?” She couldn’t believe someone would let such a beautiful pet run around without identification. “We need to call your family.”

The dog closed its eyes again, dropping its head back to the ground, and Lucy felt a pang of fear.

“Don’t die, doggie.” The urgency for this creature to live was real. She hadn’t meant to hurt it. She hadn’t even seen it until it had nearly crossed the road. “Let me help you, okay?” She begged. “Please don’t die.”

As Lucy ran to the back of her Rogue, she knew what she was about to do was completely insane. She didn’t know the first thing about dogs. She’d never had any kind of pet before, but she couldn’t leave him on the side of the road like that. Especially not with the storm coming.

In no time, she’d rearranged her cargo hold and laid a blanket down for the injured animal.

“I promise I won’t hurt you.” She kept her voice low as she approached him again. “I’m going to help you, buddy, okay?”

Lucy kept up the soothing litany as she squatted down and slid her arms under the dog, hoping like hell he wouldn’t bite her when she was just trying to help him. Though she didn’t want to exacerbate any issues or add to his pain by jostling him, she couldn’t leave him on the side of the road, either.

As she repositioned her hold around the enormous dog, Lucy lamented the fact she hadn’t been doing deadlifts lately. It had been weeks since she’d been to a gym, and this dog had to weigh over a hundred pounds.

Carrying him was awkward, especially trying to be mindful of his hurt leg, but Lucy got the dog into the back of her car without getting mauled. Which she totally counted as a win.

“Okay, doggie.” She smiled into the rearview mirror, trying to reassure him. Even though she was pretty sure he had

no idea what she was saying, she talked to him anyway. “I’m going to take care of you.”

As she refocused on the road, she wondered how she’d do that. She’d never had a pet in her life.

“I’m going to find you a doctor, and we’ll get your leg fixed right up.” She promised.

That one might actually be tricky. She was driving away from civilization right now, not toward it. And the closest town to her cabin was actually just a village, with less than a thousand inhabitants. She’d only ever gone to Pine Haven Falls for groceries, but surely they had to have a veterinarian, right?

Lucy pulled over to check her cell phone. Great, no service. With a frustrated sigh, she pulled back onto the road. Patchy service was normal for this part of the drive, but it would have been nice to have been able to look up a veterinarian and make an appointment.

As the sky darkened and more thunder rolled, Lucy wondered what the hell she’d been thinking putting that wounded animal into the back of her car. She didn’t know the first thing about dogs. And with the way small towns closed early and the impending storm, the chances of getting him the help he needed today were slim.

Lucy glanced into her rearview mirror, catching sight of the injured creature curled in a huddle on her picnic blanket.

He wasn’t moving.

“It’s okay, doggie,” she said softly. “Just hold on, okay? Just hold on.”

God, she hoped he didn’t die on her.

Chapter Two

“See?” Lucy told her reflection several hours later. “Everything has a way of working out.”

She smiled to herself as she brushed her teeth. As evenings went, this one wasn't half bad. Sure, she'd hit a dog, but thanks to that veterinarian in Española being willing to do a video consultation, she knew he wasn't going to die.

Not tonight, anyway.

Doctor Gomez had been worried about the dog's pelvis, so she'd promised to bring him to the clinic as soon as she could for x-rays. She didn't relish the idea of picking him up and putting him in her car again, though. For starters, he was hurt, not to mention how freaking heavy he was.

As she headed back into the bedroom, a huffing sound drew her eyes to the bed. The dog was watching her over his shoulder with those beautiful blue eyes.

“How are you feeling? Did you get enough to eat?”

She didn't know why she kept talking to the dog. It's not like he could actually understand her. Still, she'd read that dogs could sense human emotions, and she didn't want him picking up on her fear.

That storm was really raging now, heavy winds driving the rain into the side of the house. Peals of thunder cracking so regularly they reminded her of the ocean at high tide.

Lucy checked the diffuser on her dresser, trying to distract herself. “I read frankincense is good for dogs.” She smiled at him, appreciating the way his ears perked up. “I hope you like it.”

She slipped off her robe, laying it on a chair before climbing into bed and sliding over under the covers, closer to the dog.

“You’re such a good boy.” She praised, stroking her fingertips along his velvety ears. “Such a tame dog, and so soft.”

The fact that he let her touch him astounded her. She was the whole reason he was injured. If not for her, he’d probably be at home with his family curled up on someone else’s bed.

“I’m so sorry, doggie.” She said softly. “I didn’t see you.” Lucy slid her palm over his head and along his spine. He was beautiful, his dark coat shiny, those eyes brilliant blue. “The vet said I can’t give you anything for pain, but I wish I could.”

She made another round, sweeping her hand along his soft fur from the top of his head to the midpoint of his body.

“He said human painkillers were toxic for most dogs and we have to wait until he sees you to give you anything like that. But thank goodness for the internet, right?” Lucy smiled, petting along the dog’s flank again.

Thanks to Google, she’d been able to get the telemedicine visit with a veterinarian from Española. It was a few hours’ drive down the mountain from her, but much closer than Santa Fe. She planned to take the dog to see Dr. Gomez in the morning if the storm had passed by then.

“God, it’s really coming down, isn’t it?” She shuddered as what sounded like hail hit the house and another boom of thunder crashed outside. “I don’t like storms.” She shared, even though he probably didn’t understand her. “I lost my parents in one.”

She focused on the dog, watching her fingers slip through his dark fur as she shoved memories of that horrible day from her mind, the turbulence, the fear.

“If you weren’t here, I’d totally be in my bathtub.” She admitted.

The dog shifted, curling in on himself toward her.

“Are you cold?” She stroked his head again, being careful to stay away from his muzzle. He’d been docile so far, but

those teeth were sharp and the internet had said to keep your hands away from dogs' mouths. "I'll be right back."

Lucy shuffled out from under the covers, realizing the difference in temperature outside her blankets.

"Poor baby." She cooed as she walked over to the fireplace, knowing the dog must be miserable. "It's cold outside the covers."

She'd thought with his fur he'd be warm enough, but maybe with his injury he needed things cozier. Lucy shifted the grate and got to work. In no time, she had a cheerful fire laid and burning bright.

"How's that, better?" She glanced back at the dog. "Oh my gosh, you're so cute!"

He'd laid his head down on the mattress, covering his eyes with his paws like a child counting for hide-and-seek.

"I'll bet your family taught you that." She grinned, making her way back to the bed. "I hope you're not scared, too." She slipped under the covers again, scooting back over to the dog. "Would you like more pets?"

He lifted his head as he made a chuffing sound and thumped his tail.

"I'll take that as a yes." She giggled, reaching out to pet him.

He'd done that same thing when she'd fed him tonight, too. She hadn't been sure what dogs ate outside of packaged dog food, but a quick internet search had let her know they could eat quite a few of the same things humans did.

She'd made them roasted lamb, baby potatoes and green beans. The dog had seemed to love the food, making that sound with his breath and wagging his tail whenever she'd checked in with him. He'd even licked his plate after both servings.

Lucy switched off her lamp and slid back over toward the dog, wrapping the blanket he was lying on around him before

snuggling under her own.

Now she understood why people enjoyed having pets. The companionship was nice. Honestly, the only reason she wasn't hiding under a blanket in her bathtub right now was because of the dog. She couldn't wait for him to see the things she'd ordered him while she'd cooked dinner. Toys and pillows and treats that would help him feel more at home while he recovered from the accident.

A pang of guilt swept Lucy as she thought more about the situation. This dog must be someone's beloved pet. He was so well-mannered and calm, so kempt and soft. There was no way he was a stray. While it was nice having him with her, Lucy wondered who he belonged to and if they were missing him.

She wished she could keep him.

As though he sensed her dismay, the dog nudged her hand with his muzzle, making a different sort of sound that ended in a little whine.

Lucy pet his head again, murmuring soothing things to him in case he'd made that sound because he was hurting. He may not be her dog, but she was the reason he was here, and she wanted to take care of him.

He made a sort of purring sound as she stroked his velvety ears and Lucy chuckled. She'd had no idea dogs could purr. Man, she had a lot to learn about pets, didn't she?

While there was a lot about dogs she had zero clue on, as she pet this one, there was one thing she knew for sure.

She liked having him with her.

It was nice not being alone.

Chapter Three

As she worked on one of her commissions, Lucy couldn't stop smiling.

The morning had been gorgeous, but then, that's how it usually was around here after a big storm. The earth seeming to glow as it dried out, tiny raindrops lingering on the pine needles and forming prisms for the sunlight. It wasn't just the fact that the storm had passed that had her grinning, though.

Atlas was going to be okay.

Sure, he'd broken a leg, but according to the x-rays, he was going to heal just fine, which was a relief to know. Even though he technically wasn't her dog, she'd had to name him to get treatment today, and naming him made things feel more official.

Atlas.

She glanced over at him, lying on one of the new beds she'd bought him.

"Poor baby," she cooed. "You look wiped out."

That trip to Española hadn't been easy on him, on either of them, if she was honest. Not only had she had to load Atlas into the car again, she'd had to witness him being poked and prodded, which he'd absolutely hated. At least the doctor had let her stay with Atlas throughout the examination. But even with her petting him and trying to keep him calm, he'd still growled a bunch and made Dr. Gomez and his staff nervous. Then again, the veterinarian had originally thought Atlas was a wolf, as though anyone would actually have a wolf for a pet.

Lucy chuckled to herself about that as she glanced at Atlas again. Man, he wasn't looking so hot. Chances were good the dose of meds she'd just given him had more to do with the glassy look in his eyes than fatigue, but she was glad to know he wasn't hurting.

“I wish you could speak English, Atlas.” Then she’d know exactly how he felt right now instead of making guesses. “You just rest.” She encouraged him. “It’ll help you heal.”

She went back to her painting for a while, adding thin layers to the piece, stepping back occasionally to witness the play of light before adding more. After a while, she took a break to check on Atlas.

He was still lying on the cushy dog bed, but he wasn’t sleeping. In fact, his breathing was off, his side rising and falling in an erratic rhythm.

“Atlas?” she pet between his ears, wondering what was up. “How you doing, buddy?”

He tried lifting his head and—

“Oh my gosh,” she giggled. “You look absolutely stoned.”

As his eyelids dropped, Lucy felt a pang of guilt.

“I’m sorry.” She stroked his soft ears. “That was rude of me.”

He couldn’t help how he looked after all.

“You’ve had a big day, haven’t you?” She soothed, running her hand along his spine. “You just relax.”

He dropped his head onto his paws and as she continued to stroke his fur, a sense of unease slithered through Lucy’s gut. Atlas normally watched her while she pet him. He was usually alert and attentive, tracking her movements and making that little purring sound. He hadn’t been this docile and lethargic after the veterinarian had dosed him with pain meds earlier. Then again, he’d been too busy growling at the guy and his assistant to relax, hadn’t he?

Still, the fact that Atlas could barely seem to lift his head right now frightened her.

“Atlas?”

When he didn't even crack an eyelid, she knew something was wrong. Following her instincts, she went for her phone. She didn't know what was going on with him, but she was pretty sure he needed help.

She only hoped she could get it fast enough.

On that note, she called the clinic in Pine Haven Falls. Her call was answered promptly, and she was put through to the doctor right away.

"Hi, um, my dog is sick." She said lamely, fighting back tears. "Please, can you come see him? I don't think I can get him in the car again today."

As though the doctor could sense her distress, he cut right to the chase, asking for particulars and arranging a house call. He had a pleasant voice that somehow soothed her, even across the phone line, and by the time she hung up, Lucy was feeling a little more hopeful. Dr. Truett had sounded like a nice man and a competent doctor.

She only hoped he'd get here quickly.

Atlas wasn't looking so good.

~ ~ ~

By the time the cavalry arrived, Atlas was out cold and Lucy was nearly beside herself with worry. She still couldn't fathom what had gone wrong. All she'd done was give Atlas a dose of the meds the vet in Española had prescribed. He hadn't reacted like this at all to the meds they'd given him at the vet's office. Lucy sighed as she headed out to greet her guest, thankful that he'd come and hopeful that the new doctor could get to the bottom of things and help Atlas.

If that dog died on her watch, she'd never forgive herself.

Lucy stepped out of the studio, surprised to see two men climbing out of the vet's van. She'd only called one.

"Ms. Vasquez?" The tallest one smiled pleasantly and Lucy was drawn to his eyes. They were kind, but mismatched - one green with brown flecks, the other a brilliant blue. "I'm

Doctor Greyson Truett. We spoke on the phone. And this is my colleague, Maddox Beck,” he indicated the hulking man with deep amber eyes and rich brown hair.

“Hello.” She smiled.

God, how rude was she with the staring?

But honestly, these men were unlike anyone she’d hung out with before. They were huge compared to her, and she wasn’t a small woman.

“Please, call me Lucy. Won’t you come in?” She headed for the house, waving them inside. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, thank you.” Doctor Truett had a pleasant smile.

“Nice place,” the burly brunette said.

“Thanks.” Lucy smiled, trying not to stare.

Maddox. He was called Maddox. And there was totally a gym in Pine Haven Falls judging by the muscles on him.

On both of them, actually.

Even the doctor, who was more rangy in build than his assistant, was obviously sinewy and strong.

“How long’ve you been here?” Dr. Truett asked, taking a seat in one of her armchairs.

“Just a few weeks officially, but I’ve been having work done here for months.”

“So, you bought the place then.” Maddox’s amber eyes seemed to bore into her and Lucy shook her head.

“No. This was my grandfather’s property and as his only living kin, I inherited it when he died. He loved this place.” She smiled sadly, looking around the living room and remembering how Yayo had decorated it with his fly-fishing stuff. “I didn’t have the heart to sell it so, I had it renovated and decided to spend the summer here.”

And why was she telling them all that, anyway? Maybe she should get out more, make some actual friends in the area.

“I’m really worried about my dog.” She blurted, trying to stop the small talk. She focused on the veterinarian, who’d perched on the edge of the armchair, both hands on the old-fashioned black doctor’s bag in his lap. “Can you examine him please, Dr. Truett? I think the medicine the other vet gave us messed him up.”

“Medicine?” Maddox raised his dark eyebrows. “What medicine?”

Lucy shook her head, glancing at the doctor. “You didn’t brief your assistant on the way?”

Dr. Truett smiled wryly. “I didn’t give specifics. Where’s the patient?”

As the doctor stood to follow her, Lucy was surprised all over again by how tall he was. He had to be over six and a half feet. And with his silver-flecked black hair and mismatched eyes, he looked more like a rock star than a veterinarian.

While she led him to her studio, Lucy reminded him again of the details of the accident and her interactions with the other doctor, as well as the treatment and medications he’d given the dog.

“Atlas.” Dr. Truett chuckled, squatting down to examine him. “Like the titan?”

“Yes.” Lucy grinned, glad he knew her source material. “Do you need anything to help him?”

“Just a few minutes with him to start.” He smiled. “Would you mind putting a kettle on, please? I think I might like some tea after all.”

Lucy nodded, glad to have something to do other than fidget nervously while watching the doctor work. She knew Atlas was breathing, but it was labored. And while he’d completely zonked out, she didn’t know if that was a good thing or not.

“Thank you, Doctor Truett.”

Something about him put her at ease and let her know Atlas was in good hands.

“Call me Grey.” He smiled. “And I’m happy to help.”

“I hope you can. He’s a sweet dog.”

“Is he.” Grey chuckled. “Looks more like a wolf to me.”

“That’s what the other vet said.” Lucy frowned. “I think he’s a mix or something, but I don’t know for sure. He’s super sweet, though.” She smiled. “He made me feel safe during the storm last night.”

“Did he now?” Grey gave the dog an inscrutable look. “Will you give us a few minutes, Lucy?”

“Oh, sure.” She nodded. “I’ll just go start that tea.”

When she stepped out of the studio, she was surprised to find Maddox just outside the door, standing like a guard with his arms crossed over his chest, staring into the distance in complete silence.

“I’m going to put the kettle on. Would you like some tea? Or maybe something else to drink?”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having.” Maddox declared.

“Tea it is then.” She smiled.

