



The Midlife
CHRISTMAS
MAGIC
ALINE ASH

Midlife Christmas Magic
Bear Mates Over Forty Book 8
Aline Ash

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Midlife Christmas Magic, book 8

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Chapter 1

Loretta

If Lottie were to compile a list of all the shit she'd seen in the past six months, there wouldn't have been enough paper to contain it all. She knew that her employer wasn't a good man. He wasn't actually even entirely a man. His scarred visage rendered him terrifying enough, but the fact that he often had his thugs beat other people bloody for a living was enough to raise the hair on anyone's arms.

Lottie stayed because against all the odds, her charge was a sweet eleven-year-old boy who badly needed a sort of mother in his life aside from a teacher, and because quite honestly, she needed the money. She was in a tough spot and no other job she could get would provide for her dad's care. She'd thought the position was a blessing that dropped into her lap. Then she learned the truth.

Of all the things she'd witnessed, this was the worst so far.

Nelson Inglis—loan shark, bear shifter, and technically her employer—stumbled from the woods that surrounded and disguised his property, half-dressed, wounded, and covered in blood.

Lottie shot out of the wooden chair. She liked the quiet of the night. After Orrin was asleep and her lesson plans were complete for the next day, she'd take a flashlight and a book, and no matter what time of year it was, she'd go and sit out on the old farmhouse's wrap around porch. While Seattle's winters were rarely bitterly cold, there was a brisk biting wind that reminded her it was November. She'd thrown on a chunky

knit sweater, a pair of lined fleece leggings, and a heavy three-quarter length jacket before she'd come outside for the peace, quiet, and fresh air.

This wasn't clearing her head. She'd been outside for all of ten minutes, and now Nelson appeared looking like a murder scene.

Holy god, please let there not have been a murder.

She didn't want to get involved, but it was too late for that. The men Nelson employed—his evil henchmen? Business associates? Whatever they were—usually only came around in the afternoon or early evening. Not that they'd ever gone into that kind of territory. In the months she'd worked for Nelson she could count on one hand the number of times they'd actually had a proper conversation. He was a gruff, private man, he'd ask how his son was doing and if she needed anything, but that was about it. And it had been clear that anything related to his business interests was strictly off limits. But at least if his goons had been around they could have taken care of their boss—however much they scared her.

Right now, it was just the three of them.

Her great big, bleeding boss who she absolutely did not like in the slightest, his son—asleep in bed, and herself. Okay, maybe she did like him a smidge, at times. Maybe she noticed things that made her blood run hot, and her body burn in awkward spots. Maybe she did respect his fatherly instincts. But there was a whole heap of trouble in his work and in his life in general that she would have preferred to steer clear of. The burning, awakening, strange responses in her body—well, she would have liked to steer clear of them too, but hiding them, lying to herself, and doing her best to ignore it was the best she ever got.

Nelson moved like a mountain uprooted. Jagged edges, lumbering strides, heavy footfalls, and a hardness that stole her breath. Beneath the raw, animal power, he had an inherent grace that would have embarrassed him. When he laughed, it was harsh and bitter, and he would have laughed if anyone pointed that out to him. He would have said that he had no grace and no beauty either.

He would have been wrong.

Despite the silvery, faded scars that marred his forehead and cut down the left side of his face, past his jaw, and down his neck, he was still a beautiful man.

Beauty could be cold, hard, and cruel. Beauty could be, and often was, unfairly given.

The man was built like the grizzly he actually was in his other form. Even hunched over, he was still all power and hard muscle. What man was built as powerfully as he was? She'd never seen anyone like him before. She didn't want to fixate on anything, but the blood drew her attention and the rest of him held it. She held her glance too long and her heart stuttered and tossed in her chest.

How far had he walked in that state, blood leaking and bubbling in rivers between the massive hand clutched over his shoulder? The full moon caressed those tight, huge muscles, but it also painted scars on his arms, torso, and back silver against night darkened skin. Those scars weren't ugly. They were just scars but knowing the kind of violence that had wrought them, scared her. Fearful scars that made Lottie's stomach tighten and her chest feel like it was ripped wide open, even though it wasn't her first time seeing them.

She threw herself down the porch steps, her booted feet moving in remarkable silence. She raced across the yard so fast that the hood of her jacket blew off and her coppery hair tumbled free and streamed out like fluttering ribbons behind her.

She stopped in front of Nelson. There was no snow, but droplets of blood hit the ground like the rain that came over the mountains in the distance. He raised his head and his eyes flashed. He gave her a twisted grin that made the ruined part of his face bunch up hideously.

Lottie steeled herself, even though her stomach twisted. She tried hard not to look at all the blood. “How did you get that?” The wound. Bullet? Knife? Animal?

“Not the way you think. Quite stupidly actually.” He tilted his face to the full moon. “It’s a full moon tonight. I went for a run by myself. Shifters do that kind of thing. I thought I was alone out there, seeing I was on my own land. But there was someone else out there. Someone hunting where they shouldn’t have been. Didn’t even have time to scent him out. I just heard the gun and felt the pain and knew I had to get out of there.” His face twisted up in another sneer. “I found the clothes I’d stashed, got changed, and used my shirt and sweater to staunch the blood. I dropped them a while back. They were sodden anyway.”

“You need a hospital.” Yeah. Right. Because Nelson did things like a regular person ever.

He scoffed at that. “Not a chance.”

Even at five seven, she was so much shorter than he was. He could be on the ground, comatose, and he’d still have more power in one limb than she had in her whole body. Still.

She stood her ground. Crossed her arms and tried to look like she wasn't going to budge.

“You can't come inside. You'll terrify Orrin if he wakes up.”

“I have no intention of going in there. But you should. Get some sleep.”

Her eyes locked on the scars on his naked shoulder. The flesh twisted in silvery rivers, snaking over his chest and arm. They looked raised and shiny where the blood covered them. He caught her looking and held her gaze in a hard stare of his own.

“It's not my first time getting hurt. Shifters heal fast. I'll dig out the bullet and be fine in a few days.”

“Or you'll bleed to death like a fool,” she snapped. She didn't know where she pulled that strength from. She was trembling all over. “I don't like you. You know I think you're a terrible human being with a black heart. You're merciless and you can be cruel. But I've seen how much you love your son and Orrin only has you. If something happens to you, he'll be alone in the world.”

Nelson shrugged, or at least tried to before wincing in pain. “I have a brother.”

“It's not the same as having a father.” She couldn't just go back inside. She couldn't let a man possibly bleed to death knowing she could have helped him—even if she thought he was a prize asshole. “You'll let me help you,” she insisted, though she nearly passed out at the thought of more blood and

that gruesome gaping wound. “Or I’m going to call for an ambulance, I swear.”