As she made her way back into the house, the realization that she had two complete strangers on her property set in and Lucy found herself wishing Atlas was conscious. She knew he wasn’t really her dog, but she liked having him around.

While he was docile and kind to her, he’d growled at nearly everyone they’d encountered today whenever they’d gotten close to her, which had honestly made her happy. Atlas’s behavior had made her feel like maybe he’d seen her as *his* human or something.

But maybe all that growling was why the vet had prescribed opioids along with the anti-inflammatories. She’d

read that aggression could be a sign of pain. Maybe the doctor had accidentally overdosed her dog because he'd been so growly?

Lucy sighed. Whatever was going on with Atlas, Grey was on it. She knew he and his colleague wanted to help, and she was determined to do whatever she could to support them.

She just wanted Atlas to be okay.

Chapter Four

Lucy glanced at the clock, wondering how things were going behind that closed door. Maddox had made quick work of moving Atlas from her studio to her bedroom earlier, so he'd be more comfortable. He'd been gentle about it too, carrying Atlas like a puppy instead of the big dog he was. No wonder Grey had brought the guy along.

They'd been holed up in her room with Atlas for a while now though, and all the no-news was making Lucy nervous. She took a deep breath, willing herself to chill out. There was no need to worry. Atlas was being overseen by a team of professionals. He was sure to pull through.

She glanced at the clock again, wondering if she should offer to make dinner for them, or if that would be weird. Man, she hated this lull.

Even though she knew it was irrational, Lucy couldn't seem to shake the sense that something important was happening behind that closed door. Unable to stand the silence any longer, she knocked and called out.

"Everything okay in there?"

"Actually, Lucy," Grey replied, "can you come here a moment?"

Though his voice was just as calm as before, a dread settled in the pit of her belly as she stepped into the room.

Maddox sat in a chair next to the bed with a hand on Atlas's head, while Grey stood beside him, petting Atlas's flank. There was a distinct air of disquiet in the room, the men's faces drawn, as though they'd just been through something serious.

"What's going on?" She whispered, focusing on Grey's hand, wondering if Atlas was breathing or not.

“Lucy,” Maddox’s voice was rough. “Come, sit here.” He stood up, keeping his hand on Atlas’s head while shifting to the side to make room for her.

Lucy didn’t hesitate. In a moment, she’d crossed the room and settled into the chair.

“Why don’t you talk to him?” Grey encouraged.

“Atlas?” He didn’t move. “Are you sleeping, Atlas? I’m sorry to bug you, but there are a couple of guys here who want you to wake up as much as I do.”

She felt a little silly talking to the sleeping dog, but there was a sliver of relief in knowing he wasn’t dead. She could see his belly subtly rising and falling under Grey’s hand, and at least the rhythm of his breathing was steadier now.

“Can I pet him?” She asked the doctor. “When we were at the other vet, he liked that. It made him less growly.”

Grey exchanged a look with Maddox, then nodded, moving a little to the left so she could reach between them.

“He growled earlier?”

“Yes.” She flattened her palm along Atlas’s soft fur, loving the way it enveloped her hand. “I don’t think he liked Dr. Gomez very much. He growled at him during the video consult too.”

While Lucy pet Atlas’s flank, she shared her suspicion that the growling was the reason for all the medicines, and her concern that the dosage was too high.

“I mean, he didn’t even whine yesterday.”

“At all?”

Lucy slid her hand down Atlas’s foreleg, thinking about Grey’s question. “Well, there was a tiny whine at bedtime. But I think he just wanted me to pet him.”

She remembered him nudging her hand with his muzzle and glanced at Atlas’s face. His eyes were still closed, and Maddox still had his hand on Atlas’s head.

“Oh, Atlas.” Lucy sighed. “Please wake up, baby. We all want you to be better.”

Lucy kept up with the talking, telling Atlas what a good boy he was and how she was going to make chicken for dinner, and he needed to wake up so he could eat and play with his new toys.

But aside from a sort of sigh and a deepening of his inhales, he didn't stir.

After a while, Maddox cleared his throat and suggested they try something else. His somber tone dampened some of the hope she'd had earlier.

“Do you think he's going to wake up, Grey?”

“Eventually.” He crossed his arms, gazing down at Atlas with a frown. “It appears his body doesn't agree with the drugs that veterinarian ordered.”

Lucy felt tears prick her eyes at the news. She tried blinking them away, but they just pooled, making her vision blurry.

“I didn't mean to hurt him.” She whispered.

She'd followed the other doctor's protocols to the letter, giving Atlas a fresh dose right on time. She'd had no idea the medicine wasn't the right thing for him.

“It's okay.” Maddox soothed, setting a hand on the arm of her chair. “No one believes you did this maliciously. It's clear you care for him.”

“I've never had a dog before.” She shook her head. “I didn't know what to do. I just did what—”

“You did beautifully, Lucy.” Grey said softly. “You did more than most would have.”

“But he's going to die, and it's all my fault.”

Great, now the tears were really flowing, but Lucy didn't do anything about them. She hated the thought of Atlas hurting.

Or dying.

“It’s all my fault.”

“Shh.” Grey soothed. “There’s no reason to cry. He’s going to be okay. And it’s not all your fault.”

“I hit him with my car.” Lucy swiped at her eyes with her knuckles. “None of this would have happened if I hadn’t hit him.”

“Why didn’t you call Grey first?” Maddox asked. “Pine Haven is much closer.”

Lucy shook her head.

“I didn’t know if there was a vet in town. And with the storm coming in and how late in the day it was, I assumed everything would be closed.” She wiped her eyes again. “Dr. Gomez was still open and agreed to do a video consult. I only took Atlas to him because of that consultation. I thought consistency of care was a good thing.”

“It is.” Grey nodded. “And I’m happy to see to his care from here on out.”

Lucy gave the doctor a weak smile. “Thanks.”

Grey crouched down, his face on the level with hers. “We’ll need to move him, Lucy. He can’t stay here.”

While his tone was gentle, the ferocity in his mismatched eyes let her know this doctor was determined to save his patient, and he couldn’t do it at her house.

“I know.” She nodded sadly. “I guess I…”

God, he was just a dog. And he wasn’t even hers. Somehow, though, the thought of Atlas being taken away made her heart ache.

“Can I stay with him? At your clinic, can I…”

Geez, she was losing it, wasn’t she? This is what happened when you didn’t have friends or family, you got

nutso attached to an animal. No wonder some people she knew had so many pets.

“I don’t think it’s wise for you to be there.” Grey said softly, compassion in that mismatched gaze. “You’ve done a great job of looking after him, but it’s our turn now.”

“But doesn’t he need care, like a home? A family?”

“He has a family.” Maddox said gruffly.

Lucy turned to him, an ache blooming in her chest.

“Do you know them?”

Pine Haven Falls was a small community. If Atlas’s family lived there, these guys were bound to know them. But then again, she’d found Atlas in that no-man’s-land on the way home from Pineberry Springs. She didn’t know where he was from.

Maddox glanced at Grey, then shook his head.

“Lucy,” Grey put his hand on her shoulder, giving her a gentle squeeze. “I need to take him to the clinic.”

Atlas made a new sound, a low rumble in his chest that drew everyone’s eyes.

“Is he—”

“This is a sign.” Grey said. “He’s starting to come around.” Grey stood, putting himself between her and Atlas.

“It may be best if you step out for a bit.” He said calmly.

“Okay.” Though she’d much rather have stayed with them, Grey smiled reassuringly as he walked her to the door.

The fact that the doctor was so calm and Maddox so self-contained right now was encouraging. There was no reason to imagine the worst. These guys were professionals, and they had everything under control.

“I’ll see you in a bit, then.” She nodded at the doorway. “Thanks again.”

“Happy to help.” Grey smiled. “We’ll take good care of him.”

She knew Atlas was in excellent hands, but she didn’t like being shut out of her own bedroom again. While Lucy knew they meant well, the way Grey and Maddox had treated her with kid gloves was unnerving. Kind of reminded her of everyone she’d dealt with in the wake of her parents’ deaths. Like there was some kind of handbook or playbook people worked from when dealing with a grieving girl. Soft voices, furtive glances, reassuring words. Silent conversations she wasn’t privy to, but felt.

Atlas wasn’t going to be okay.

She didn’t know how she knew it, but she did. They were going to take him away, and whether or not he lived, she wouldn’t see him again.

He had a family. And if he survived this, he’d be going home with them. But maybe she could see those beautiful blue eyes again.

Just one last time before she told him goodbye.

Chapter Five

Cade came awake in the woman's room. At some point, he'd been moved from the cushion in the art studio to her bed, the scent of her strong in his nostrils. An earthy, floral blend of tuberose and vanilla, rosewood with a hint of jasmine, and something else that was uniquely her beneath it all.

Lucy.

At least he'd learned her name.

Lucy Vasquez.

She was a pretty thing, with her dark hair and golden skin. Her caramel-brown eyes and that beautiful smile. He'd enjoyed the way she'd coddled and fussed over him, Googling left and right to make sure she gave him the best care. But then again, she thought he was a beloved house pet, didn't she? He should probably be more annoyed by the turn of events, but for whatever reason, he wasn't.

Maybe that frankincense she'd been diffusing really did help with the calming.

For the first time in ages, he wasn't running scenarios in his head, determining viable plans and predicting outcomes. He was just enjoying being back in her bed, that lovely mattress with the soft linens that carried her scent. That wonderful place where he'd watched over her, protecting her from the storm while she'd slept.

He'd ended up sleeping last night too, and it had been some of the best damn sleep of his life. He wasn't sure how much of that had to do with his injury, and how much had to do with Lucy. There was something about that woman that called to him. Something that simultaneously excited and soothed him. He'd never experienced that before and, as

strange as it was, the thought of leaving her later made his heart ache.

But maybe that was just the drugs.

Whatever that vet had given him had Cade feeling groggy. He'd thought he'd heard Maddox through the pack link earlier, but hadn't been with it enough to respond coherently. Though the worst of it had passed, even now, his senses felt dulled, his thoughts a bit jumbled.

Cade was glad to be back in Lucy's bed, though. He liked the way the blankets held her scent, making it easy to imagine her being in the room with him, even though she wasn't.

"Alright, Cade." Grey's soothing voice reached through his hazy thoughts. *"How bad's the pain? And don't even think about lying to me."*

"You mean like he did last night?" Unlike Grey, Asher's voice wasn't soothing. His friend was obviously pissed off about Cade omitting a few details when he'd checked in through the pack link last night.

Cade groaned, wondering when someone had decided to open the party line and whose bright idea it was to interrogate him through the telepathic link when his brain was barely coming back online.

"Explain."

Maddox's order had Cade opening his eyes.

What the hell was his Alpha doing here in Lucy's room? And Grey?

"What the fuck?" The sound of his own voice had Cade realizing he wasn't in wolf form anymore.

He was buck-ass naked in Lucy's bed.

When had he shifted?

"About an hour ago." Maddox frowned.

"Are you in my head or did I say that aloud?"

“Yes.” Maddox leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. “You need to explain, and quickly.”

Cade glanced around the room, noting the tension in his friends’ bodies, the crossed arms, the clenched jaws, the furrowed brows and frowns. Maddox, he could understand. But hell, even Grey looked pissed off, and the healer was usually unflappable. One person was conspicuously absent, though, the person he most wanted to see.

“Where’s Lucy?”

“Distracted for now.” Maddox said matter-of-factly.

“We need to get you out of here.”

“Wait, what?” Cade frowned. “Why?”

Maddox raised an eyebrow. “You sure those drugs didn’t fuck with his mind, Grey?”

“I’m sure.”

“You should have told us, Cade.” Maddox scrubbed a hand down his face. “This is a fucking nightmare of epic proportions.”

“Sounds like hyperbole to me.” Cade shifted against the stack of pillows, wondering when he’d leaned back against them. “I don’t remember a lot about today,” he admitted. “Lucy took me to some doctor in Española, and he nearly outed me as a wolf, but—”

“He knew about shifters?” Maddox scowled.

Cade shook his head. “I don’t think so. But he was trying to tell Lucy why she needed to surrender me to a conservation officer. You should have seen her telling him he didn’t know what he was talking about.” Cade chuckled. “She’s got some fire, that one.”

Grey and Maddox shared a look that wasn’t lost on Cade.

“What?” He demanded.

“She thinks you’re a dog,” Grey said. “She named you Atlas.”

Cade blinked at that news. He remembered Lucy calling him that, but he’d already been pretty out of it.

“At least she’d picked a good name.”

Not something like Wolfie or Midnight.

“Are you really lying here in her bed happily playing the lap dog?” Maddox scowled.

“No.” Cade sat up, ignoring the pain in his hip and the way his head ached.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” Maddox said evenly. “You’re going to get up and leave this place as a human. After what it took to get you to shift, we aren’t risking you re-entering wolf form until your bones re-knit.”

“My bones?” Cade scowled. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You should have been brought in immediately.” Grey growled. “She did well with you, but you should have gotten medical care or shifted right away so things realigned properly from the beginning. As it was, I had to readjust your hip and your femur. You’ll need to take it easy for the next few days, and no shifting for the rest of the week, at a minimum.”

“Shit.”

Cade shook his head as the reality of his situation set in. Shifters healed quickly, but their anatomy and needs varied based on their form. By staying in his wolf form and not getting medical attention right away when he’d needed it, he’d limited his own recovery, and possibly endangered his own mobility.

“Look, I couldn’t have shifted even if I’d wanted to when it first happened.”

“That’s because you’d shattered your pelvis.”

Cade frowned at Grey's reply. "That vet said I'd just broken a leg."

"That's because by the time he took the x-rays, you'd already begun healing. And incorrectly at that." Grey frowned and started pacing.

Maddox shook his head. "She should have called us first."

"The important thing is that she called." Grey kept up with the pacing. "But now, she's attached to this 'dog'," Grey gestured to Cade, "and we're going to have to take him away from her somehow."

"Then we need to leave." Maddox said. "We already told her he can't stay here. We'll tell her we had to take him in for diagnostics or some shit."

"And then what, Maddox?" Grey frowned. "We tell her he died?" He shook his head. "She's done everything she could for Cade, treated him like her own pack. She deserves better than that."

"She knows he's not her dog," Maddox pointed out. "We tell her we found his family and we send 'the dog' far the fuck away from here. That way, he doesn't have to 'die' and Lucy won't have to know about our world."

"But she shops in town." Grey said. "She visits the grocer and the farm stands."

"It's not like we're running around shifted." Maddox frowned.

"True." Grey nodded thoughtfully. "It could work."

"It's fucking going to work." Maddox nodded.

"Cade, why don't you—"

"You guys doing okay in there?"

Lucy's voice was a balm Cade didn't know he'd needed, and he grinned from ear to ear at the sound.

“Fucking, hell.” Maddox grumbled, putting himself between the bed and the door. “Grey”

“I’m on it.” Grey said softly. He glanced at Cade, then raised his voice so Lucy could hear him calling out, “Just a minute,” and smoothing his shirt on the way to the door.

Cade felt his hackles raise as his friend headed out to talk to Lucy and he bit back a growl while throwing his legs over the side of the bed. Though there was no rational reason for it, the idea of Grey spending time alone with Lucy made him want to punch the guy in the face.

“You’re joking, right?” Maddox frowned down at him.

“What?” Cade wasn’t sure what he was being reprimanded for.

Maddox observed him for a moment, then turned abruptly to Grey.

“Get him out of here, Grey. I’ll make your excuses.”

“What are you going to tell her?” Anxiety churned in Cade’s belly at the thought of leaving without saying goodbye. “She’s—”

“I know what she is.” Maddox said. “And you’re not going to do it like this.” He glanced at Grey. “Get him the fuck home, Grey. Right fucking now.”

Chapter Six

Cade grumbled under his breath as he shambled down the hall in search of sustenance. The least they could have done was take him home and let him sleep in his own fucking bed, but no. They'd hauled him to the clinic and assigned him a room 'for observation,' which meant he'd done a whole lot of not sleeping, tossing and turning on a twin-sized mattress under Grey's and his team's watchful eyes.

Fucking protocol.

He was fine. Absofuckinglutely fine.

He just needed some goddamn coffee.

And maybe some eggs and bacon. And toast. Or waffles. And home fries. Or a steak. Shit, he was starving. He hadn't eaten anything since the croissant and that Greek yogurt and berries thing Lucy had given him yesterday.

Cade chuckled as he thought about that breakfast while trying to figure out the clinic's coffee maker. Lucy had been adorable looking up what foods he could have, including coffee, which she'd said he couldn't have.

Damn, he missed his coffee.

And fucking hell, this grind and brew contraption of Grey's was some sort of technological trophy or some shit.

"Where the fuck does the water go in this thing?"

Cade growled as he fumbled with the sleek mechanism on top, trying to get the damn thing open. Whatever happened to a simple drip coffee pot? Or even a pour over. Why the hell did everyone and their mother have to have some newfangled piece of shit mach—

"Hold your horses, soldier."

Cade glanced up at the wall of muscle that had just walked in.

“Don’t tell me you’re here to check on me, too.”

“What can I say,” Tane grinned. “SOP.”

“I’m fine.” Cade frowned.

“Sure you are,” Tane chuckled, shuffling Cade to the side. “So fine, you’re just in here beating up Grey’s coffee maker.”

“Oh, does that thing make coffee? Looks more like a spaceship to me. I mean, what’s the silver thing on the end for, anyway?”

“It’s for steaming milk.”

“And that, right there, is the problem.” Cade nodded. “Who puts fucking milk in their coffee?”

Lucy did.

As the memory of Lucy in her tiny pajamas and silky robe curled up on the bed next to him with her milky coffee and her laptop flooded his mind, Cade had to take a deep breath. And another, rubbing his sternum to quell the ache blooming in his chest.

Damn, he hadn’t even gotten to say goodbye.

“Hey.” Tane snapped his fingers in front of Cade’s face and Cade’s eyes shot to his boss, who was frowning. Those hazels of his full of concern. “Why don’t you go sit down and let me handle this.”

An order, not a question. Great. Just fucking great.

“I’m not an invalid, you know,” Cade said, hobbling over to sit at the table. He had to admit, though, it did feel pretty damn good to get off his bum leg.

“Yeah, yeah.” Tane blew him off. “We all know how tough you are. Getting your hip shattered and walking around like a damn hero.”

Though Tane was giving him shit, Cade could see the smirk on his friend’s face, and it made him smile.

“You know, you’re not that bad of a boss, old man.”

“Not that bad of a—” Tane grumbled, turning away from the machine. “I’m an incredible boss. Look at me making you coffee when I should be putting you on probation.”

“Probation?” Cade scowled. “Why the fuck would I—”

“Oh, let’s see. You don’t check in,” He started counting on his fingers. “You let a human handle you, you resisted basic care, you lied about your injuries, you got on a conservation officer’s radar, you spent the night playing a house pet, and did I mention you didn’t check in?”

“I tried checking in, I asked Ash to—”

“I’m your Chief.” Tane barked. “You report to me first. Now, I get Asher is your friend, but—”

“He’s also our Beta.” Cade pointed out.

“I’m going to pretend my second didn’t just interrupt me.” Tane said calmly, turning back to the coffee machine. “I’m going to pretend he has the intelligence to keep his fucking mouth shut when I’m calling him out.” He glanced over his shoulder with a hint of a smile. “I get you spoke with Ash, and he did check in with me.” He went back to the coffee. “Told me you asked him to, and that’s better than nothing. But in the future,” Tane turned to face Cade again. “You tell me yourself. Especially something like this. You fucking tell me yourself, we clear?”

“Yes.” Cade nodded. “Listen, Tane, I wasn’t trying to blow you off. I had a hard time connecting to the link yesterday, especially right after the collision. When Ash came through the line, I just went with it. He told me to stay put.”

He’d also given Cade shit about playing a house pet, but Cade wasn’t going to share that part with his boss.

“That’s fair. But you could have at least told me you’d found your mate. What the fuck, Cade, I have to hear it second-hand?”

“My mate?” Cade shook his head, frowning. “No, no. I —”

He hadn't claimed her. Hell, he'd barely touched Lucy.

He hardly knew her and he'd been in wolf form, for fuck's sake.

"Growled at anyone who came near her, including our Alpha and Healer." Tane shook his head. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"What?"

This was news. Cade knew he'd growled at that veterinarian and his team, but—

"I growled at Maddox and Grey?"

"You were out of it when it happened, from what I understand. Which means the bond is deep."

"Wait," Cade frowned, running a hand through his hair. "What bond? I just fucking met her." Though he definitely liked the idea of having her in his life on the regular. "And you guys already had a briefing? Why wasn't I in on that?"

As the second Gamma, he was in on all the debriefs. Usually.

"Like I said, you were out of it."

"I've been awake all fucking night."

"We didn't meet officially. Madd—"

"Hello?" someone called from down the hall. "Doctor Truett?"

That voice.

Without thinking, Cade took off toward that gorgeous voice.

Lucy.

His Lucy was here.

No, she wasn't his, he reminded himself as he shambled down the hall, not officially. Not yet. They'd only just met

after all, and she'd thought he was a dog. Tane was talking to him, but Cade wasn't listening.

Fuck protocol. He had to see her.

Chapter Seven

Despite Tane's yammering and the pain in his hip and leg, Cade kept on toward the front of the clinic, following that beautiful voice.

Lucy was an absolute vision, with her dark hair in a thick, shiny braid hanging over the front of one of her golden shoulders.

"What are you doing here?" The words came out even though he'd just thought them and he bit back a curse. She had no idea who he was.

She stepped back on an inhale, her lips forming a little o. That combined with the surprise in those caramel-brown eyes did something to him and Cade took a deep breath himself, trying to cool the heat that had suddenly suffused his veins. God, she looked edible in her green shorts and floral tank top. The low hiking shoes matched her shorts, but Cade wondered what she'd look like in heels.

Probably fucking fantastic.

And what the fuck was wrong with him?

Here she was in the flesh and instead of talking to her like a decent person, he was ogling her like some—

"Um," Lucy shook her head on another inhale. "Hi." She smiled shyly. "Is Doctor Truett in?"

"He's out for the morning." Tane said before Cade could speak. "Can we help you?"

Cade disliked the way Lucy sized up his boss, taking in Tane's powerful body with those gorgeous eyes of hers. He flexed his fingers, fighting the urge to fist them as she gazed up into Tane's face with wonder. Cade cleared his throat, taking a step forward, trying to get her to break the eye contact with Tane and look at him instead.

She lowered her gaze, but it took a moment before she focused on him. The smile she gave him took his breath away.

Simple, pure. Lovely.

“I have a few things to drop off for the clinic.” She glanced at Tane, then back to him. “I wasn’t sure where to put them. Maybe I should have called ahead.”

“No, it’s fine.” Cade smiled brightly, taking another step closer. “We’re happy to help you.” He glanced around the room. “Where are the items?”

“In my car.”

They stood for a moment, just gazing into each other, and Cade found himself wanting to sweep Lucy up in his arms and kiss those beautiful lips.

He wondered if they were as soft and luscious as they looked.

Tane cleared his throat and Lucy blinked, dropping her eyes as a flush crept across her face and chest. The sight of her pleasure did something to Cade, and he fought back his primal urges.

“Where’s your car, Miss...” Tane began.

“Um,” Lucy shook her head with a little smile. “Please, call me Lucy.” She ran a hand along her braid. “I’m parked in the lot, outside.”

And then she was walking.

Tane gave Cade a stern look as he passed. “You stay here. You can barely walk.” Though he’d kept his voice pitched low, the order was clear.

Cade wasn’t having that, though. Whatever Lucy was dropping off, he planned to help with. He’d assumed he’d never see her again, so seeing her now was an incredible gift and he wanted to make the most of it. There was something about that woman... something for him.

His mate.

“Shit, Cade.” Tane fell in beside him. “I get it, but you’re going to hurt yourself. I need you back in the field. Quit fucking around and get back in bed.”

“I’ll head there later.” After he’d helped Lucy.

Tane cursed under his breath and called for backup through the telepathic link, but he didn’t exert his dominance or pull rank.

Instead, he walked right next to Cade, as though he didn’t think Cade could walk by himself.

“Oh,” Lucy frowned as she caught sight of his gait. “Please, I’ve got this, actually. None of it’s heavy. I just didn’t know where to put it.”

“It’s not a problem.” Cade smiled. “I’m happy to help you. It’s the least I can do.”

“Oh?” He loved the way her lips formed that word, the way her dark brows raised, the hint of a smile playing in her eyes.

“We appreciate you making a donation, ma’am.” Tane said quickly. “Least we can do is help carry it inside.”

Lucy smiled at Tane. “I didn’t catch your names.”

“I’m Tane. And this here’s Cade.”

“Cade.” She gazed into his eyes and Cade felt his blood heat all over again. “It’s nice to meet you both.” She shifted her focus to Tane, extending her hand. “I’m Lucy Vasquez.”

Cade bit back a growl as Tane clasped hands with Lucy. And when she offered her hand to him, he didn’t want to let it go. But he didn’t want to seem like a creeper either so, he reluctantly released her palm.

“So,” Lucy turned to the back of the SUV, opening the hatch. “Most of this is brand new. I took the tags off and washed it, but nobody’s used anything except for two of the beds at the back.”

Cade was shocked at the volume of dog paraphernalia in the back of her car.

“Lucy.” Grey called, walking over to them carrying one of those to-go cups from the cafe. “Great to see you. What are you doing here?”

“I came to drop off Atlas’s stuff.” She shook her head. “I mean the stuff I bought for the dog.” She dropped her eyes, looking down at her feet. “I didn’t know if his family might want any of it for him, or if you could use it for your other patients.” Lucy smiled up at Grey. “I was just telling these guys that most of this is unused.” She reached into the car, pulling out what looked like a plush tree limb. “He wasn’t with it enough to play with any of it, but he laid on two of the beds. I can show you which ones.”

“Lucy, that’s...” Grey surveyed the contents of her vehicle. “That’s very kind of you.”

Cade refused her offer to help them carry things inside. He, Tane, and Grey made quick work of emptying Lucy’s car while she held that stuffed toy, cradling it to her chest and petting it absentmindedly as she followed them into the clinic.

“What’s that?” Tane asked, pointing his chin at the toy.

“Oh,” she shifted, as though realizing she was carrying it for the first time. “It’s called a find-a-squirrel?” She glanced down at the toy again with a little smile. “I never learned if he was a chewer or not. We may have saved these squirrels from decapitation for all I know.” She chuckled, handing it to Tane. “Oh, there’s one more thing. Be right back.”

As Lucy headed out to get whatever it was, Tane and Grey closed in on Cade.

“She bought all this for you.” Tane shook his head. “Holy hell, I didn’t see that coming.”

“She thought I was a dog,” Cade pointed out. “And she didn’t have any dog stuff.”

“So, she bought the damn store, apparently.” He chuckled, motioning to the pile of dog paraphernalia.

Cade had to admit it was a lot, but it was also completely endearing the lengths she’d gone to to help him feel comfortable. He’d laid on two of those big pillows, after all.

“What are we going to do with all this?” Grey frowned. “She must think we’re we veterinary clinic, not a hospital.”

“We’ll figure it out later.” Tane replied, lifting his chin toward the door and putting on a grin.

“This is the last thing.” Lucy had a folded blanket in her arms. The one from her bed that Cade had slept on. “Atlas,” she shook her head. “The dog really liked this blanket.” She handed it to Cade. “It seemed to be where he was most comfortable, so I thought he might like to have it while he’s healing.” She turned to Grey. “Can I see him? You know, before he goes.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy.” Grey shook his head. “That’s not possible.”

“Did he... Did he ever wake up?”

Cade sensed Lucy’s fear, scented her sorrow, and he wanted to drop that blanket and wrap her in his arms. He barely knew this woman, and yet, she’d done everything she could to look after him when he’d been vulnerable. The urge to comfort her warred with the reality that she had no fucking clue who he was. What he was. Or that she was already his.

At least, he wanted her to be.

“He did wake up.” Grey said softly. “But you can’t see him, Lucy. I’m sorry.”

Though she looked crestfallen, Cade appreciated that Grey hadn’t lied to her. Glad he hadn’t told her some story about a family in Iowa or some shit, whatever crazy tale Maddox had been trying to come up with yesterday to get Cade out of her life.

But why the fuck did he have to be out of her life? He could absolutely stay in it, just not as a dog.

Or a wolf, as the case may be.

Lucy was lovely, talking with his friends, nodding at something Grey was saying. While Cade nodded along, he wasn't paying much attention to the conversation. He was too busy appreciating the way the light coming through the clinic's windows played across Lucy's dark hair. And then she was looking at him expectantly and he grinned like a loon. He loved the way she tilted her head up toward him, loved that soft smile on her lips, the gentle question on that beautiful face.

"What was that?" Maybe he should have been paying better attention to his pack mates, but he only had eyes for Lucy right now.

"We were talking about the coffee shop?" Lucy glanced at his friends, who smiled and nodded encouragingly. "Apparently there's one down the street..."

"Yes." Cade nodded. "Hummingbird Cafe. It's just down the street."

Could he get any lamer?

While he was normally smooth with the ladies, for whatever reason, he was having a hard time talking right now.

Lucy observed him for a moment, then nodded.

"Okay. Thanks."

She turned back to Tane and Grey, shaking hands and thanking them, and Cade fought back the urge to growl again. Not so much because his friends were touching her, but because he was a fucking moron. Fate had given him a chance to see Lucy again, and he'd blown it by being up in his head and talking out of his ass.

Shit, maybe those drugs were still fucking with him somehow. He was normally more with it.

“Cade,” Lucy held her hand out to him. “Thanks again for your help. I appreciate it.”

“You too.” He smiled, shifting the blanket and shaking her hand.

Heat rushed through his body at the contact and he took in everything about her, from the silk of Lucy’s skin to her little smile and the light in those gorgeous eyes. God, he didn’t want to let her go, especially not when she was looking at him like that, her delectable scent making him want to do more than hold her hand. But after a moment of silence, he had no choice.

Lucy blinked when he released her, as though she’d been in a trance. She didn’t move though, and the shy smile and blush she gave him made him feel like pounding his fucking chest.

Gorgeous.

She was so fucking gorgeous.

“Well,” she said after another moment of staring into his eyes. “It was nice to meet you, Cade.”

And then she was heading for the door.

As the scent of her flooded his senses, Cade knew he couldn’t let her go. Mate or not, she was something special. Something he desperately needed to explore.

“Lucy, wait.” He called, handing the blanket to Tane.

She turned in the doorway, the light streaming around her like she was some sort of goddamn angel. Cade didn’t have a plan, he just knew he couldn’t let her walk away from him. So, he blurted the first thing that came to mind.

“Would you like some company?”

Chapter Eight

““W”ould you like some company?”

Lucy wasn't sure how to react to that question. Of course, she'd like some company if it came in the form of that dreamy man. Cade was incredibly handsome and those eyes - swoon worthy. They were so startlingly blue, like a crystalline lake, they reminded her of Atlas. She shook her head, the dog.

The dog who wasn't hers.

“I'd love to buy you a coffee. Least I can do as a thank you.” His charming smile did something to her. Something she liked.

A lot.

“Um, sure.” Lucy smiled, making space in the doorway.

The guy was limping, but that didn't detract from his hot factor. At all. With all his lean, well-formed muscles, he looked like something from a bodybuilding magazine, or some kind of soldier or pro-athlete or something, not a vet tech.

But damn, those scrubs looked good on him. Especially with the way the short sleeves clung to his well-formed biceps, and the pants skimmed his powerful thighs. Lucy smiled as she followed him out the door.

His ass looked good, too.

And what was she even doing, sizing this guy up?

There was no way a chick like her was going to be more than a fun time for a smoke show like him. Although she wasn't opposed to a fun time.

Fun was good.

And she could definitely use some fun after her recent drought.