She was shocked when he let out a hiss of breath. “Fine,” he grumbled. He knew he didn’t have time to stand out there arguing the point and she wasn’t bluffing about making that call. They’d sidestepped around each other for long enough and he knew that she didn’t say things she didn’t mean. “I’ll go to the barn. I have medical supplies there.”

He walked past her. Even though his gait was unsteady, he still made such good time that she had to run to keep up.

She didn’t usually go into the barn. Neither did Orrin.

It was never directly off limits, but they both knew that it wasn’t a place for them.

She’d once asked Nelson why the farm didn’t have any animals if there was a barn. He’d told her that bears made all animals too nervous, even if human form they could sense that there was something different about them. His family got rid of the sheep and cows and horses that the place came with a long time ago. He’d kept up the barn, but only to the point where no one would think it was anything but a ramshackle old building.

He pulled open the man door and she followed him inside. It looked like any regular old barn from there. Dusty bales of hay, an ancient cobweb-covered tractor, shovels and pitchforks here and there.

Two steps in, he stumbled.

Lottie tried to take his arm, but her fingertips didn't even make contact with his bare skin before he flinched away. "No," he hissed, rounding on her. Her heart raced and her fear must have been clear because he swallowed hard and stopped basically baring his teeth at her. "Please," he amended. "I'm fine."

He wasn't, but she didn't try to help him again. He didn't stumble either. He picked his way across the barn, weaving past old stalls and ancient implements. When he pulled open a door at the back, she thought it was the end of the barn. But the wall didn't open up to outside. That door was the entryway into a different world.

A small tidy office with good lighting overhead, drywalled walls, and tiled floors. There was a large oak desk, rows of bookshelves, filing cabinets, and two ornate antique leather chairs.

Officially, Nelson had an office in the house. What was this then? His unofficial office? The real one?

He slid open the top drawer of the desk. Blood dripped over the surface, which didn't have a single sheet of paper or anything else on it. Those drops were so red on that buttery yellow leather finish. Lottie gulped, swallowing back the excess saliva that flooded her mouth.

No wonder Nelson sometimes went out there to meet with his thugs. She thought he was just giving them instructions, but maybe it wasn't as bad as all that.

It probably was.

He passed her a small mirror. She was so stunned that her hands closed around the edges of it before she could even think about what it was for. He produced a kit next, small and black, a bit like the kind paramedics carried. Then some bandages. The realization of what he planned to do suddenly hit and her hands shook on the mirror. It looked more like something that should be used for applying makeup or tweezing eyebrows rather than doing makeshift surgery on yourself.

She could handle the bandages and even the mirror, but it was too much when Nelson produced a sheathed knife from that drawer. She nearly fainted when he pulled out the wicked silver blade and dropped it on the desk's surface.

Still holding his hand over the wound, he dribbled blood over the floor with the few steps it took to get to the cupboard behind the desk. He wrapped his hands around a bottle of whiskey and slammed the door shut.

“No,” she breathed. “No. You can't. This isn't the eighteen hundreds, and you're not some damn gold prospector alone in the hills. You can't just pry that bullet out and pour whiskey on the wound and hope for the best.”

He acted like she'd just made a good joke and let out that rusty laugh of his. The one that sounded half bitter and half reluctant. “Done it before, and I'll probably do it again in my lifetime. Modern medicine is no good for anyone like me. Any idea what would happen if some doctor ever noticed anything off? Wounds healing too quickly? An abnormality at all? Lab rats. That's what would happen. I won't spend my life in a cage. A few minutes of pain now ensures that my secret stays a secret.”

“There has to be a doctor somewhere else. A shifter?”

The slightest hesitation. Was she imagining it, or was that wince something unrelated to the pain? “Nope. There’s no one.”

Her fingers clamped harder around the mirror. She took a deep steadying breath. “There’s me.”

He sat down hard in the large antique desk chair. The wooden seat creaked alarmingly.

He picked up the knife and waved her over with it. “Stand there.” She couldn’t move. Her legs wouldn’t work. He misinterpreted that. “Please,” he sighed.

Christ, this was insane. She’d thought that a million times since she’d taken this job. Things that appeared too good to be true often were—but she’d never imagined that she’d be stepping into a world where reality was sometimes questionable.

Nelson didn’t treat himself to even a drop of that whiskey. He doused the knife, and he doused the wicked looking bullet hole in his shoulder, back and front. He gritted his teeth and his skin went from its normal healthy bronzed hue to a pale, waxy grey, but he never made a sound. Not when he raised the knife. Not when he stuck it into the wound and dug around with that freaking blade.

Not even when Lottie gagged and nearly dropped the mirror.

Alright, he did make a sound then. “I’m almost there. Just stay strong. Hold that mirror there. Yes. Right there. Good

girl.”

What the hell was wrong with her that those words went through her like liquid fire? Good. Girl. Not like she was a child. No. Like she was a full-grown woman and she'd done something to please him. That should make her gag again, but instead, it fortified her. She shut her eyes and didn't watch the rest of the procedure. She didn't open them again until she heard the knife thunk down on the desktop and a quick hiss of pain as the splash of whiskey met torn, wounded flesh again.

She tore her eyes open as Nelson was packing the wound. She searched for the crumpled bullet and found it on his desktop near the knife. God, he'd just pried a fucking bullet out of himself, and he was still conscious. He packed the wound and wrapped the bandages over and around his shoulder. They reddened immediately, but that didn't seem to worry him.

“Best to leave it open. You're not sewing anything into it that way. Don't worry. It'll coagulate soon enough and in a few days, it'll be like it didn't even happen. There'll be a scar...” his eyes met hers and there it was. That wry, dry humor. “But that clearly won't matter to me.”

“How did it happen?” She'd never been brave enough to ask. She wanted to die now. Why did she ask that now? She shouldn't be the one going into shock here.

He kept winding the bandage steadily around his shoulder, like it was nothing to him. Like it hadn't hurt a bit. Like he hadn't lost a drop of blood. “It was a long time ago. Shifter shit. I was an asshole.”

“You're still an asshole,” she blurted.

He gave a bark of surprised rusty laughter. “Yeah. I was worse back then. I couldn’t control my bear. Got into it with another shifter who wasn’t really an asshole but couldn’t control his either. Teenagers and hormones. Sometimes it happens. I was mad about it for a long time. My family ended up leaving the clan we lived with—other people like us who lived remote. My dad bought this land. Got us some fake IDs. Set us up. I was bitter for a long time. Did some even dumber shit. I was spared anyway. Got mercy I didn’t deserve. I’ve walked a bad path.”

If they were truth telling, then she might as well be honest. “You’re still walking it.”

He didn’t look up at her. “Not like before. But you’re right. I’m not a nice man. You can’t be, doing what I do, and everyone has to make money somehow. Being a shifter living in a human world is hard. It’s easier to lend people money and stay out of sight.”

“To send your thugs out to do the dirty things.”

“To recoup losses. People know what happens when they sign contracts.”

“You could go legal. Lend money through proper channels and write off your losses for tax purposes.”

His eyes shot up to hers. He didn’t smile or snort or laugh, but there was the slightest warming in his black eyes. “I knew when I hired you that you were desperate. That’s why you took the job even though you didn’t like the look of me. I researched you. Wouldn’t have hired you otherwise, so don’t look so surprised.” What the hell? Also, what the hell, he

hadn't even looked at her. How did he know she was surprised or not? "I know about your dad in that home. I know how much it costs, down to the dollar, every month. I know you only stay because of him and because no other job pays what I pay. That's why you've put up with the bullshit. But, despite how terrible I am, maybe I recognize the goodness in others. Maybe that's my curse. To see it and feel it and never have it for myself. You're a good person. You're loyal and trustworthy. I needed someone like that before I told you about what Orrin really is. I tried to get another shifter to teach him. Couldn't find one anywhere. Not one who'd agree to the job. I can help him with his bear. I can do that, even if I'm a shit human. It's the other stuff I couldn't help him with. That's why I needed you."

She set the mirror down. He didn't seem to need it anymore. He tucked the last of the bandage into itself and leaned back in the chair. How any man could look so... all-encompassing after being so gravely wounded, she didn't know, but he took up the whole room. "I- I know you love him," she stammered. "It's probably your one redeeming quality."

"That and my good looks."

She gulped. Seriously? This man never made jokes, and getting shot seemed to put him in a better mood? She'd never have taken him for someone who could be self-deprecating, let alone so brutally honest. "The scars don't make you ugly." She said that with no small amount of compassion. She wasn't going to joke about that. Inside, they had to hurt him. They had to bother him. They were so... visible. But ugly? No. He wasn't an ugly man. That was the hardest part of knowing him. The part that confused her the most, so she tried hard not to think about it.

How anyone so fundamentally bad could be so beautiful on the outside. The scars didn't dampen it. Not one bit.

"It's my black soul that does it."

She flushed, having been called out like that. He knew what she was thinking. "Exactly," she muttered.

He nodded, still not offended. She had to look away. She couldn't keep looking at him. Looking at him freely like this when she normally didn't, only made her want to look more.

"Orrin won't travel down that road. Like I said, I can help him with his bear. I have enough control now. Spent enough years on my own doing all the wrong shit that I want to do right by him. got over that bitterness when my life was spared years ago. Maybe I'm even sorry about it. about all those wasted years. I don't want that for him. Ever. He's my child and if there's one thing shifters get crazy protective of, it's their young. He has to go into a hard world already and he has to be prepared. He'll never want for money, I'll make sure of that, but money is fuck all."

"It's something, sometimes."

"Sometimes it is. I'll leave him this place, but he needs more. I'm no good as a teacher. He needs someone soft in his life. Someone good. All the things I'm not. But you are. I know you stay because of the money, but I also know it's for him. I've wanted to thank you for that for a while now, but I didn't know how. Men like me don't say nice things. We don't say soft things. I'm no good at it."

Had anyone on earth ever been blunter? She wasn't used to this. No one talked like this. No one was like this man. Anywhere. He was one of a fucking kind and that twisted her up on the inside in ways she swore would never happen again.

“I do love your son. He's a sweet boy. You don't have to thank me for being good to him. I'm happy to do that. And you pay me.”

He shut his eyes. Was he tired? He had to be exhausted and in so much pain. There was probably a limit, even to his bravery. Was he going to pass out? Was this a medical emergency? Dear god, was he dying right in front of her?

“I'm fine. I can literally sense your anxiety.”

“Because you're a bear?”

“Because you're breathing like you're the one who's going to pass out. I'm fine. I have a change of clothes out here. That panel over there opens up into an underground area. I have a shower down there, a bed, a stash of food and clothes and cash.” She gasped. “I'm only telling you because I should have told you a long time ago. In case something ever happened, and you needed to get Orrin somewhere safe. I've already entrusted you with our greatest secret. I can trust you with this, no?”

“Y-yes. Of course.” How did he do that? Disarm her so completely?

“Orrin won't find out about this. I was careless tonight. It won't happen again.” His eyes shot open, and he looked at her so directly that her stomach cramped. “I won't be back

until breakfast. Tell him I had to go into the city for an emergency early morning meeting.”

“What are you really going to be doing? Because it sure as shit wasn’t showering and getting cleaned up? Not with that gleam in his already coal black eyes.

He raked a hand through his long hair. Also jet black. Not a strand of silver. He didn’t look it, but she knew he was near fifty. He’d mentioned it once to her, that he was forty-eight. She still could barely believe it. If he’d been telling the truth, that is. She was forty-two and he looked at least five years younger than her.

“Taking care of a poacher on my land.”

“When you mean taking care, you mean...”

That mocking slash of a grin twisted his strong, beautiful mouth again. That was the grin she saw on him so often. The smile that wasn’t a smile at all. He’d look so much nicer if he ever did allow a real one, but she doubted he ever would. That would mean letting his guard down, and even when he did that, it didn’t look like smiles and laughter and wholesome goodness. Even a heart to heart, like they’d just pretty much had, was done with him perfectly in control. You could be honest with your walls down and still be one hell of a force, couldn’t you?

“I’m just going to walk out there and evict him.” His lips actually twitched in the corners. He was going to enjoy himself doing it. “We both know that I can be a real prick and people don’t like dealing with scary people in the dead of night, especially not when they’re not supposed to be on their private land.”

“What if he shoots you again?”

“Does that seem likely?”

“I don’t know. He shot you once already.”

“He shot the bear.”

The two seemed so inseparable sometimes. For someone who was entirely human, it was still such a hard concept for her to grasp. Her life hadn’t been an entirely happy one, but it had been fairly normal until she’d taken this job and then it had travelled into fantasy realms.

“You’ll come back,” she whispered, her voice not nearly as steady as she would have liked.

He wasn’t going to offer comfort, but he did clasp his hands on his desk and his jaw ticked. “I’ll always come back.”

Chapter 2

Nelson

Hard truth?

Getting shot made a guy feel like warmed up shit to the power of unholy death.

Was it a coincidence that one night, he had an intruder on his land and the next morning, two more showed up or was the universe trying to send him some sign?

Five years ago, hell, all his life ago, two younger Greenacre shifters showing up, bursting at the seams with rebellion would have been music to his ears? Now? All he could think about was how fiercely his shoulder ached and how much he'd rather be outside playing games with Orrin and Loretta.