Seriously, it had been like a year since she'd had anything besides solo fun with toys. But after having been cheated on by yet another good-looking smooth-talker who'd turned out to be an asshole, she hadn't been in a hurry to put herself back out there.

And now, here she was, agreeing to coffee with a handsome stranger.

Well, a girl had to live a little, didn't she?

"The cafe is just a few blocks away." Cade smiled, offering her his hand.

Damn, those eyes. And that dark hair, and his charming grin. That chiseled jaw with its attractive stubble that would no doubt feel amazing on her inner thighs...

Lucy shook her head, trying to will her imagination to slow its roll. Cade was definitely erotic fantasy material, but since he was right in front of her, she needed to get her head out of the freaking gutter.

"Why don't we take my car?"

It was subtler now than earlier, but the dude was limping.

"It's not that far."

"But you're injured."

Cade's frown had Lucy wishing she hadn't said that.

Crap. What if he just walked with a limp, like a birth defect or the remnants of an old football or war injury or something?

"It's not a big deal." He ran a hand through his shiny black hair. "I'll be better in a few days."

"Well, then let's take my car just to be safe." She smiled. "I don't want you doing anything to mess up your healing."

Like she was a freaking nurse. He was the one in scrubs here. Lucy motioned to her car to give herself something to do besides catalog Cade's incredible features.

“You can drive if you’d like.”

She had no idea where that had come from. But honestly, if it was only a few blocks, it wasn’t a big deal to have a stranger driving her Rogue.

Not this stranger, anyway.

Geez, what was wrong with her? She could appreciate beauty, sure. But when had she turned into a pervy leech?

“You sure?” He cocked his head to the side.

“Sure.” She shrugged. “I mean, I don’t even know where this cafe is. It’ll be easier if you just drive us.”

And then he wouldn’t be on that bum leg of his.

“Okay.” He held out his hand again and Lucy set her keys in his palm. He chuckled, offering her his other one. “I’d like to walk you to the car.”

Even though they were literally standing near the back of her SUV, Lucy took Cade’s hand, ignoring the thrill of anticipation uncoiling in her belly as she let him escort her to the passenger’s side. There was something about this guy, something different than the others. Sure, his colleagues had seemed nice, and they were handsome in their own way, but Cade was a league of his own.

Well, what do you know, he was a gentleman too.

Cade held the door for her, offering his own arm as support, while Lucy climbed in. And then he surprised the heck out of her by leaning into the car and buckling her seatbelt for her. No one had done that since she’d been a child, but something about the gesture was endearing. And hot.

“Gotta be safe, right?” Cade smiled, his eyes bright and his face so close she could almost kiss him.

Lucy fought back the urge, returning his smile and thanking him for his chivalry. Wow, the men in this town were actually nice.

Cade grinned at her as he adjusted the seat and Lucy got the feeling he was looking forward to having coffee together.

She smiled back, wondering if he was seeing anyone. Had to be. A handsome man like that was sure to have a special someone. Or someones.

Going by how suave he was, he was probably a total player.

As Cade drove them the few blocks to the cafe, Lucy thought about the guys who'd come out to help with the dog last night. There had to be something in the water here in Pine Haven Falls. Every man she'd met so far could be on a calendar. The smutty kind the local fire department made every year as a fundraiser. She let her mind wander, wondering what Cade's chest looked like underneath those green scrubs. No doubt it'd be as spectacular as the rest of him.

"Let me get your door." He smiled, turning off the engine.

Lucy could only nod and smile back. There was something compelling about Cade. She waited patiently in the car, holding his intense gaze as he hobbled around the grill. Damn, he was sexy, even with that limp. When he opened the door, she realized she'd been so enamored with his commanding azure gaze she hadn't even unbuckled and she fumbled for the latch.

"Allow me." Cade said softly, leaning in and reaching across her lap.

Lucy couldn't tell if his voice had dropped lower or if she'd just imagined it, but she loved the way his hand grazed her hip as he released the seatbelt. She felt herself flush as she imagined that hand skimming along her body while he guided the seatbelt back to its starting point.

He hadn't touched her, but a girl could dream, right?

Cade stepped back, holding the door while offering her his free hand. Lucy felt a frisson of delight throughout her body as she took it and let him help her out of the car.

God, she needed to get a handle on herself. He was just a nice guy, guiding her to the coffee shop. There was no reason for her nipples to be peaked from such minimal contact. No reason to enjoy the way he kept hold of her hand as he guided her.

When they entered the cafe, everyone stopped talking and stared at them as they made their way to the counter. Lucy wasn't sure where to look, so she focused on the goal, appreciating the display of pastries next to the cash register and wondering where the baristas were.

“Morning.” Cade’s voice was different, his tone brusque as he dipped his chin to no one in particular.

When the eyes in the room stayed on her, Lucy moved closer to Cade, thankful he was with her. She knew she was the fresh meat in town. She’d seen those kinds of gazes before, whenever she’d gone to the gym in San Diego, and found herself wishing she’d worn pants today instead of shorts.

As though he could sense her unease, Cade pulled her closer, trading which hand held hers so he could wrap his arm around her. While they’d just met and the move was totally proprietary, Lucy found she didn’t mind in the slightest.

In fact, she liked the way Cade’s palm slid along her lower back to her hip, pulling her to his side as they kept walking. There was something protective about it, especially as people stared at them. She liked the way she fit against Cade. It was familiar somehow, as though they’d been walking together like that for years. She would have fit better if she’d wrapped her own arm around his waist and snuggled up under his shoulder, but having him hold her hand was nice, too.

“Don’t mind them.” He said quietly as they reached the counter. “They just haven’t seen such a beauty in these parts before.” His jaw clenched as he glanced over her head and Lucy could just imagine someone was checking out her ass.

Something told her Cade’s gentleman routine wasn’t an act. Though she’d just met him, there was something about

Cade that felt so utterly familiar, and simultaneously extraordinary. Something that called to her and had her wanting him to carry her out of the cafe and drive them to her house, where they could spend the day getting to know each other.

With or without clothes.

A chair scraped along the wood floor behind them, but Lucy didn't turn around. Instead, she pulled her hand from Cade's grasp and slid her arm around his waist, settling against him as she gazed up at him. He looked down at her, his nostrils flaring on an inhale, a slow smile creeping across his chiseled face.

Damn, he was handsome.

Without thinking, Lucy leaned back, reaching up and resting her palm on Cade's handsome jaw, stroking her thumb along that dark stubble, appreciating the texture.

"I'm so sorry." She whispered after a moment, keenly aware she was touching a relative stranger rather intimately.

In a public place.

God, what was wrong with her?

"Don't be." He smiled, wrapping his other arm around her and repositioning them so his body was between hers and the room. The whole world shifted as he leaned in and brushed a kiss along her temple.

Suddenly, Lucy didn't care in the slightest about lattes and pastries. She didn't care that she'd literally just met this guy. It felt like she'd known him for ages and as she got lost in that gorgeous gaze, she wanted him to lift her onto the counter, spread her legs with those strong hands of his and—

"Lucy." Cade brought her hand to his face, giving it a little kiss before lowering it to her side. "Honey, I need you to —"

She never learned what he needed her to do. A woman's voice asking for their order cut through the fog of lust she was

rocking. As Lucy shook her head, trying to collect her thoughts, Cade placed an order. She didn't quite catch it though. She was too busy watching his mouth move and wondering what those lips would feel like on more of her skin.

And then they were walking again. Lucy loved the way Cade's palm felt against her lower back as he ushered her outside. The cafe's back patio was lovely with its artfully arranged groupings of tables and wooden end stage.

"Oh, this is adorable." Lucy grinned, taking in the colorful potted plants and all the lawn art.

Cade guided them to a bistro table near a planter full of wildflowers peppered with bronze hummingbird lawn ornaments and pulled out a chair for her, making sure she was settled before taking his own seat.

Lucy beamed at him as he sat down. The way he looked at her was next level, though, and as he gazed at her across the little table, Lucy felt her core heat all over again.

There was something about Cade that called to her. The magnitude of that pull should probably have scared the crap out of her, but it didn't. In fact, as liquid heat unspooled in her belly, Lucy found herself wanting to be alone with Cade.

Wanting more of him.

Chapter Nine

Cade scrubbed a hand down his face as he settled into his seat, realizing he needed to shave. And shit, he was still in the fucking scrubs he'd worn to bed last night. What a fine picture he must be making for Lucy. And yet, the way she was gazing at him had him feeling like he was in a fucking tux. And damn, when she'd caressed his jaw like that at the counter, he'd wanted to kiss her breathless.

He still did, if he was honest.

"Here you go." Lenora singsonged her way over with a tray and Cade rose to help her. "Oh, no you don't." She smacked his hand away. "This is my turf, remember?"

Lucy giggled, and Lenora winked at her.

"Lucy Vasquez, Lenora Albers." Cade waved between them in introduction before sitting back down. "Lenora owns the cafe." He explained to Lucy as the barista set a saucer with a bowl-like mug on it in front of her.

"This looks wonderful." Lucy beamed at her latte. "I always love the foam art. You're quite gifted, Lenora."

"Oh, you have no idea." She quipped back with her usual cheek, setting down a plate of croissants. "Aaand, black for the Deputy."

Cade raised an eyebrow as Lenora handed him the mug. He hadn't told Lucy about his job yet. Hell, they hadn't talked about much of anything yet, had they?

"You two let me know if you need anything else," Lenora grinned, giving Cade a meaningful look.

Fucking hell, did everyone know?

"We will, thanks." Lucy smiled.

Cade just nodded to the barista, who gave him a wink before heading back inside.

Great. Just fucking great.

The last thing he needed was the gossip mill getting its grind on him and Lucy being mates. He hadn't even talked to her about it yet. But he knew in his bones it was true, and not just because Tane had pointed out a few particulars.

Cade had never been this attracted to someone before, never been so singularly focused, and that was saying something, considering he was one of the best trackers in town.

He couldn't believe he'd missed the signs when he'd been in wolf form, though. He'd been drawn to her even then, wanting to protect her, to claim her. But he'd thought that instinct was because of the kindnesses she'd shown him.

"This is delicious." Lucy smiled.

"How'd you know I liked lattes and croissants?"

"Lucky guess." He lied, remembering the way she'd cradled her milky coffee and fed him bites of her croissant.

Shit, how the hell was he going to tell her about this?

It was clear she found him attractive. If the way she kept staring at him and the flush across her skin hadn't already told him that, the scent of her arousal was a dead giveaway.

And damn, was that a spectacular bouquet.

"Listen, Lucy..." he let his voice trail off, wondering what the fuck he could say to get her home with him. He didn't want to have this conversation here. Though they were alone on the patio, shifters had incredible senses and he didn't want to risk any witnesses for this convo. Especially not if she declined him, which she'd be well within her right to do.

And it would shatter him if she did.

Unlike some of the other shifters in town, wolves mated for life.

"Lenora called you Deputy." Lucy picked up her latte in both hands. "I thought you were a vet tech."

Cade glanced down at his scrubs and shook his head.

“I work in law enforcement, not medicine. I’m just in this setup because I spent the night at the clinic.”

“Because of your leg?”

Cade nodded, taking a drink.

Man, she didn’t miss much, did she?

“How’d you get injured? If that’s okay to ask.”

“You can ask me anything, Lucy.” He wanted her to, actually. It would make this whole thing much easier. “I was in a collision.”

“Oh, my gosh!” She covered her mouth with her hand. “That’s terrible.”

Her concern warmed his heart, and Cade reached across the table to take her hand.

“I’m fine.” He slid his thumb along her knuckles. “I’ll be right as rain in a few days.”

Lucy eyed him for a moment, her face circumspect, and Cade wondered what she was thinking.

“Look, this might be a little forward.” He admitted. “But I’m really enjoying your company. Would you be up for—”

“Yes.” She smiled, not even letting him finish the sentence. Then she blushed prettily, dropping her gaze as she realized what she’d done. “I mean, I’d love to... see you... sometime.”

When her eyes flashed back up to his, Cade felt it in his core. The connection, the heat. The desire. He calculated the distance to his house on the edge of town, predicting how quickly he could get them there and determining which path would attract the least amount of attention.

“Or now.” Lucy smiled.

“I’d love to invite you to my place.” Cade wasn’t sure they were having the same conversation, but he liked where

things were and where they seemed to be heading. Liked that look in her eyes, liked the way her scent had deepened, the way her breasts rose and fell as her breath changed.

“That would be nice.” She whispered, blooming for him right there at the table.

Cade bit back a growl as the thought of parading her through the riffraff in the cafe flitted through his mind. It was hard enough the first time they’d walked through with all those male’s eyes on his mate. He shook his head. Not his mate. Not yet. He may have staked a bit of a claim by holding her, but until he actually mated her, she was fair game, wasn’t she?

“Do we need to bus our table?”

Lucy’s innocent inquiry brought him back to the moment, back to her gorgeous eyes and soft smile. She really was a good human.

“No.” Damn, his voice was husky. “Lenora’ll get it.”

Lucy glanced over his shoulder. “Is that an exit? That gate?”

Cade grinned, liking the way she thought.

“It is indeed.” He smiled, rising from his chair. “Shall we?”

He liked the way Lucy sidled up to him, but he didn’t like how much of her coffee and croissant were left untouched. He wanted to provide for her the way she’d provided for him. No, he *needed* to provide for her in the way of his people.

“Wait a minute,” he stopped her before she took his hand. “Why don’t we finish our coffee first?”

As much as he wanted to take her home and get them naked, he needed to slow the fuck down. There were things that needed explaining before they jumped into bed together. Some pretty fucking big things. But as Lucy settled back in her chair, he started with the small ones first.

“So, how long have you lived here?”

“Oh my goodness,” she giggled. “You’re so right.” Lucy cupped her hands around her mug, that sweet blush on her cheeks again. “Um, I just moved in a few weeks ago, but I’ve had renovations going for a couple of months.”

“Renovations?” Cade took a sip of his coffee, remembering her bedroom, with its natural fibers and luxurious vibe. There’d been something cozy and den-like about the airy and serene space that had appealed to him. Probably because he’d been laying on her comfortable bed, surrounded by her intoxicating scent.

“It was my grandfather’s place.” Lucy focused on her cup. “Yayo took good care of things but, well,” she glanced up with a smile, “let’s just say we had differing tastes.”

“Not a fan of standard cabin decor, huh?” He chuckled.

“No.” she laughed, reaching for her croissant. “I don’t actually get that aesthetic either. I mean, just because you’re surrounded by wildlife doesn’t mean you need to hang it on your walls. Dead creatures and hunting and fishing gear aren’t my idea of art at all.”

Cade laughed along with Lucy.

“What about you?” She asked. “How long have you lived here?”

“Since I was a kid.”

“So you must know the area well.” She took another sip of her coffee. “I was thinking it’d be fun to try out Wheeler Peak. You ever been there?”

“I have.” He nodded. “And I’d love to take you sometime.”

The thought of her going alone got his hackles up. That hike was at least a six-hour trek round-trip, with an elevation gain of nearly three-thousand feet, not to mention the drive to Taos to access the trailhead. No way was he going to let her do any of that on her own.

“How about this weekend?”

“Um,” Cade watched Lucy’s mouth as she took another bite of her croissant. Damn, he wanted to kiss her. And how inappropriate was that right now? He’d backed them off the heat so they could do things in the right order, or at least he’d tried to.

Though they spoke like civilized people, he still wanted Lucy with the same intensity as the moment he’d laid eyes on her, and that beautiful scent of her arousal that had bloomed for him earlier hadn’t abated in the slightest either.

“Oh, right, your injury.” Lucy wiped her mouth with her napkin. “We can find another day when you’re better. I have plenty to keep me busy, but I heard that summer’s the best time to go. Well, the safest anyway.”

Thank fuck she understood about safety.

Cade smiled, realizing what a good thing that was. His urge to protect her was already strong, and would only deepen with the bonding. Having her on board with staying safe boded well for their relationship.

“We’ll find a time.” He promised as Lucy pushed her half-eaten croissant aside. “Did you get enough to eat?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I’m not that hungry.”

Could have fooled him.

“And yet, there’s hunger in your eyes.” He chuckled.

She glanced down, that flush rising again, and Cade reached out, crooking a finger under her chin and lifting her face.

“That’s not a bad thing, Lucy.” He brushed his thumb along her chin. “In fact, I think it’s sexy as hell.”

“What are we doing here, Cade?” She asked softly. “I think you’re attractive, but I don’t even know you. I don’t usually jump into things like this so... quickly.”

“We can take whatever pace you need, Lucy,” he promised tenderly. “I think you’re attractive too, and I’d love to get to know you better.”

In every way.

Damn, how did he tell this woman that he’d already fallen for her? That in his mind and heart, she was already his?

They sat like that for a few moments. Her gazing at him with those gorgeous brown eyes, him stroking his thumb along her chin, silently willing her to be open to him. To them.

And then she smiled.

Cade lost his breath as she grinned at him, dipping her chin to kiss his thumb.

“You know, I’m game if you still wanted to go to your place.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

As she nodded, Cade felt more buoyant than he’d felt in his entire fucking life.

“But could we swing by the farmer’s market first?” she asked apologetically. “They close at one today and don’t want to rush our time.”

“The farmer’s market.”

She was killing him, she really was. But as she grinned at him with a little shrug, Cade found he couldn’t deny her.

“Sure.”

This way, they’d have the afternoon all to themselves.

“Great!” She set her napkin on the table. “They had the best berries last week and I’m out. My dog really liked them.”

“Your dog, huh?” Cade chuckled, following Lucy to the gate, appreciating being claimed by her in that way.

Lucy stopped herself mid-stride, the scent of her arousal dissipating.

“I mean, *the* dog.” She glanced at him. “He wasn’t really mine.” Lucy sighed, dropping her eyes.

“I just took care of him because I didn’t know whose he was.”

“Well,” Cade pulled her into his arms. “I’m sure he’s very grateful.”

“You think?”

“I do.”

He was incredibly grateful for Lucy’s help. He had no clue how he was going to break the news to her that he’d been ‘the dog’, though. They were just beginning to get to know each other, and he’d meant what he’d said about her setting the pace. Until she was ready, he couldn’t share that part of himself.

“It’s probably for the best that Dr. Truett took him away.” She pulled back, looking up at him. “I don’t actually know anything about dogs.”

“I’m sure you know more than you think.” Cade smiled, remembering all the Googling she’d done on his behalf.

Lucy gave him a little smile, leaning back further, gazing up into his face.

Damn, she was lovely.

She reached up, caressing his cheek again like she had inside the cafe, her eyes dropping to his mouth. Cade went with it, leaning down and pressing his lips to hers.

At the contact, a frisson of energy went through his body. Every nerve ending called to attention as she kissed him back.

Fucking hell, if that’s what happened from a chaste little kiss, he couldn’t imagine what the mating was going to be like.

And damn, he couldn't wait to get her home and find out.

On that note, he ended the kiss, brushing his lips along her temple as he pulled back.

“So,” damn, his voice was gravelly, “How about that farmer’s market then?”

Lucy nodded with a smile, and Cade orientated them toward the gate.

Though the market was the last place he wanted to take her, after everything she'd had done for him, it was the least he could do.

He'd eaten all her berries, after all.

Cade grinned as Lucy leaned into him, wrapping her arm around his waist while they walked to her car. Damn, he could get used to this.

He really could.

Chapter Ten

Lucy grinned as Cade buckled her in again. While she was perfectly capable of fastening her own seatbelt, there was something endearing about the way he did it. As though it was all part and parcel of helping her into the car, like her comfort and safety were his personal responsibility.

“Can’t be too careful.” He smiled.

“So I hear.”

He gazed at her tenderly as he stepped back and closed her door, and Lucy fought the urge to touch her mouth. Her lips still tingled where he’d kissed her, her body still alive with that electric hum. She chuckled to herself as Cade settled into the driver’s seat.

All that from a little kiss.

She’d never felt so alive with any man before. Or so safe. Honestly, she couldn’t think of the last time she’d let anyone else drive her car. And she’d never agreed to go to a guy’s house on the first date before. Not that they were dating. Not yet anyway, but Lucy knew in her bones it was inevitable.

Heck, she’d already invited him on a day trip, hadn’t she?

As Cade pulled them out into traffic, she marveled at how comfortable she was with him, at how right this felt - him driving them somewhere, them spending time together.

“So,” Cade smiled, “I know berries are on the list. Anything else?”

“I like to see what they have, but I was thinking apricots, salad greens, and some herbs.” Lucy gazed out the window, taking in the town. “This place is really cute, quaint.”

Most of the small towns she’d visited or driven through before had seemed run down and relatively uninhabited, but

Pine Haven Falls had a vibrancy to it. Sure, there were a few buildings whose paint jobs were a bit faded, but they were in good repair and bustling with activity. It was clear people did more than shop here.

“Quaint.” Cade chuckled. “Not the word I’d choose for Pine Haven.”

“Why not?” Lucy glanced at Cade, appreciating his strong profile. “I think the mishmash of architectural styles is charming.”

Cade laughed at that, and Lucy felt her heart stutter at the sight of his unguarded joy. Just when she’d thought he couldn’t get any more handsome.

Man, he really was something else.

Lucy saw a huge house with enormous garage doors along one side.

“Is that the fire department?”

“Yes.” Cade nodded. “And the library isn’t far from here. Have you been there yet?” He took another turn and Lucy recognized the area. They were getting close to the farmer’s market.

“You guys have a library?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” He glanced at her with a smile. “We may be small, but Pine Haven’s a fully functioning town.”

“Sorry,” she chuckled. “Most of my experiences with small towns have been driving through on road trips where all you see is a tiny part of it - the town square, shops, and stuff like that. It’s hard to imagine people actually living there.”

“Well, we definitely live here.”

“I can see that.” She grinned. “And I’m glad you do. I’m glad we met, Cade.”

Had that really just been this morning? Man, as he pulled into the parking lot, it felt like they’d done this a million times,

like they'd been together for ages.

Lucy glanced at Cade again as he parked the car. There was just something about him... something for her. And she was going to go with the flow and find out what it was.

Cade left the car running after he put it in park. "Lucy, before we mingle with the other locals, there's something you need to know."

She sat up at his serious tone, uncrossing her ankles and putting her feet flat on the floorboards as dread crept into the pit of her belly.

"Don't tell me you're married."

That would be her luck. She finally meets the perfect guy, and he turns out to be just like the assholes she'd dated in California.

"No." Cade held up his hands. "Nothing like that. Not yet, anyway."

Lucy frowned, crossing her arms over her chest, which spurred him on.

"I mean, one day I'd like to get married. But I don't have a wife, not yet."

At least he was telling the truth. The earnestness in his voice and eyes was a dead giveaway. Something tugged at Lucy's heart as Cade ran his hand through his dark hair and down his neck.

God, she was being rude, wasn't she?

"Sorry. I'm being sensitive." She admitted, thinking of her dating history. "I just don't like being a side gig."

Especially not with him.

Not that that made any sense either, but something about Cade felt different from every other guy she'd known. Better. Important. Perfect.

Which was ridiculous, right? She'd literally just met him.

“Anyone who treated you like a side gig is a fucking idiot.” Cade said seriously.

Lucy smiled, appreciating the colorful language on her behalf, feeling some of her nervous energy fade. She undid her seat belt, bending one knee up on the seat as she turned to face Cade.

“You said you wanted to tell me something? I think I sidetracked us.”

“Yes.” Cade nodded, his gaze boring into her and making her blush.

There it was again, that heat they’d shared at the coffee shop.

Lucy fought back a deluge of naughty thoughts involving Cade’s pillowy lips and her body as she gazed right back into those brilliant blues.

A phone rang, and Cade cursed.

“I’m going to have to take this,” he said apologetically, pulling a phone from his pocket. “I’m sure it’s about work.”

“It’s okay.” She gave him what she hoped was an encouraging smile as she shifted in her seat again. “Take it. I’ll just get started on the shopping.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy.” And he truly seemed disappointed that something had interrupted them.

She gave Cade a sweet smile before leaving him in the car with his call. She was part-way through her shopping when she realized how irresponsible that had been.

What the heck was wrong with her?

Sure, Cade didn’t feel like a stranger, but the truth was, they barely knew each other. And she’d not only let him drive her Rogue, she’d just left him in there to take his call like they did it all the time. Maybe she was losing it.

At least there were witnesses.

Not that she thought Cade would actually steal her car, he was a Sheriff for crying out loud.

Lucy flipped her braid over her shoulder, focusing on picking out the best bunches of arugula and parsley, while willing herself to calm down. This thing with Cade, this attraction, while a bit confusing, was also pretty awesome. She'd focus on that.

She chose some rosemary and handed her selections to the vendor, who smiled at her knowingly.

"You've got a good one there, sweetie." The merchant's smile made her look ten years younger.

Lucy felt her skin flush at the older woman's comment. She couldn't tell if the woman was talking about Cade or the herbs.

"Um, thanks." She pulled some cash from her pocket.

"None of that," the woman tutted. "It's on the house, my dear."

Lucy focused on the woman's face. Kind eyes, and an even kinder smile. Though she had white hair, there was a youthful vibrancy about her, a playful air that was balanced with a calm elegance.

That woman was aging goals, right there.

"What's your name?" Lucy asked.

"Call me Jorie," she smiled. "Is there anything else you need?"

"Actually, do you have any fennel? And I plan to pay for all of that."

"I do." Jorie gave her a mischievous grin. "And you can plan to pay, but I choose not to accept."

Lucy could only stare as Jorie put her items into a reusable grocery bag and turned to a crate on the ground, pulling out a fat bulb of fennel with its feathery leaves.

“Making your grandfather’s famous trout then, hm?” Jorie smiled.

Lucy’s belly did a flip-flop.

“You knew him?” She hadn’t even told this woman her own name yet.

“Oh, Emilio was well loved here,” she said wistfully as she tucked the fennel into the bag.

A pang of sadness hit as Lucy thought of Yayo with his kind eyes and quiet strength. She missed his stories, missed his smile. Missed his hugs and the way he’d always made her feel at home.

“He was a good man,” Jorie said softly.

“But, how...” Lucy let her voice trail off, wondering how this woman knew she was related to Yayo. She’d only been to Pine Haven Falls with him a few times.

“Oh, little Lucy,” Jorie chuckled. “you were the light of your Yayo’s life. He was always showing photos of you or your latest artwork. I hope you’re still painting. You’re quite talented.”

“I am,” Lucy reassured her.

“Good.” Jorie beamed, adding some spinach to the bag before handing it to Lucy. “I’m so glad we got to meet in person, Lucy. I hope you’ll come back next week, the tomatillos and eggplant should be ready by then.”

Lucy tried to pay her again, but Jorie wouldn’t have it.

“Nonsense,” she waved her off, “family doesn’t pay here.”

Lucy set a twenty-dollar bill underneath a head of cabbage, wondering just how well Yayo had known this woman that she would consider Lucy family. She couldn’t remember him ever mentioning someone called Jorie. Then again, Yayo hadn’t really talked much about the people in town at all.

God, she missed him.

When she got back to the car, Cade was leaning against her tailgate, typing quickly on his phone. He looked harried, his dark hair mussed up like he'd been running a hand through it, and his beautiful lips drawn into a frown.

"Is everything okay?"

"I'm so sorry, Lucy." He ran a hand through his hair, massaging the nape of his neck like he had an ache. "There's a situation out at Hidden Pines." He opened the liftgate, taking her bags from her and loading them up on a curse. "I'm going to have to go in."

"I understand." Work was work, after all. "Would you like me to take you home or back to the clinic?"

"Shit." He scrubbed a hand down his face, shaking his head. "My house. You sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all."

Cade drove again and Lucy did her best to pay attention to the path he took, but it was hard to focus. His energy was completely different now than it had been earlier. He was quiet, brooding, those dark brows furrowed as he scowled.

Lucy reached over, resting a hand on his thigh. "It'll be okay."

He took a hand off the steering wheel to clasp hers. "I'm so sorry, Lucy. This isn't how I'd hoped to spend our afternoon." The regret in his voice was palpable and while she shared his disappointment, she absolutely got it.

"It's not your fault." He worked in law enforcement. It's not like people scheduled their crimes according to his work schedule, was it? "I have some things to get done today, anyway." He shot her a glance, but she continued. "I'd only planned a quick stop to drop off the dog's stuff and hit the farmer's market. Not that I minded coffee or anything," she added quickly, giving his hand a little squeeze. "I really enjoyed our time together, Cade."

“I did too.” He said softly, “And I’d love to see you again, Lucy.”

“I’d like that.” She smiled up at him.

“I’ll call you then.” He grinned back. And damn, what that grin did to her.

When he pulled into his driveway, Lucy meant to take in his house, but all she could see was Cade.

After a moment of gazing into each other’s eyes, Lucy looked away. She didn’t actually want either of them to go, but what could they do?

“Thanks for hanging with me,” she said softly. “And for the coffee.”

“I had a good time with you today.” He smiled. “And I absolutely want to do it again.”

“Me too.” She grinned, appreciating the heat growing between them again.

Cade helped her out of the car, ushering her into the driver’s side and buckling her seatbelt before making sure they had each other’s contact information. She liked how attentive he was, how kind. She just wished he’d—

“Lucy,” his voice was soft, low, “I’d like to kiss you before you go. If that’s okay with you.”

“Yes.” She smiled.

He leaned in and kissed her and Lucy forgot where she was as delight washed her body. She opened for him, but he pulled back, rather than enter.

“Stay safe.” He smiled.

As he shut her into the car, Lucy wondered if he’d done that on purpose, letting her surrender to him and pulling back, leaving her wanting more. That was a pro move if she’d ever seen one. And yet, as she watched Cade shuffle back from the drive, she caught the bulge in the front of his scrubs and knew he wanted her as badly as she wanted him.

She waved, giving him a sweet smile before putting the car in gear.

Oh, she looked forward to seeing him again, too.

And one thing was certain, the next time Cade kissed her, she was definitely going to deepen things. They may have just met, but she wanted to know more of him.

All of him.

Chapter Eleven

“Great, more rain.” Cade switched his wipers on, thinking of Lucy.

He'd hated leaving her earlier. But hell, Tane wouldn't have called him into the field this close to his injury if that hadn't been an all-hands-on deck case.

Fucking tourists.

No respect for nature, and a healthy dose of narcissism in some of those rich pseudo-hippies who frequented the retreat center at Hidden Pines. Cade shook his head. Even after conducting all the interviews, he still couldn't believe one of them had actually shot at the wildlife. Guns were supposedly prohibited on the property. With all the “plant medicine” used there, the fact that a firearm was not only present, but had been discharged repeatedly, was a clusterfuck and a half.

At least that bear was okay.

A bright flash in his peripheral followed by a sharp clap of thunder had Cade checking the road for downed limbs. Usually, summer rain showers popped up and were gone within a matter of hours, leaving the air a bit cooler, a little welcome humidity sticking around through the evening. The storms they'd had lately had been bigger, though. Full-on thunderstorms coming off the mountains and pelting the area for hours. It's a wonder they hadn't had flooding in town yet, what with the falls so close. Still, the rain was good for the area.

As more thunder rumbled in, Cade thought of Lucy again. He'd tried calling earlier, but she hadn't picked up. His instincts had him wanting to check on her. She'd told him she didn't like storms. Well, she'd told ‘Atlas’. Cade chuckled, pulling up Lucy's contact and giving her another call. He still wasn't sure how to broach the subject with her, but one of

these days, they were going to have a good laugh about her having thought he was a dog.

Voicemail again. Maybe she was working in her studio? From what he'd seen, she got immersed in those paintings, wholly focused on the big canvases. Ignoring his disappointment, Cade left Lucy a message checking in and telling her how much he'd enjoyed their time together earlier. He kept it light, though something told him he needed to head her way.

All his instincts were firing where Lucy was concerned.

Eventually, he pulled over and sent a text, checking if she was okay and wondering if she'd had dinner yet. When there was no reply, the urge to go to her became overwhelming.