That probably meant he was getting old. And soft. It seemed like that should be far more of a problem than he actually felt it was. No one would guess. He was too much of a scary asshole on the exterior for that.

The two younger bears clearly found him imposing and they kept fidgeting on the hay bales he'd told them to sit on. Of course, when they'd had the balls to knock on his door that morning, he'd taken them directly out to the barn. They'd been nervous about that. So was he. He hadn't known what they wanted, but he'd known immediately they were shifters. He didn't recognize them. They were too young for him to know them. He'd left Greenacre before they were even born. But he did know they were bears just from looking at them, the way something inside of one shifter howls at recognizing another,

and they'd stated within ten seconds of him opening that door while Orrin was doing his morning math lesson with Loretta at the dining room table, that they were from Greencare and urgently needed to talk to him. The clan was in crisis. They'd quickly blurted out stuff about humans, wolves, other shifters, and an alpha that needed to go.

He'd made a mistake five years ago and he'd almost lost his life. Since the day he'd been spared, he'd dropped his insane obsession with revenge, and he'd distanced himself from Greenacre completely. That was the cost of losing a challenge. A life for a life. He'd been spared. He owed his life to the man who'd granted him mercy.

These two were unmistakably Greenacre bears. That jolted him and he forced himself to stare at the far wall instead of getting out an internal microscope to study the sudden wave of longing he felt for a place where he'd never truly belonged. He found that looking past people, at a point in the distance, unnerved them.

“How did you find me?” How did these youths even know about him?

The largest one with the red t-shirt spoke up. It wasn't warm out. The brisk wind from the day before carried on into the morning. Even he felt cold in his old plaid wool coat, but he'd lost a lot of blood the night before. That was probably the culprit. The other shifter sat with his legs spread and his elbows resting on his knees. He'd worn a black leather jacket and jeans distressed from some factory and not hard wearing.

“Landon,” Red T-shir identified himself.

“I'm Chase,” the other guy stated.

“That doesn’t answer my question.” He was gruff, but it wasn’t enough to deter these two.

“Everyone knows who you are,” Landon spoke up bravely. He looked right at Nelson, meeting his gaze directly, which was something most people were wise enough not to do. There was something about his eyes, about how they appeared black when in reality they were just deep brown, that others found disconcerting.

And the scars, of course. No one liked to look at a walking horror show, and his face had practically been half mauled off when he was thirteen.

“What happened with Trace might be history, but history leaves a record.”

Landon nodded at the other shifter’s flowy words. “Honestly, we came because we love our clan. Greenacre is in danger. It’s not a good time for anyone to be divided and we’re about as carved up as it gets. The place is fracturing apart under Sam’s leadership. He’s allowed in humans, but the expansion has been so fast. Too fast. Too much. He’s allowed in a wolf and now other shifters. There were those who had doubts when all the changes started happening, but there are more now. It’s not just the old timers who wanted to keep to the old ways. There are many younger shifters who want the safety and security that a closed clan offered.”

Nelson grunted. Inside, his heart felt even sicker. He could barely breathe, but he was used to putting on a good show and he made sure that he gave nothing of that away. Five years was a long time. Things had changed in Greenacre, but there was one thing that wouldn’t have.

“The alpha position is voted, not challenged for,” he said dryly. “Even if I wanted to challenge it, I couldn’t. I made a vow.”

“That vow was to Trace. He spared your life. Not Sam.”

Semantics. He’d left enough of his bitterness behind him that he wasn’t going all in on that. He wasn’t going to challenge Trace or anyone else in Greenacre. He might have given his word to Trace, but throwing his physical weight into a bloody fight like that would be breaking his vow to matter who it was. He wouldn’t fight anyone who belonged to his old clan.

“It doesn’t matter,” Chase cut in, realizing they weren’t going to get anywhere with that. “We don’t want you to have to fight anyone. Yes, the alpha position is voted. We’ve talked about it for a long time between us,” he didn’t define who ‘us’ was but Nelson could guess. Anyone who didn’t want Sam in power anymore. “We couldn’t think of anyone powerful enough to take Sam on and win. You could come back this reformed man that wants his son to grow up in his clan with other shifters.”

Nelson might have given his word, but he very badly wanted to take this jumped-up kid outside and kick his ass for presuming to know the first thing about him. He held back, but it sure wasn’t because of the bullet wound in his shoulder. The old version of him would have enjoyed the violence and that sickened him now. He was not going to revert back to that man. He’d changed, even if on the outside, he’d had to stay mostly the same. Anyone who cared to look would have noticed the differences in him.

This little shit had just pressed on a sore spot. He *did* want Orrin to grow up with other shifters. He'd have friends in Greenacre. Mentors. He'd learn what it truly meant to be a bear from other bears. He'd be a part of a community.

He didn't want his son to have to relive his life. He'd tried very hard to ensure that his sins didn't get visited upon Orrin.

"There's one problem with that. I'm not a family man." Revealing one's weaknesses was never a good thing. People tended to exploit them. "I don't have a mate, they wouldn't even consider allowing me back alone."

"Find one," Landon urged. This kid was out of control. He was practically burning up with his desire to rebel. Maybe it rankled the most because Nelson knew he'd been the same way, and worse, at a far earlier age. "Fake it. Pay her. We don't care."

"I wouldn't be able to find a bear mate." It worried him that the first face that flashed through his mind was Loretta's. Copper hair. Pale green eyes. Pale skin, a sprinkle of freckles, soft pink lips that always found a smile even in the hardest of times. Sometimes, she made him feel things. Dangerous things. Things that weren't right. Imagining paying her to be his fake mate was unthinkable. She was Orrin's teacher. A man like him didn't deserve to be within a hundred feet of her goodness. "I'd have to pay a human."

Landon shuddered. "Well, if you could find one... and then run for alpha on another point. That we have to be more cautious. Open up slowly, if we keep opening up at all, which you'd be against. Humans aren't all bad, but this floodgates thing needs to stop. The ones that are there are mated and

could be allowed to stay, but things should be different. Slower changes. No other shifters, either.”

Chase took over and told him about the lab rescue from that spring. Sam led a rescue mission down to Florida to break into a government run lab where four shifters were being kept in cages and experimented on. Those shifters were currently being provided sanctuary in Greenacre. The young shifters had originally backed the rescue plan once they’d learned the full horror, but now they were having doubts that these shifters should have been brought back to Greenacre, and they were concerned about what could be next for their clan.

Inside, Nelson quietly applauded the effort. Shifters did not belong in cages. They were not lab rats. He’d refused to ever have medical care for just that reason. He knew Greenacre had a clinic now and even though it was less than an hour away, he’d always refused to go.