Another bright flash of lightning and peal of thunder had Cade heading for Lucy's as the rain came down in earnest. He didn't want her to be alone and frightened.

By the time he reached her place, Cade wondered if he was overreacting. Sure, she'd told him - as 'the dog' - that she didn't like storms, but that didn't mean she needed him to sit with her through it.

Cade checked his phone again, still no response.

Though it was barely sunset, with the thunderstorm, it already looked like nightfall and the lights from Lucy's cabin spilled out into the darkening night, giving off a comforting vibe despite the storm. Cade shook his head, frustrated with himself. Lucy was probably curled up with a cup of something hot and her laptop or a book. She probably had a fire going, too. But if that was the case, why hadn't she answered her phone?

Another round of thunder had him opening the truck and making a break for her porch. His hip twinged as he moved, but at least he was ambulating better. He frowned when his knocks went unanswered.

"Lucy?" He called out, knocking again.

The lights were on. She had to be home.

On instinct, he tried the door, cursing under his breath when he found it locked. While it was good news in the safety department, it meant he got drenched from the sideways blowing rain while he waited for her to answer. After a long minute, he let himself into her house, his instincts screaming that something was off.

He scanned the room after locking himself in. Fire in the fireplace, laptop on the couch next to a blanket and a half-empty mug of cocoa, but no Lucy. Cade called her name while taking off his wet boots, but she didn't respond. On high alert, he tapped into his senses, sending them out into her cabin, seeking her.

There, the master bathroom.

Of course, he chuckled to himself. Everyone had to pee, right? He made his way to her kitchen, putting a couple of dish towels to work, drying himself off. After several quiet minutes, he started getting nervous again. He knew Lucy was home. He could scent her. And sure, there was that overlay of fear, but he'd come to help her with that.

"Lucy?" He called, heading toward her room. "Lucy, it's Cade. I stopped by to check on you."

The bathroom door was closed, but the scent of her fear was strong in Cade's nostrils. He fought back the urge to kick the fucking thing down, knocking gently instead.

"Lucy, you okay in there?" He kept his voice even, trying to calm her with his tone.

"Cade?" Her voice was strained and her scent—

Oh, God, she was crying.

"Can I come in?" He fought back his rising panic, trying to keep calm for her, but desperately needing to see her. To hold her. "Lucy, honey, can I come in?"

Another crash of thunder muffled her reply, but Cade went with it, assuming it was a yes. If it hadn't been, she could

scold him later. He didn't fucking care.

He just needed to lay eyes on her, to make sure she was okay.

And fucking hell, was she far from okay.

Lucy sat in the empty bathtub, hiding under a blanket, clutching a pillow.

"Oh, Lucy." Cade went to her, shifting the blanket aside to cup her face in his hands. "Honey, how long have you been sitting there like that?"

"Cade?" she whispered. "Are you really here or am I imagining it?"

Damn, he hated the way she shook, hated the tears pooling in her eyes and streaming down her face. He swept his thumbs gently along her cheekbones, wiping her tears.

"You're not imagining." He brushed a kiss on her forehead. "I'm really here, and I'm not going anywhere unless you want me to."

In a flash, her arms were around him, her face pressed into the hollow of his neck as she cried, her body quaking with her emotions.

"I've got you, Lucy." He stroked her back. "I'm right here, honey."

He appreciated how she let him sweep her into his arms and carry her to the living room. When he tried to set her on the couch, however, she clung tighter.

"Don't go." She whimpered. "Please."

"I'm going nowhere," he soothed.

"I just thought you might like your cocoa."

"Please, just hold me, Cade?" The ache in her voice tugged at his heart. "Can you just... just for a little while?"

He gave her a reassuring smile, then settled them both on the couch with Lucy in his lap. Cade pulled her blanket over,

wrapping her up and then sliding his arms back around her.

“How’s this?” He smoothed her hair from her face.

“Better.” She sighed, nestling closer. “So much better. But why are you here?”

“I came to check on you.” He slid a palm along her back, trying to soothe her. “When you didn’t answer the door, I let myself in. I know that wasn’t cool, but it was for a welfare check. I was worried about you, Lucy.” And rightfully so. Damn, he’d never forget the sight of her in that tub. “I still am, if I’m honest.”

“I’ll be okay,” she said softly. “I just... hate thunderstorms. They remind me of the night our plane went down. The night my parents died.”

“Oh, shit. I’m so sorry, Lucy.” He held her tighter. “I didn’t know.” Sure, she’d told him in his wolf form that she’d lost her parents in a storm, but, “A plane crash?”

She nodded against his chest. “I don’t like flying either.”

“I don’t blame you.”

Holy shit.

He held her close, murmuring soothing words and stroking his palm along her back, wishing he could do more to comfort her.

After a while, Lucy relaxed into him and Cade took a full breath for the first time since he’d scented her fear.

“There you go,” he soothed, “just relax, Lucy. You’re safe.”

She nestled closer, pressing a palm to his chest on an inhale.

“Thank you for coming.” He could hear her smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Cade smiled back before kissing her head again.

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

And that was the fucking truth.

Chapter Twelve

Lucy snuggled closer to Cade.

While she was embarrassed that he'd found her cowering in her bathtub, she *was* glad he'd come. Glad he'd wrapped her in his strong arms and held her in his lap. Glad he'd stroked her back and her hair and peppered her temples and cheeks with kisses while saying the sweetest things to her.

"You make me feel so safe." She admitted.

So loved.

She kept that part to herself and just gazed up into that handsome face, thinking about how much she enjoyed Cade's company.

"I'm glad." He smiled softly, brushing her hair from her temple with his fingers. "I admit, I had no idea you were so frightened. I just wanted to check in with you when you hadn't replied to my messages."

Lucy frowned. "You called?"

"And texted." He trailed his finger down her jawline, keeping up that tender tone and that sweet smile. "You were a little busy, though."

Yeah, she was busy freaking out and hiding in her bathtub. God, what he must think of her.

"Hey," he soothed, cupping her cheek in his palm. "None of that."

"None of what?" She frowned.

"Whatever you're thinking. I can tell it isn't good. I don't judge you, Lucy. We all have things that frighten us."

"Really." She smirked. "I can't imagine what would frighten you." She shifted in his lap, sitting up taller and

slipping an arm over Cade's shoulders, grateful for his solid strength. "I'll bet you wouldn't hide in your bathtub, though."

"I don't have a bathtub." He chuckled.

Lucy shook her head. "Now that is a travesty," she said playfully. "However do you relax?"

"Showers can be relaxing."

The thought of Cade in a shower did something to Lucy, and while it was a great distraction, it was completely inappropriate to go there, considering he'd come over to be a gentleman.

"Have you eaten?" He asked after a moment.

"No. You?"

"Not yet."

"Oh, let me make you something, then."

She smiled, grateful for something to do, some way to thank him.

"Let me help. I want to take care of you, Lucy."

Now wasn't that the sweetest thing to say? Especially on the tail end of such a lovely rescue and cuddle session. The storm was still going, but with Cade there, she didn't feel as anxious.

"How can I help?" he asked.

The earnestness in his voice and tenderness in his gaze threatened to undo her and Lucy shifted the blanket, climbing out of Cade's lap. He was hot, and sweet, and protective and caring and... awesome. But this yearning to be with him every day was just—

"Lucy." He reached for her hand. "Let me help you, honey. It's the whole reason I came over - to see you. To spend time together."

Lucy nodded. She did enjoy his company, after all.

“Sorry, I just get in my head sometimes.” She admitted. “I’m not used to...” Wanting someone you’d just met this badly? Feeling completely attached to a relative stranger? God, how lame. “To a handsome man wanting to spend time with me without an ulterior motive.”

And how sucky was that?

“You think I’m handsome?” He grinned, sitting up taller while running his thumb along the back of her hand.

“Really?” She shook her head, fighting back a laugh. “It’s not obvious?”

“Well, I think you’re beautiful.” He stood and Lucy let her gaze lift with him. “But I think we established that earlier, hm?” He smoothed her hair back with his free hand. “Our attraction to one another.”

Lucy nodded, staring up into those gorgeous eyes. Attraction didn’t even begin to cover it.

“I don’t even know your last name.”

“Hansen.”

“Officer Hansen, huh?” She grinned, taking in his navy shirt and golden star.

“Deputy, actually.” He smiled.

“Well,” Lucy leaned back a little, gazing up at him, “Will you join me for dinner, Deputy? It’s the least I can do considering you saved me from a night of solitude and fear.”

He grew somber, his smile giving way to a frown. “I never want you to feel that way, Lucy. Will you promise to tell me next time you feel like climbing into your tub like that?”

Lucy resisted the urge to put her hand over her heart, but it was beating faster than usual with him looking at her like that. Such intensity, such—

“You okay, honey?”

She nodded slowly. “I am. Now that you’re here, I’m much better.” And was it weird that she didn’t want him to leave?

Cade gave her a little smile, his free hand sliding to her shoulder. Lucy fought back a fresh round of fantasy-worthy thoughts involving him slipping those fingers under the strap of her camisole and sliding it off her shoulder altogether.

Gazing up at him, she wondered what his lips would feel like along her bare skin, along her neck. Cade inhaled deeply, his smile spreading, and Lucy knew she needed to say something, do... something.

“Um,” Damn, he was attractive. “Would you mind stoking the fire?”

Lucy fought the urge to shake her head. Double entendre much?

“Happy to.” He grinned.

“Great.” She smiled back. “I’ll just get started on dinner then.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Cade leaned in, brushing a kiss on her forehead before releasing her hand, and Lucy did her best not to whimper as he moved away from her.

Geez, she thought as she headed into the kitchen, could she get it together? He wasn’t that far away, and he was doing what she’d asked him to. Still, Lucy wanted to have Cade right next to her. And how pathetic was that? She’d blame it on the storm, but she knew she’d be lying.

The truth was, there was something about Cade that had her wanting him to hold her, wanting to hear his voice, wanting to spend time with him. Which was weird. She wasn’t the clingy type, not that she knew of, anyway.

Lucy got the rice started and pulled out her mandoline and some cucumbers, marveling at how comfortable she was with Cade. Even though they’d just met, she felt like she’d known him for years.

“Alright,” Cade grinned, heading to the sink, “The fire’s properly stacked and stoked. What else can I do?”

Lucy loved watching Cade wash up, the way he pulled fresh towels from her drawer like he lived there, the way he moved around her kitchen helping to prepare the meal. While she’d giggled at the way he’d refused to let her near the mandoline once he’d seen how sharp it was, as though he was protecting her from her own kitchen, she had to admit there was something lovely about watching him julienne the cucumbers. Something endearing about Cade’s demeanor. She liked the way he looked out for her.

Such a gentleman.

“You know,” she smiled as Cade took another helping of bulgogi, “Atlas - I mean the dog. He made me feel safe in the storm, but I think you’re even better at it. Probably because you can actually hug and talk.”

“Oh, really?” Cade laughed, and Lucy felt her spirits lighten even more.

“Yes,” she smiled. “You’re a perfect dog substitute.”

“Dog substitute.” He shook his head. “What am I going to do with you?”

She had lots of ideas, but none of them were ladylike.

“Have dinner with me tomorrow?”

There, that was civilized, right?

“I’d love to.”

Lucy grinned at the thought of spending more time with Cade. There was something about him she liked very much.

Everything actually.

And her respect and admiration for him only deepened when he took on the bulk of the cleanup, encouraging her to relax while he chatted her up and cleaned her kitchen.

“You’re such a gentleman, Cade.” She smiled, watching him hang up the dish towel.

He gave her a wolfish grin that went straight to her core.

“Happy to help, ma’am.”

Lucy just stood there, leaning against the counter watching Cade, as everything in her yearned for everything in him. It didn’t matter that they’d just met. Sometimes your body knew things your mind hadn’t processed yet. And, as her limbs grew languid and desire unspooled in her belly with every step he took, Lucy wanted nothing more than to give in to her body’s cravings.

“Lucy,” Cade’s voice was low, sultry, as he gazed down at her. “I’d love to hold you right now. Would that be alright with you?”

“Yes.” She smiled, going with her body and moving closer to him.

Lucy let Cade pull her into his arms, appreciating his strength and his masculine scent as she wrapped her own arms around his waist and nestled into him. They stood like that for a while, in a warm embrace, his hands stroking gently along her spine while he told her how much he’d enjoyed spending time together. Eventually, Cade kissed the top of her head and leaned back to look down at her.

“Can you stay longer?” She asked.

His smile lifted her spirits.

“Sure.” He kissed her forehead again. “Let’s go sit down.”

She nodded, letting Cade escort her to the living room, one hand on the small of her back. While she’d rather have gone to the bedroom, he probably had the right plan. For now anyway...

“So,” Cade settled them onto the couch, “will you tell me more about your Yayo?”

She'd mentioned him earlier, when Cade had asked what had brought her to the area. But actually sharing about how he'd become her guardian and all the ways he'd supported her growing up felt tender and a bit raw.

Cade pulled her closer as she told him about her past, including that horrible storm that had changed everything. Lucy appreciated the warmth and compassion he gave, nodding and commenting in all the right places, stroking his palm along her upper arm, and brushing little kisses along her temples while encouraging her to tell him more. They talked for hours, about their childhoods and their parents, about their work and interests. Lucy was delighted to learn she'd already met some of Cade's friends.

"They're really nice."

She smiled, thinking about how kind they'd been to her.

"Nice?" Cade shook his head. "Grey maybe, but not Maddox or Tane. Did anybody make a move on you?"

Lucy giggled at Cade's frown. "Already territorial, huh, Deputy?"

Not that she minded. There was something endearing about the way Cade had taken to her.

"You have no idea." The heat in Cade's blue eyes called to everything feminine in Lucy. She shifted to face him better, loving his simultaneously protective and nurturing vibe.

"No." she said quickly, compelled to let Cade know *he* was who she wanted, not his friends. "They just helped me with the dog, and everyone was kind and gentlemanly."

"I'd like to have seen that." Cade chuckled. "Good thing I don't have to hurt any of them."

Lucy cocked her head to the side, loving Cade's little smirk and the light in his gorgeous eyes.

"You wouldn't hurt them, not really."

“No. But if they’d done anything untoward with you, I absolutely would.”

Lucy blinked up at Cade, surprised by his answer. He didn’t seem like the violent type, but she guessed being in law enforcement, he’d probably seen his fair share of bad situations.

“They were—”

“I know.” He smiled. “Perfect gentlemen.” He tucked her hair behind her ear, turning the movement into a caress along her jaw, his touch and gaze so tender it stole her breath. His fingers trailed down her neck. “Let’s talk about something else now, okay?”

Lucy nodded, but she couldn’t stop staring at Cade’s lips. Those perfect, pillowy lips that would no doubt feel amazing on her skin.

“Kiss me.”

Cade leaned in, claiming her lips, his arms wrapping around her, his hands gliding along her back and into her hair. Lucy pressed closer to Cade’s powerful body, opening for him, letting him in while spearing her fingers through his soft hair.

She moaned with pleasure as they explored each other, not caring if she seemed needy or wanton. She was. Cade’s kisses invited her to give her mind a break. Her body knew what she wanted, it knew what to do.

Before long, her fingers were sliding along Cade’s shirt, releasing those buttons so she could feel his skin, only to be frustrated by the t-shirt beneath. Damn, how many layers did he have to wear? As she yanked his shirt from his slacks, Cade pulled back from their kiss, taking her hands.

“Lucy, honey, are you sure this is what you want?”

“To feel your skin? Absolutely.” She nodded. “I promise, I’m not like this with everyone, it’s just...”

God, how did she explain she felt like they were made for each other? How romance movie was that? She had a flash of

sadness at the thought of Cade leaving her and quickly brushed it aside, reminding herself that he lived in the town he'd grown up in and was a Deputy Sheriff. That had longer-term written all over it.

“I want to be with you, Cade.” She told him honestly. “I know we just met, but there’s something about you I…”

God, did she sound like an obsessive woman? This was so not her. Usually she just took things in stride, but with Cade, she—

“I know.” He lifted one of her hands for a kiss. “I feel the same way. I didn’t want to freak you out with that, but my attraction to you goes beyond the physical, Lucy.” He dropped one of her hands to cup her cheek. “I want to be with you in all the ways, but I don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret. We can go at whatever pace you need, but I want to be with you. I want to know all of you. And I’m willing to take all the time in the world with that exploration if you are.”

Lucy couldn’t help grinning.

“Could you be any more perfect?”

Cade shook his head with a little smile. “I don’t know about perfect.”

She cupped his face with her free hand, appreciating his chiseled jaw. “I get to judge that.” Lucy gazed up into those brilliant eyes, feeling the flutter in her belly she got when on the precipice of something wonderful. “Cade Hansen, will you stay with me? I want to feel you everywhere.”

He gave her a slow, sensual smile as a low rumble came from his chest.

“I want to feel you everywhere, too. But not here on the couch, honey, not like this.”

“Yes.” She was so up for that. “My room’s that way.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before Cade had her in his arms again, giving her another breath-stealing kiss.

And then they were moving, clothes disappearing as he lifted and carried her through the house to her room, her bed.

Lucy gave herself over to her desire, letting her hands roam and rove all over Cade's firm body, her hips shifting of their own accord as he walked. And then he laid her out on her bed, shifting back to pull off his t-shirt and stare at her.

"Damn, Lucy," he growled huskily. "You are so fucking gorgeous."

Lucy reached for him, thinking he was pretty damn gorgeous himself. Those muscles were the real deal and the carnal look he gave her brought a fresh flood of excitement to her core.

"I need you, Cade." She rasped, her voice thick with desire.

The primal hunger on his face suggested he would pounce and ravage every inch of her, but Cade took his time. Moving over sensually, kissing her soundly again as his hands ghosted over her skin, leaving an electric tingling in their wake.

"Yes!" she panted as he kissed down the column of her neck.

He went lower, kissing his way over every inch of her torso as she pressed him closer, one hand spearing into his soft hair.

"My Lucy." His voice was gravelly, tinged with desire and awe. "So perfect." He dropped a kiss where her neck met her shoulder. "So fucking perfect."

And then his lips were on hers again and Lucy lost herself to the electric sensations as she gave herself to Cade. There was no more thought, only instinct and passion, her body taking over where her mind had left off. And as they caressed, and kissed, and explored every inch of each other, she knew Cade was right.

This was perfection.

Chapter Thirteen

Holy shit, she was fucking perfect. He knew that, had known it since he'd first laid eyes on her. But now that Lucy was here, under him, bare and beautiful, Cade knew it in a different way. The heat of her body seared into his own and Cade had to lift his head to breathe.

Damn, her kisses were intoxicating.

Lucy shifted her hips, calling his name, her fingers scrabbling along his back, trying to pull him closer, though they were already skin to skin. And fuck, Cade wanted her with everything in him. He wanted to drive himself into her deep, and everything about her right now let him know she wanted him to.

But he couldn't, not yet.

Though he knew in his soul Lucy was his true mate, he couldn't claim her without her full knowledge and consent. Sex was one thing, but it wasn't just sex. Not for either of them.

Cade trailed kisses along Lucy's body again, worshipping every inch of her golden skin, lingering on her breasts, her curves.

"Damn, Lucy." His voice was low and thick. "Do you know how incredible you are?"

He slid his hands along her hips, down her outer thighs, loving the feel of her as he kissed his way down her belly. And fuck, what those little mewls of pleasure she made did to him.

"I want to taste you." He rasped, raising his head to check her response.

Holy shit, she was spectacular. Skin flushed and chest heaving, eyes glazed with pleasure, mouth open, panting.

For him.

“Yes, Cade.” She panted. “Taste me. Fill me. I need you.”

Cade moved lower, his hands gliding along Lucy’s sexy legs, parting them so he could slide his shoulders and torso between them. He kissed her inner thighs on his way to her core, loving the way she trembled with delight and anticipation. Loving the scent of her arousal.

When his lips met her mound, he nearly lost it. Soft and warm, slicked with her desire for him. Delicious. Cade lapped at Lucy, lost in the sensations of wet on wet, lips on lips, loving the way she melted beneath him. The way she shifted her hips, the way she grasped his hair and pressed into him.

“More, Cade.” She moaned. “More.”

Her pleading tested Cade’s resolve. He wanted to bury himself to the hilt in that delicious, wet heat of hers. To feel her envelop him and work his cock. But he needed her consent, needed her all in before he could claim her that way. Still, it was within his power to give her more, so he gave it. Gave it with everything he fucking had, licking into her and worshipping her sweet pussy.

She came for him again and again and Cade relished the way her inner walls contracted, loved the way she called his name, loved the fresh floods of her arousal on his tongue. He fucking loved bringing her pleasure forth. Loved the way her body shook with the force of her ecstasy. Damn, he could live here, at her sweet core, tasting her like this forever.

“Cade.” She called huskily and damn if that didn’t make him want to start at the top again. “Cade, I need you.”

“You’ve got me, honey.” He kissed the insides of her thighs before returning to her delicious folds. Lucy squirmed beneath him, her hips rocking into his jaw.

“Please,” she panted. “Give me more.”

Damn, he loved the blissed out look on her gorgeous face.

Cade cupped Lucy's cheek, gazing into those gorgeous caramel-brown eyes before leaning down and kissing her, trailing a hand to her delectable breasts.

"Tell me what you want." He purred when they came up for air. "I need to hear you say it."

"I want to taste you, Cade." She said softly. "Please."

He kissed her breasts, laving his tongue over her pearly nipples, calling more delighted moans from her body before going back to her face.

"You want to taste me, hmm?" He kissed her again, sliding his arms under her and repositioning Lucy on the bed before kissing his way back down her body and climbing off the mattress.

"Cade." She sat up swiftly as he walked around the bed. "Please don't go. If you don't want to—"

"Oh," he grinned. "I want to."

He leaned in, kissing her soundly again, loving the way she relaxed into him, even chasing his lips when he pulled back.

"I think it'll be more comfortable for you this way." He guided her to lie down again, her head leaning slightly off the mattress. "There you go, Lucy." Cade stepped back, appreciating the way Lucy's eyes lit up as he ran his hand along his cock. "Is this what you want, honey?"

"Mhmm." She nodded. "I want to taste you, Cade, to suck you."

Damn, she was sexy as hell, all laid out naked and wanting. Those gorgeous breasts peaked for him, the scent of her arousal still strong in his nose. Cade held Lucy's gaze for a long moment, contemplating how best to handle this. He stopped stroking himself. He was about to fucking blow and wanted to come inside her pussy, not her mouth. But he didn't want to talk about his people right now. Didn't want to try

explaining shifters to her, not when she was licking her lips and looking at him like that.

He loved that hunger in Lucy's eyes, the desire. For him.

"If you want to stop—"

"I don't." She shifted up. "I don't want to stop. I want you. I want this." She gestured between them, her eyes going back to his cock.

He nodded. Hell, he wanted this too. It took everything not to fuck her senseless right now.

"I'm glad to hear it." The smile Lucy gave him went right to his heart. "If you want to stop at any point, for any reason, Lucy, I want you to tap my legs, like this." He demonstrated, so she knew how to tell him to stop with her mouth full. "You understand?"

"Yes." She nodded, smiling. "Now, let's go, Cade." She grinned, resetting herself so her head lay off the bed a bit. "Let me return the favor."

Cade stopped partway to her mouth.

"It's not a favor, Lucy. There is no repaying. I wanted to taste you, to—"

"And I want to taste you." She reached out, wrapping a hand around his cock, and Cade stepped closer, enjoying the electric feel of her skin on his.

Lucy shifted, tilting her head back and licking the length of him.

"Mmm." She smiled. "You're so soft."

Cade chuckled at that. He knew she must be talking about his skin. His shaft was so hard right now he thought it might shatter. And when she took him into her mouth, he thought he might lose himself completely. But he kept it together.

"Damn, Lucy." He praised as she hollowed her cheeks around him. "You feel incredible, honey." That sucking

sensation was unreal, the constriction of her wet mouth heaven.

Cade leaned over, kissing his way along Lucy's body until he found her core and settled there, exploring every inch of her with his mouth. Soon, he'd slipped his fingers inside, curving them along her front wall, driving them into her and back again as his other hand slid under her ass, massaging her cheek.

As Lucy sucked him deep, Cade matched her rhythm with his hands and mouth, both of them working each other toward a precipice of pleasure. And when they crested it, he didn't fall. He fucking flew. Another orgasm tackling him from behind as energy shot from his feet through his skull, his balls seeming to explode, sending tidal waves of pleasure up and through his shaft.

Even as Lucy drank him dry, her body shuddered with her own releases, her moans of pleasure vibrating along his cock and into his bones, calling forth yet another orgasm. The pleasure was so intense, he couldn't believe he was still standing. Cade was only vaguely aware of his fingers still working Lucy's core, his mouth nipping her clit, her trembling thighs and slick heat. He was positively soaring, his entire being swept up in the ecstatic nature of it all - nothing but incredible sensation.

Eventually, he pulled back from the center of his world, shifting his hips and taking Lucy's hands as he kissed the ever-living shit out of her. When they came up for air, he nearly flopped onto the bed with elated exhaustion.

"That was fucking incredible," he panted.

"Mmm." She nuzzled into his thigh, her eyes closed. "You too."

He smoothed the hair back from her face, loving how sweaty it was from their mutual pleasure.

"Let me clean you up, honey."

“Mmm.” She smiled, but didn’t open her eyes and Cade got the impression she felt like he did, utterly relaxed.

Though he would have preferred crawling onto the bed alongside her, he wanted to make sure she was comfortable. So, Cade got a cloth and a basin and gave her a sponge bath before seeing to himself and tucking them both in. As he settled the blankets over them, Cade marveled at how much had happened in such a short time. Fate was funny like that.

Lucy snuggled against him, sliding a hand along his pecs and sighing softly in her sleep. Cade wrapped his arms around her, appreciating the feel of her there. The normalcy of this, the beauty of it. He’d only known Lucy a matter of days, and yet, he couldn’t imagine his life without her in it.

He didn’t want to.

Though he hadn’t completed his bond with her yet, hadn’t properly claimed her, there was no doubt in his mind that Lucy was his woman.

There was no one else for him.

Chapter Fourteen

Lucy couldn't stop grinning. She'd been grinning all day and as she headed toward Cade's house, her cheeks actually hurt from the smiling. That man was something else.

She couldn't wait to see him.

It had actually turned out to be a blessing that he'd had to work today. After all, she did too, but she would have gladly blown everything off and hung out with Cade longer if she could have. As it was, her memories of last night and this morning had been tiding her over all day. Man, the way he'd pleased her had been incredible. She hadn't slept so well in ages. And then waking up with him...

Lucy's eyes swept the road, checking for wildlife even as her mind wandered to her Cade. He was a wonderful man, kind, intelligent, handsome, compassionate, fun to be around, passionate. She chuckled at that last.

Cade was definitely passionate.

She wasn't sure what he had planned for them tonight, but she hoped it involved more of his brand of getting to know each other. She'd never felt more safe, cherished, or sexy than she did with Cade. She'd loved every minute of everything with him and only wanted more.

Cade's huge black truck was in the driveway when she pulled up to his house and Lucy felt the flutters of anticipation in her belly at the thought of seeing him again. Man, she had it bad, didn't she? But who cared? When there was something good, you went with it. And Cade was definitely good.

More than good.

As she made her way to his porch, Lucy wondered if she should have worn something sexier, or more date-like, instead of her usual shorts and camisole. But it was too late to worry

about that now. Besides, the look on Cade's face when he opened the door let her know he wasn't thinking about what she was wearing at all.

"Hey." She smiled, rising on her toes to kiss him.

She loved the way Cade wrapped his arms around her, holding her close while he kissed her senseless right there on his porch for the whole world to see. There was something oddly wonderful about it and Lucy didn't care at all that his neighbor had taken that moment to drag their trashcan to the street. She just kissed Cade back, sliding her hands over his shoulders, clasping them behind his neck.

Cade pulled back and gazed down at her with a look that took her breath away all over again.

"I'm glad you're here." He kissed her again as he lifted her.

Lucy wrapped her legs around him as he carried her into his house and settled onto the couch with her in his lap. They made out for a long while, and by the time they came up for air, it was dark outside.

"You know," she smiled, running her fingers along the tops of his shoulders. "I like how you say hello, Cade."

"Mmm." He kissed her neck. "I like how you do, too."

They sat for a long moment, just gazing into each other's eyes, and Lucy loved how wonderful it was just sitting together like this.

Cade reached out, tracing his fingertips along her jaw.

"Damn, I missed you today." His voice was low and gruff, sexy.

"I missed you too." And sure, she should probably be freaked out by that fact, but she wasn't.

Not at all.

"Lucy, honey," Cade cleared his throat, "I need to tell you something. It might sound completely crazy but, I need you to

hear me out.”

“I’m listening.”

Somehow, she knew whatever he had to tell her wasn’t scary, and yet, she found her heart rate speeding up as she watched Cade’s Adam’s apple shift while he swallowed.

He was nervous.

“It’s no secret I’m incredibly attracted to you, but it’s not just for a good time, Lucy. I want to be with you long term.” He cupped her cheeks with both hands. “I need you to know what you’re getting into with me, though.”

While she liked the idea of something long-term with Cade, she frowned at the seriousness in his tone.

“And what is that?”

“I’m a shifter, honey.”

“Okay.” Lucy searched Cade’s face for more clues. She didn’t see what the big deal was, but he was obviously anxious about it. “So, do you normally work nights, then? I’m an indie artist. I make up my own hours. We can work out schedules.”

Cade rested his forehead on hers, wrapping his arms around her waist. “No, honey, that’s not what I mean. Although, being in law enforcement, sometimes I do work strange hours. I mean…” he leaned back, taking a deep breath. “You know how your family heritage is Hispanic and Native? Well, mine is like that, only different.”

“I don’t care about your ancestry.” Lucy frowned. “Is that a thing in small towns? People care about stuff like that? My Yayo lived here just fine and got along with everyone.”

What the hell?

“No, Lucy.” Cade shook his head. “It’s not that, it’s—” he ran his hand down his face. “Shit, this is hard to do. We don’t usually talk about it.”

She nodded, understanding his hesitancy.

She'd put up with her own share of crap from people who didn't look like her at boarding schools growing up.

"Look, Cade, I don't care what your heritage is. As long as you or your family aren't actively oppressing anyone for theirs, I don't care. I just want to be with you."

"But I'm a shifter, honey."

"I don't even know what you mean by that." Lucy sighed. "I can tell it's important to you and you think it's a bad thing, but..."

"No, being a shifter is a good thing." Cade interjected. "It's a very good thing." He shook his head. "Shit, we're not supposed to talk about this with others, but you need to know."

Lucy cupped Cade's face in her hands, wishing she could do more to calm him.

"Then tell me, Cade." The way he was getting worked up over this shifter thing was kind of freaking her out. "Just tell me whatever it is and we'll figure out how to deal with it. Or not." She shrugged. "Just tell me."

"Okay." He nodded.

In the silence that followed, Lucy was keenly aware of their breathing. It was obvious Cade was working himself up for something big and Lucy grew more nervous as the silence stretched.

"Shifters," Cade finally said, "shifters are a group of people with the ability to change their form."

"Like the Nahuales?"

Holy crap, that was brujo stuff.

Her Yayo had told her stories of the shapeshifters when she'd been too little to know they were make-believe. She'd had nightmares and been afraid of the dark for years after that. She still didn't go out in the woods on the new moons, just in case somebody wanted to drink her blood.

“Kind of,” Cade said slowly, repositioning so he could look into her eyes. “Hey, it’s okay, Lucy.”

“No, no, that’s not okay.” She climbed out of his lap, putting as much space between them as she could without seeming rude. “Do you have any other powers?” She lowered her voice. “Do you drink blood?”

Holy crap, this couldn’t be real, right?

“What?” He frowned. “No.” He shook his head. “Fuck no.” Cade stood up and Lucy took a step back.