How could he, when even though he’d never been banned even after he’d kidnapped Trace’s mate and faced him in single combat, that same mate was the doctor.

She’d probably help him, but he would never be able to humiliate himself like that.

He’d taken her and her two babies and held them against Trace to trap him into fighting him. It wasn’t something he was proud of and after he’d lost, and finally let go of that endless cycle of hatred and bitterness that demanded revenge, he realized how misguided he’d been.

“You’ve made mistakes,” Landon said. He slammed the heel of his fist into his palm. “But you’ve changed. Greenacre has changed. People will support you, just to have Sam out. There’s a lot of doubt right now. We need a strong,

powerful leader who can take the clan back to being what it was, back to safety. If that's what you're selling, they'll buy it. We'll make sure you'll win."

"Through what?" he growled, disgusted with the direction this was taking. He was far more disgusted with himself for the thin thread of hope that going back stitched through him. "Fake votes? Smears and fears?"

"We have to save our clan." Chase stood up and paced the area with the discarded bales. The barn looked like a real dump, and Nelson took pleasure in the fact that the two probably saw it that way. "We'll get people to see our point. Many do already."

"Sam would never allow me back." He hadn't been banned, but that was the truth. Not to mention, he could never suffer the humiliation of begging.

Landon stood as well, but he was fixed in place, arms crossed. He looked big and tough. Was he? Probably not. Nelson saw right through that act. The stance, where he tried to make himself appear larger. Older. Seasoned. One wrong move and Nelson knew how easily this kid would spook. He didn't engage with that thought. He didn't move at all. He sat unnaturally still and went back to studying the wall.

"Sam would allow you back," Landon said, but he sounded like the wall staring was working. It was weird. Neither of them liked it. "He's so into acceptance and love and being open and helping all shifters of every kind and rehabilitation, that they'd all be into it."

"That would be an abuse of trust." Fuck, now it felt for sure like something inside him had torn open. It wasn't that bullet wound. It was just... home. It hurt. He'd had to be

strong for so long. He'd made his choices, his living, and his mistakes. He'd lived with it, and he was going to live with it tomorrow and the next day because that was the bed he'd fucking built for himself.

“Then go legit. Don't make them regret it. Be enough of a change that the people get what they want, because they do want it, even the ones who don't know it yet. We need it to survive as a clan.”

Landon let that settle like the dust he kicked up when he shuffled his designer combat boots on the hay strewn floor. Like the artfully distressed jeans, he was trying to cultivate a hard man image, but he seemed more like a teenage boy playing dress up.

“We were expecting to find a different man,” Chase admitted.

What the fuck did that mean? The old urge rose to smear this kid across the ground, but Nelson didn't shift an inch. He didn't look away from the wall.

“This is better,” Landon confirmed. “You're not a bad man, Nelson. You'd make a good leader in every sense. You just don't know it yet.”

He finally stood up. Not swiftly, but slowly, letting both of those young shifters watch every movement in his powerful frame. When he stared Landon down, he shrunk back. Chase stood his ground, but only because he was further away. It would be Landon who got hammered into tomorrow should he choose to let his fists fly.

He wasn't choosing to.

Staring them down with his black, blank eyes and his ugly, terrifying, horror story of a mug was enough. “No.”

“Just think about it,” Landon encouraged. He very clearly didn’t value his life.

“Come back home,” Chase dared to add. He was emboldened by Landon’s enthusiasm.

“I would suggest,” Nelson growled, and he sounded terrifying because he was truly losing his patience. “That you leave immediately. This conversation didn’t happen. You were never here. You’ll go home and you’ll stop thinking about betraying your alpha.”

“It’s not a betrayal if we want our voices to be heard and we encourage another candidate to come forward and let the clan choose. Even Sam would encourage another to come forward, if that’s what the clan wanted. If someone won fairly, then he’d accept that decision without hard feelings.”

“That’s because your alpha is a good man. He’s a better man than the two of you could ever hope to be. Grow up. Learn some respect. Come here again, and I won’t be responsible for what I do to the both of you.”

He must be losing his fucking touch, because Landon had the balls to stare him down and then the little bastard shook his head. “You won’t do anything. All your life, you thought you were the boogeyman, but it turns out, you’ve grown a conscience, and you care about things like honor. This was a one in a million chance and we knew that. We went to the enemy of a good man because we thought we’d get what we wanted, but we meant it. You’re not that man anymore.

Even if you still do bad things to survive in this world, you've become better than you're willing to admit. Whether that's because Trace spared your life or because of your son, or maybe it's just time, it's the truth. I can see how badly you want to come back to Greenacre. I just mention the word and you get this homesick as fuck look on your face."

Okay, fuck. What happened next wasn't really his fault. He'd been pushed way the hell over the edge. He took one step and the bear burst out. He didn't even feel his bones popping and rearranging, didn't feel the bandages ripping off with his clothes, or his wound tear open. He stood up on his hind legs, waved his massive paws through the air, and *roared*.

And those little shits stood their ground.

They looked like they weren't even impressed.

"Yeah," Landon muttered, *rolling his eyes*. "That's what I thought."

It was a damn good thing the bear didn't pick up on sarcasm the way that Nelson would have, but it read the body language of those shifters just the same and he knew they weren't scared or impressed. They were smug. Superior. They faced him down without the slightest hint of fear.

After a few minutes, they broke the standoff and walked out of the barn, leaving him standing there. *Leaving him standing there*.

Completely. Alone.

Chapter 3

Nelson

Some days, life made it so apparent that you weren't invincible.

The morning started off with him waking up to a mouth so dry he could hardly swallow and an ache all over his body. His shoulder throbbed fiercely, as it had for the past four days. He blinked into the early sunlight. Downstairs, the rattle of dishes reached him.

Loretta was an early riser. She was always up before him or Orrin, preparing lessons, making coffee, and getting breakfast going for herself and his son. She used to offer to make it for him too, but he'd always declined. He didn't need someone cooking for him. It felt too much like being taken care of and he was never going down that path again.

When he threw back the covers and swung his legs out of bed, all his strength deserted him and he felt like a snow globe dropping to the floor, little shards of glass exploding in every direction. Except the glass was his bone. He felt like he'd already been cut up from the inside out. Something wasn't right with his stomach. His head.

There was something he had to ask Loretta. A question that burned inside of him every minute of every day since those two young shifters came to him because they wanted to cause trouble.

They saw it as saving their clan.

What was I going to ask her?

Green eyes. So pretty. She's so pretty. I always notice. I can't stop noticing. She's not for me. Never for me. Kara was for me. I loved her.