He held up his hands in a placating gesture.

“Just hear me out, Lucy,” he kept his tone soft, obviously trying to calm her, “I know this is weird, but it’s not what you think.”

“You just told me you’re a shifter, a Nahual. What the hell am I supposed to think?”

God, he’d been in her home, in her bed. She’d have to get a *limpia* and—

“First of all, I’m not a Nahual. I’m no brujo, I have no magical skills, and I’m not out for any nefarious anything.” He dropped his hands, shaking his head. “I’m a shifter. I was born that way. Everyone in my family is a wolf, several of my friends. But there are other kinds of shifters too, birds, bears, dragons—”

“Dragons?”

Holy crap. She’d fallen for a lunatic.

“Lucy, will you please sit down?” Cade gestured to the couch. “I know this is a lot to take in.”

“Show me.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“What?”

“Show me. Right now. Shift into your wolf-form or whatever. I want to see it. This all sounds like the crazy bullcrap my Yayo scared me with as a child, so I’d behave.”

“Lucy—”

“Nope.” She shook her head, dropping her hands and starting to pace. “I cannot believe I fall for the guy who thinks he can turn into a freaking animal.” She whirled on him. “I let you go down on me.”

“And you’re fucking delicious.” He grinned.

“This is not funny, Cade.” Though, she had to admit, his smile was kind of infectious.

Lucy fought it off, though. She wanted to be mad about this.

How was it possible that she was so freaking comfortable with this guy, felt like she’d known him her whole life or something, was willing to explore more with him and he pulls a stunner like this? How did anyone make him a Deputy Sheriff?

“I’ll show you, but you might have to call the doctor.” Cade frowned. “I’m not supposed to shift right now.”

“Oh my God, are you even serious?”

“Absolutely, Lucy.” Cade stood in front of her in his well-fitting jeans and t-shirt, looking all edible and manly and honorable...

“You’re not supposed to shift.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Grey’s orders.”

“The veterinarian? He’s not the boss of you, Cade, you’re the Sheriff.”

“Deputy.”

“So, if you shift, you’ll what? Stay in that form or something?”

“I’m not sure.”

Lucy stared at Cade, debating what to do. Crap, how had things gone from them talking about something long-term to this? Thank goodness she’d learned it now. Nothing sucked

more than getting invested and intertwined with someone, only to learn they're delusional and dangerous. Some part of her knew Cade wasn't either of those things, or at least hoped he wasn't. But this was still some crazy crap, and it was too much right now.

"I need to go." She announced.

"Lucy," Cade's voice rang out, beckoning her back, but she didn't turn around.

No way was she going to stick around and get her heart broken any more than it already was. Better to leave now than let Cade make a fool of them both by luring her into his delusions.

Somehow it didn't really feel like he was lying, but God, what if she went with it and it was all bullcrap? No, that would hurt too much.

It already hurt now.

Chapter Fifteen

“Lucy, wait.”

Lucy hated walking through Cade’s house alone while he called after her. She hated that they’d gone from all their delicious heat and attraction to this, whatever this was. But no way could she deal with magic and wizards stuff today.

She freaking hated being lied to.

Lucy fought back tears as she headed for Cade’s door. She’d thought he was perfect for her. How could she have been so stupid?

Cade called her name again, but she didn’t turn around. And that probably made her a bitch, didn’t it? A sound like a large twig snapping had her pivoting and heading back toward the other room, though.

“Cade?”

Had he fallen and hurt himself? He had that limp. Sure, it had seemed better this morning, but he was still healing and—

Lucy stumbled, dropping to her knees.

Instead of Cade, a big, black dog with brilliant blue eyes stood staring at her.

“Atlas?” Lucy frowned. “Wait, you’re... Atlas?”

The dog came forward and nudged her with his nose before laying down in front of her with his belly exposed.

“Cade?” she asked hesitantly.

The dog made that chuffing sound and thumped his tail like he had when she’d helped him the other night, the one that meant he liked something.

Lucy reached out a shaking hand and pet his flank.

“Is it really you?” God, she wished he could talk as a dog. Instead, he nuzzled her hand like he wanted her to keep petting him.

“You’re the dog?” Lucy couldn’t believe it. “You made me feel so safe during the storm, twice.” She buried her face in Cade’s neck, recognizing his masculine scent, even in this form. “Oh, Cade, no wonder you didn’t want to tell me. I’m sorry I hit you with my car. And you had a broken leg. No wonder you couldn’t turn into a man again. And you’re not really a dog, so no wonder those drugs made you sick.”

She kept up with the petting and the apologies, trying to wrap her mind around things. Cade let her pet him. He even wrapped his paws around her neck while she cried. And then he was human again, pulling her into his lap and holding her close to his bare chest.

“Shh, Lucy, it’s okay, honey,” he soothed.

“I could have killed you,” she sobbed. “Twice!”

As a fresh round of grief rocked her, Cade kissed the top of her head, saying sweet things and rubbing her back. Lucy surrendered to the moment, to the sensations, letting her emotions and confusion out as Cade held her in his wonderful arms. When she finally calmed, she felt completely spent.

“I’m so sorry, Cade.” She whispered.

He lifted her chin to gaze at her. “Don’t be. You didn’t know, and I should have been paying better attention to the road.”

“I mean, for not believing you. And for that too, hitting you, drugging you.”

“You took incredible care of me, Lucy.” He grinned. “Hell, I would have been happy to have been your dog. But, I’m a wolf, honey. A shifter.”

“And there are others like you?”

Cade nodded. “Pine Haven Falls is a sanctuary for shifters. A safe place where we can be ourselves.”

“I’ve never seen animals in town.” Not that she’d been there much, a few grocery trips, and that visit to the clinic yesterday. “Wait a minute. Grey’s not a veterinarian, is he?”

“No.” Cade chuckled. “But I sure am glad you called him. Can you imagine how upsetting it would have been for you to find a naked man in your bed?”

Lucy grinned, shifting her hips against Cade.

“If it was you, I wouldn’t mind. I like you naked.”

He laughed, the sound lifting her spirits.

“Are there really dragons in Pine Haven?” She’d always wished dragons were real.

“A few.” Cade nodded. “I’ll make introductions later. Right now, we need to focus on us.” He tucked her hair behind her ear. “If you need more time to adjust to things, I understand. We aren’t supposed to tell outsiders about this at all. That’s part of why I didn’t shift when you thought I was a dog. But I knew even then that you were mine. That’s why I didn’t run away.”

“You were going to run away?” Lucy frowned. “I got you all those toys.”

Cade laughed again, pulling her into his embrace and kissing the top of her head.

“You were incredibly thoughtful. And by the way, I loved that lamb you made me for dinner.”

Lucy grinned, thinking about that night.

“I loved the way you curled up on my bed and snuggled close to me at bedtime.” She admitted. “I’d thought you were just cold.”

“Nope.” He smiled. “I’ll own that. I wanted to be close to you and protect you even then. Listen, you need to know I’ll be a bit territorial with you. Not overbearing or anything, at least I hope not. Please communicate with me if you think

that's happening. But I won't let any harm come to you, Lucy, and I won't take kindly to other men getting too close to you."

"Is that why you growled at the vet and his techs and at your friends?" She giggled as Cade nodded.

"I'm not proud of it, but it's part and parcel of being a wolf. I protect what's mine."

"So," she laced her hands around his neck. "I'm yours, am I?"

"If you want to be." He smiled. "If you'll have me."

"You do realize we just met, right?"

"I do." He chuckled, caressing her earlobe with one hand while resting the other on her hip. "And I know how insane it sounds after such a short time of knowing each other. But you're it for me, Lucy. My true mate. My people only have one, and you're mine."

Lucy smiled at him, marveling at how safe she felt right now. At how much she still wanted to be with him, even after having learned he could turn into a wolf, which was kind of crazy.

"It's customary among my people to mate for life," he said solemnly.

"And you want to mate me."

Heat flared in Cade's eyes as she slid her hands down his biceps.

"Yes."

She knew a statement like that should make her want to run for the hills, but after everything they'd shared, Lucy didn't want to go anywhere, especially not with Cade looking at her like that. She'd known from the moment they'd met that she wanted to be with him, and he'd made his intentions abundantly clear with every interaction since. So, somehow, what he was saying made sense, even when it didn't.

"Is it weird that I want to hear more?"

“It’s not weird at all.” Cade leaned in for a kiss.

As Lucy tilted to meet him, Cade brushed his lips along hers, sending a frisson of awareness through her body, desire uncoiling in her belly at his touch.

“I know this is a bit much, and I appreciate you hearing me out.” He smiled. “You’re so fucking perfect, Lucy, you don’t even know.”

She grinned at his praise, feeling herself melt as he leaned in, giving her another kiss. When Cade pulled back, he gazed at her tenderly.

“Among my people, when we find our mates, we claim them.” He trailed his fingers down her throat, drawing a light circle with his fingertip at the base of her neck. “It’s for life, Lucy.”

“Mmm.” She liked the way he felt, those fingers ghosting along her clavicle and up her shoulder, following the line of her camisole’s spaghetti strap. “Strangely, that idea isn’t terrifying.”

It should be, though, right?

She should be freaking out that some guy she’d just met was telling her she’d be with him forever. Should be freaked out that a relative stranger was touching her like that, running his fingers along every exposed bit of skin as though he was reading braille.

But it wasn’t terrifying, it was electrifying.

And he wasn’t a stranger, was he? Not anymore. They’d learned every inch of each other’s bodies last night and this morning, and she’d happily do it again.

“I never want you to be terrified, Lucy,” Cade murmured, kissing the base of her neck where it met her shoulder. “God, I want you so much. Want to taste you, be in you.”

“Yes, please.” She shifted her hips, wanting to feel him everywhere again. He’d been incredible last night.

But instead of pressing closer, Cade pulled back, gazing at her with awe.

“Lucy,” He cupped her face in his hands. “Sex with me is different. We’ve already begun a bonding and if I take you now, it will seal that. I want you to be my mate. I want to claim you as mine, but I won’t do it without your full consent.”

“Wait,” Lucy shook her head, trying to comprehend that last, “You ‘bond’ with people when you have sex with them? So, how many ‘mates’ do you have?”

She’d thought he wanted only her.

“I don’t have any other mates, Lucy.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “You’re my mate. The only one for me. I’m already bonding with you. Can’t you feel it? That pull, that incendiary something, the drive and desire for connection, for more... I want to deepen that, to solidify it, to make it real by claiming you.” He shook his head. “But I can’t take it back once it’s done. Once I claim you, you’re mine. I don’t want you to commit to anything you don’t want to do, Lucy. You need to know for sure you want to be mine, and that you’ll have me.”

Lucy pretended to think, cocking her head to the side as she fought back a grin. In reality, this was a no-brainer. She knew that pull he spoke of. She’d felt it since she’d laid eyes on him at the clinic. And yes, it was absolutely weird that Cade could turn into a wolf, but somehow, it was also pretty cool. In truth, she liked both the man and the beast, had felt safe with them, loved.

“Yes.” She smiled. “I will absolutely have you, Cade. But you’ll have to explain all this stuff to me better as we go, because I have to admit, it’s still pretty strange.”

“Done.” He nodded. “We’ll sort whatever we need to. I know this all happened so fast...” he shook his head with a chuckle, “Fate’s funny like that.” “We’ll figure it out together.” Lucy smiled, loving the idea of together with Cade.

“I like the way you think.” He grinned, sliding his hands back to her waist.

They fell into one of those comfortable silences again, staring into each other’s eyes as heat built between them. Lucy marveled at how incredible this day had turned out to be.

How beautiful.

“So, about this mating thing,” Lucy smiled, loving the feel of Cade’s growing arousal beneath her. “Can you tell me how it works? I think you said it involves sex?”

Cade made that purring sound he did sometimes and Lucy ground against him, knowing he liked it by the gleam in his eyes and his body’s response.

“It does.” His voice was low again, husky. “It involves me coming inside you, marking you as mine, inside and out.”

“Well, that sounds awesome.” Lucy grinned, remembering the way Cade had tasted every inch of her skin last night and all the pleasure he’d given her this morning.

He was on her in a blink, those pillowy lips molding to hers. Lucy opened for him, welcoming him in, moaning at his incredible flavor as they explored each other’s mouths. When he wrenched himself from her, Lucy groaned in dismay.

“I don’t want to take you here on the floor.” Cade kissed her neck as he swept them up. “Not for our first time, honey.”

And then he was kissing her again and Lucy was spearing her hands into his dark, silky hair. Somehow he got her naked amidst all the kissing and heavy petting, and then Cade had her spread out on his bed, his head between her thighs.

“Let me taste you again, Lucy.” he growled, “I want more of that sweet nectar I’ve been craving all day.”

“Yes.” She sighed, shifting her hips and widening her legs. “I’m yours, Cade.”

Before she could take another breath, he buried himself in her from nose to chin, licking, sucking, and nipping as she

writhed beneath him in pleasure. She flew apart and came back together to Cade, telling her how fucking perfect she was in between nuzzling her neck with his lips while his fingers caressed her breasts.

Lucy felt delightfully languid in Cade's arms, loving the way he tended to her on every level. Checking in on how she was feeling, communicating what he wanted to do and acting on her consent. And damn, he made her feel incredible. She'd lost count of how many times she'd flown apart for him, but she knew there was one thing they hadn't done yet. One way he hadn't claimed her yet. And she ached for it.

"Cade," she gasped as he worked her core with his fingers while suckling her breasts with his talented mouth, "I need you."

"I'm yours, honey," he husked from her chest, "Now and always."

As wonderful as hearing those words was, Lucy needed something else right now. She shifted her hips, grinding against his hand.

"I need you inside me." She admitted, whimpering at her own ache. "I need to feel you in me."

Cade gave her a kiss that took her breath away before capturing her face in his hands and gazing deeply into her eyes. "I want that too, Lucy, but there's no going back after this."

"Why would I ever go back?" She shifted against him again. "I want you, Cade."

There, that was it, wasn't it?

The feelings she'd been dancing around, the emotions she hadn't wanted to name, swamped her now. She'd felt it from the moment they'd met, the attraction that was more than attraction. Some kind of something, an electric current she couldn't ignore. A magnetic pull warping space and time until there was no past or future, only now. With Cade.

“I love you, Lucy.” He grinned, taking her breath away. “I’ve loved you since the moment we met. I just didn’t want to freak you out with the intensity.”

And now they were going to be bonded. Mated.

“Show me.” She begged. “Let me feel your love, Cade. I need it.”

Now, more than ever, perhaps.

Cade hovered over her, his brilliant blues staring into her, a soft knowing in his eyes.

“I love you, Lucy Vasquez. Now and always.”

He kissed her again and Lucy kissed him back, giving as good as she got. And damn, he was a good kisser.

Then Cade was inside her, stretching and filling what had once been an aching void. For the first time in her life, Lucy felt whole.

And that was a wonderful thing.



Thanks for reading!

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Authors Note



Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Lucy and Cade's story as much as I enjoyed writing it. I'm looking forward to sharing more adventures featuring the sexy shifters of Pine Haven Falls with you soon.

In the meantime, I'd love to invite you to my FREE Insider's Community where you'll get the inside scoop on creative updates including sneak peeks, deleted and behind-the-scenes, giveaways, exclusive offers and special events.

Also, it would mean so much to me if you would take a brief moment to leave a rating and/or review on this book. It helps other readers find me. Thank you for your support!

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About Sarah

Sarah Dinan writes spicy paranormal romance and urban fantasy stories featuring alpha-protectors and the people who bring them to their knees. She's a martial artist, Turkish cuisine connoisseur, and critically acclaimed Celtic singer. She's also worked as a radio DJ, hair model, actress, belly dancer, teacher, and ropes course facilitator. When she's not penning tales about the art of surrender and the ownership of desire, Sarah can be found enjoying nature, encouraging creatives, making music, playing video games, and advocating for clean water. Sarah lives in Austin, Texas with her husband, son, and battle cello, Tilda. Visit her at www.sarahdinan.com or connect on socials @thesarahdinan.

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