He stood up and he was suddenly acutely aware that he'd just been plunged into a vat of boiling metal. His heart. Beating too hard. So hard. He was instantly soaked, cold and clammy, but no, he was so hot. So terribly hot. The room faded out and tilted sideways. He tried to grab something, the headboard or nightstand, but there was only air and then the hard floor, the boiling metal consuming him, slithering over his limbs, the pain more than he could bear, and then blackness.

Beeping. A prick of pain at his wrist. Whisps of smoke in his nostrils, burning like fire.

He opened his lips. Parted them. They were too dry. His tongue was thick. He'd swallowed the burning metal. His mouth was coated in it. Metallic and bitter.

Nelson forced his eyes open, which took so much of his strength that a soft groan tore from his throat.

He wasn't in a boiling vat of metal. He hadn't fallen into some industrial accident. It was no client gone wrong, seeking revenge. Not that anyone used methods like that any longer or had boiling vats of any substance at their disposal. No. He wasn't drowning any longer. His heart beat normally.

Beep, beep, beep.

No.

His focus was sharp and immediate. He knew exactly where he was.

Hospital.

It wasn't possible. He couldn't be here. No, no, no, god, please no.

The sharp sting at his wrist was an IV attached to a drip bag beside the bed. He had one of those stupid finger monitors on and it belonged to a bank of machines at the side of the bed. White rails thought they could hold him in. Contain him. They were wrong. He wasn't staying here. He had to get out. Get out and get free. He would die otherwise. They would take him and—

“Hey.”

One word. That one soft word stopped the flood of panic. He didn't realize how blurred his vision still was until Loretta materialized. Her freckles made sense first. Tiny, soft dots sprinkled over her nose and cheeks. A few on her forehead, above her coppery brows. She smiled, but it wasn't real. The dimples that she normally had didn't appear. The rest of her slowly followed those freckles. Her eyes. Lips. The long, copper gold hair that hung nearly to her waist. Her braid swung over her shoulder when she moved.

She popped a tube of something out of her pocket. Lip balm? She uncapped it and ran it along his lower lip. He tried to move his head away, because what the fuck? but she swiped

his top lip as well. Like magic, a straw appeared after. She guided it to his bottom lip, and he didn't know what heaven was until he took that first sip of water.

“H-hospital.” He butchered the word. Still so dry. Another sip of water helped. It was warm and tasted all wrong. Not fresh, like the water from his well. Like chemicals, from the water the city treated.

“It’s okay.” She set the cup back on the table, out of sight. He couldn’t make his head turn. His body was so weak. Something wrong. What was wrong? The metal. No, not the metal. That hadn’t happened. It wasn’t real. “You’re in a hospital in Seattle, but I’m here. I’ve been here the whole time.”

She stepped aside so he could see Orrin, curled up in a chair in the room, the plaid blanket from his bed wrapped around him.

Not his son. Jesus, not his son. He couldn’t be here. They’d cage him too. They’d get him. They’d find out. He might not have been able to move to save himself, but he moved to save Orrin. His fingers grasped the IV cannula underneath the tape and he was ready to yank it out when a soft, warm palm grasped them and pressed them down. The needle dug into his wrist.

“Nelson, you need to listen to me.” The soft whisper in his ear was urgent, but not angry. Loretta was never angry. She was always so calm and patient, especially with Orrin. Even with himself, and he knew she didn’t like him. “You need to stay calm.”

“The bear is going to come out. He’s going to come out to protect me. He’s going to come out and tear this place apart and it will be filmed and—”

“No. Your bear is not going to come out.”

“Orrin. He’s a new shifter. He can’t- he doesn’t have control either.”

“Yes, he does. You’ve worked with him for so many hours, even before his transition. You told me how you’ve been preparing him his whole life. You never wanted that anger and bleakness you felt to infect him. You never wanted him to lose control and hurt himself or someone else. He might be a new shifter, that’s true, but he’s not going to shift here. Just take a breath. A deep breath. I’m going to tell you what happened.”

Never mind the bear, he wanted to get out of this bed and tear this room apart. The smells, the sounds, all of it, reminded him too much of the last time he’d been in a place like this. Kara. With Kara. He’d left with his newborn son. She hadn’t made it.

The ache overwhelmed him. He was standing inside his own body, his own heart, trying to damn up the bleeding, but it just kept coming. Pressure built in his head. He couldn’t release it. It was the kind of shit that could only be released if it was torn or screamed or cried out.

The straw touched his bottom lip again. He had no choice. He drank the chemical tasting water and it was so, so good.

He still couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t.

Loretta’s palms, on his cheeks. She cupped his face as he leaned over him. Her fingers caressed the good skin. The bad skin. She didn’t flinch when she looked at him. When she

touched him. He was so gruesome and she saw it, but she didn't care.

“Deep breath. You have to stay calm. I'm not going to let anything happen to you or Orrin.”

He'd rather die than take a breath, but his body followed her commands, against his will. He wanted to get up and rage, tear the machinery to bits, throw things, break glass, and yell until he had no voice left.

Instead, his lungs expanded and he inhaled. It kept going. Loretta's hands never left his face. Her eyes were so green. So beautiful. He couldn't look away. Her soft smile filled him with a secret joy he didn't even understand.

“That wound got infected. I was making breakfast yesterday and I heard the crash upstairs. I ran up there and found you on the floor. Your skin felt like fire. I listened to your heartbeat and it was skipping. The internet might be full of rubbish, but it can also tell you the symptoms of blood poisoning. Septicemia. How could you not realize?”

“There weren't any red lines.”

She shook her head. “If you'd waited for that you wouldn't be here now. You had to have felt like unholy death. Couldn't you see it was infected?”

“I thought it would heal. We heal fast.”

“You keep saying that, but it didn't. I didn't have any other choice. I had to call an ambulance. Orrin—”

“Did he see?” The thought of his son being so terrified filled him with a new sense of rage. It was his job to protect him, but he’d put him through this.

“Shh. He came in and I explained you were sick, but you had to go to the hospital and they’d make you better. I got him to pack a change of clothes and grab his blanket before the ambulance got to the house. He told me you don’t like doctors or hospitals, and I said I knew that, but sometimes you get so sick, you have to go. We followed behind the ambulance in my car. Orrin was so brave. We talked the whole time. He knows he has to stay calm. Control the bear. I made him understand too that nothing was going to hurt or threaten him here. He’s in no danger. I’m here and I will always protect him, even if you’re not conscious. He was worried that if you weren’t awake to control the bear, he’d come out. I didn’t tell him that wouldn’t happen, but I did say that the bear is as old as you are now and you’ve worked on your own control for a very long time. The bear comes out to protect you, and coming out now would not be smart. I think he’s an intelligent being, and he knows that difference between healing and real danger. Or maybe, the drugs incapacitated you both. I don’t know. I just know that you’re going to have to be here for a few days.”

“Absolutely fucking not.” He managed not to roar it, but barely.

She sighed and her hands slipped away from his face. He wanted them back. She put the straw to his lips and he drank again, even though he hated her having to do this for him like he was a child. “I figured you’d say that. I already made the doctors and nurses aware that you have an extreme phobia of being here. That would explain it if there was um- a meltdown. I said that you’d probably try and check yourself out immediately after you woke up and asked them if there was some kind of home treatment. They don’t like it, but they could send you out with an IV in and I could administer the medication.”

“I don’t care what they want or don’t want. We’re leaving.”

“We are.” She wasn’t going to fight him? He was so confused. Her easy agreement capped his terror. “But right now, you can’t walk. You can’t go anywhere. You’ve been unconscious for almost an entire day. Remember how much Orrin needs you. You have to think about your own health.” She set the water down on the table. She’d been holding it after she took it away. “I promise I’m here. I swear on my life, I will not let anything happen to you or Orrin. You have no need to worry. Nothing is going to happen. You’d be dead if you hadn’t come here, Nelson. Don’t be angry that I made the call.”

A different fear finally seeped into him, like standing out in a cold rain and eventually getting soaked to the skin. His stomach churned. He was an idiot. Being an ass and changing in front of Landon and Chase probably hadn’t helped matters. He knew the wound wasn’t healing properly, but he hadn’t done a thing about it. He thought that eventually, he’d be fine. But he wasn’t invincible. He knew that. He knew it, and he’d put himself at risk. He’d made no plans for Orrin if something happened to him. His father was dead, and his brother was a recluse. He lived in the mountains, alone. They barely had any contact. It wasn’t his decision, but his brother liked it that way. He’d always thought that he’d take Orrin in if something happened to him, but he’d never even asked. Family was family, and even if Jason helped, what kind of life would that be for his son?

Ask her.

The question that he’d shoved to the back of his brain for days resurfaced.

He forced a breath. In and out. Instead of the rancid, strong smell of bleach, this time he smelled the outdoors. Flowers. Open skies. What was that? Loretta. She'd brought the fresh air with her. She had it inside of her. He closed his eyes and breathed deeper.

“I need to go back to my clan. For Orrin. He needs to be raised with other shifters. Other kids his own age. I'll always have the farm, to leave it to him, and he won't ever have to worry about money, but he needs more than those things. He needs more than just me or you. He needs a community. He needs family.”

Loretta didn't understand. Her hand slid over his and she grasped it. Not the one with the needle or the monitor. The other hand. Her fingers felt so dainty covering his. She smoothed her fingers over the back of it like he needed her protection. He didn't scoff. This woman might be tiny, but she was tough. He'd done more than find out about her father before he'd hired her. He knew her mother passed away a few years before from a short battle with cancer. Two years later, her dad had a stroke and needed round the clock care. She'd told him that she loved teaching, when he interviewed her, but she needed to take a private job with better pay because she had bills and financial obligations that her teacher's salary couldn't meet.

He gave her weekends off, as they'd agreed, and she'd leave early on Saturday morning, no matter the weather. She'd return later in the afternoon, and then leave again on Sunday and be back in the evening. She never deviated. She'd never told him about her dad, but he knew. He hadn't said anything until a few days ago.

“I don't know if I'll be welcome,” he choked out. His mouth was so thick and dry again. He had to close his eyes. Everything hurt so much. He felt so weak. Not just in his body.

“But I do know this is what Orrin needs. If something happened to me, he needs more than just my brother. They want me to come back and run for alpha. Those men who came to the barn a few days ago. That’s what they wanted. No, they want a show. They want a reformed man. They want a good man with a different vision for their clan. They’re young. Angry. Not the way I was, but in their own way. They don’t want to see their clan ripped apart. Their alpha is a good man. He’s fair. Kind. He’s younger than I am, but he’s wiser than I could ever hope to be. His heart is too big. That’s what they don’t like. They asked me to come back, but they want me to be a family man. A man with a mate.”

She didn’t gasp and her hand didn’t pull away from his. She stayed close, offering the comfort she hadn’t promised, and the protection she had. Right now, he needed it. His bear needed it. He’d hit bottom so many times in his life, but this was a different sensation. Almost dying. Leaving his son alone in the world. He’d been foolish. No more. He wouldn’t take that risk again. For Orrin, he could do this. He could do anything, no matter how much his pride suffered. He’d fall, he’d humble himself, he’d humiliate himself, if that’s what it took.

“Not a wife. A mate. But not a real mate. I have no one else to ask. You know our secret already. You love Orrin. Greenacre is an hour from Seattle, so you could still go to visit your dad. I’d pay for you to stay overnight in Seattle, to make up for the extra distance. If you could just... pretend.” He hated that he had to ask her this, but he couldn’t think of any other way it would work. He knew she tolerated his company because she loved Orrin and needed the position, but to have to pretend to be his partner? That might be asking too much, given what she thought of him and what he did—

“Pretend?” There was rage in her voice. She tore her hand away. “So you can also pretend to lead a clan and what? Because I’m assuming that’s what alpha means. Leader. You’re going to lie to people and then? Tear them apart?”

Destroy the people who hurt you? Get your revenge and have me help you?"

Yes. That would have been his plan years ago. He would have taken so much sick, twisted delight in it too, but not anymore.

"No. I gave my vow and I can't do that. I wouldn't do that—maybe once but not now. I truly want a place for Orrin. I don't want to be alpha. I just want to go back." He sighed, he did. He just wanted to go home and be with his people. He was too tired, he'd spent his life fighting and maybe realizing what he'd almost lost was the wake up call he'd needed? "Orrin's mother died giving birth. She was my wife, the way humans marry. She knew me, knew my secrets, and she loved me. I have never wanted to die more than I did when I lost her." How were those words even real? They were acid inside of him. Corrosion on his tongue. If he didn't open his eyes, he'd keep seeing Kara's face, the last time. The last time, in a place like this. "Orrin has never had a mother, but he loves you. It would hurt him so much to lose you. And I don't feel that I can go back there unless I can prove that I've changed. No one will believe me if I come back alone. We won't be welcome. I can handle being ostracized, but Orrin? I don't want him to be treated like the son of a bad man. I don't want him to have to keep paying the price for my past."

She was going to say no. She was going to say no and she was going to leave and walk out of his life. She thought he was a terrible person already, and now he'd proven just how much worse he was. She'd tell him he was wrong, a fool, that there was no redemption for a man like him. She'd quit her job, and then Orrin would be the one suffering. Suffering, when that was the last thing he wanted.

His son would be heartbroken, and he'd be the cause.

The straw hit his bottom lip again. He was so astonished that he had to open his eyes. Loretta was looking at him, her green eyes kind. Why had he never noticed just how kind her eyes were? Or maybe he had and was trying to push it away. He didn't deserve this woman in his life, but Orrin did. Orrin was a sweet, gentle soul. She was the same. There was no hatred in her eyes. No reprove. The pressure in his head intensified and his throat burned. He could barely sip any water.

“I think it’s admirable that you’ve had so much pain in your life and you’re still here, still trying. I know that you’re trying to build a better life for Orrin. Of all the things you’ve said or done, I believe you on that one. I didn’t know about his mother. I’m so sorry. I lost my mom and I know the pain of it, but I’ve never lost a partner and I can’t imagine how hard that would be. I’m not a good actress, but if this is what you think Orrin needs, I’ll go. I’ll stay until you’re accepted back into the community, I want to do this for Orrin. I do love him. I want to protect him. And you’re right. Without you, he needs a community. So, I’ll go. I’ll pretend and then we can... break up when he has other people in his life. Other people who love him. Someone else to guide him and teach him. Friends and family and community.”

Loretta wasn't the kind of person who could hide what she felt, and he saw how sad that made her. She didn't have to leave. That wasn't what he'd meant. But how could she stay if they were no longer mates? No one should have to be tied to a man like him for longer than was strictly necessary. He'd inevitably ruin them, and probably everything else he touched. She was doing this for his son. Not for him.

“If you feel like you have to leave, and maybe you wouldn't have to—maybe you could stay if you wanted to—but if you do want to go, I'll pay for your father's care indefinitely. You won't have to worry about finding a new job straight away. You could take your time and get the right one. Something you're passionate about.”

She gave him her back, but she stood too straight. Too erect. He could feel the sorrow coming off her in waves, but there was relief too. He heard the gratitude in her voice. “Thank you.”

She’d given him what he wanted, what he *needed* to do for Orrin, but he’d hurt her in the process. He knew what it was to be tormented in ways other than the physical, and he knew it now. It was another fresh wound, carved on the walls of his tattered, tired spirit.

Why did she think she’d have to leave? Surely in the six months she’d worked for him she knew how much he valued her influence on his son. They probably should have talked more—when she first arrived she’d tried to make conversation and include him in the meals she prepared for Orrin, but he’d pushed her away. *Idiot*. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy having another person in his home, but sometimes hearing her musical laughter as she danced around the living room with Orrin made his chest hurt. He loved seeing his boy so happy and thriving, but then the knowledge that he would never know his mother and the pain of losing Kara would hit. And then his walls would go up as he reminded himself that he could never let himself get close to anyone again, because getting close, letting your guard down, means opening yourself up to being destroyed.

He sighed, it must be the infection getting to him because he felt like he was going to start crying, and the last time that happened was when Kara died. Loretta was a good woman, his son loved her. He’d find a way, if she wanted to, so that she could stay in Greenacre. If that gave her joy, he’d make it happen.

“You should rest for a while longer before you try and do something as foolish as checking yourself out.” Loretta’s tone

was hard, but he watched as she took the chair next to Orrin.

He'd thought, for most of his life, and then again after losing Kara, that there was nothing left of him inside. He couldn't get worse than he already was. Could he be better? One look at the face of his infant son and he knew he had to be. But he'd slipped over the years. Backtracked. Fallen down landslides. Why was it so hard for him to act like he had a soul? Why was kindness always the hardest path? He knew what he needed to do now, but he didn't want this woman with her sweetness and goodness to be collateral damage.

He didn't know how to fix the hurt that filled up the small hospital room while those wretched machines went on beeping, spelling out his heartrate.

He wished she would look at him. He wanted to tell her he was sorry. Somehow, he'd get the words out. He wanted to tell her that she didn't have to leave. He wasn't casting her out. There were humans who lived in his clan. She didn't know enough to know that. She barely knew anything of what his life was like at all, and yet, she saw so much.

If only she would look at him, but she didn't.

She kept her face turned away from him, her jaw set hard. Her breathing was too sharp. Wounded, animal hurt. Even still, she stroked his sleeping son's dark hair so very tenderly.

Chapter 4

Loretta

“We’re five minutes away. It’s not just shifters in my old clan, they’ve taken human mates. The clan is opening up to allow other humans and shifters in as well.”

Nelson’s truck was no beater. New and shiny, leather on the inside, sleek black with chrome and tinted windows on the exterior, it handled the turn onto gravel just as silently as it rode on the freeway.

Lottie kept her tone cheerful enough, because Orrin sat in the backseat, taking in everything they said. Which hadn’t been much since they’d left the farm almost an hour ago. “I wish you would have told me that before.”

Seriously? He brought that up now when she’d been stewing for a week in her own sadness and maybe even resentment at having to be cast off when Nelson got what he wanted? Even if going back to his own people would be better for Orrin, his plan meant that she was just a pawn. She knew it was stupid to feel that way, he was just her employer. But in the time she’d spent with him she’d come to love his son as if he were her own. How much worse would things be to leave Orrin after she’d been like a mother to him? Which essentially, she would be while they were living in Greenacre.

And as for her conflicted feelings about Nelson—she still wasn’t going there.

She knew basically nothing about this clan other than what Nelson told her when he’d sat her down and explained

that he and Orrin were bears. He'd come from a small community that shifters called a clan, about an hour away from where he currently lived. That community was apparently full of other people like him. They lived apart from the world, but maintained the image of some sort of resort town so they could hide in plain sight. They'd lived there for generations.

The image she'd built in her head after that conversation, and after what he'd told her the night he was shot, was of a closed off sort of commune where outsiders definitely weren't welcome.

Especially not humans.

"I- didn't know that. I thought I wouldn't be welcome... after."

Nelson had to sit down and have a conversation with Orrin right after he'd checked himself out of the hospital that she wasn't privy to. Somehow, Nelson explained to him that he needed to appear like he had a mate in order to be trusted enough to be allowed back into the clan. She couldn't imagine how that conversation went, or how much Orrin really grasped at eleven, but he hadn't asked her one question about her acting the role of his dad's mate.

Even if she was, what would she do there? How could she find a job? Would Nelson's offer to pay for her dad's care still stand? She didn't want to accept that, because she felt like it was blood money on top of blood money, buying her off with means ill earned, but if she was going to go back to a regular teaching position, she knew she wouldn't be able to afford her dad's care.

None of those facilities were cheap, and they had long waitlists. He loved the home he was in. He adored the staff. They took such good care of him. He had friends there. His life was altered so drastically by the stroke and he'd worked so hard to get to where he was now. She couldn't uproot him like that.

Nelson looked at her and she turned to meet his gaze head on for almost the first time in a week. She'd done a good job of avoiding him. Half of her cursed herself for just giving in like she had at the hospital and the other half of her was so heartbroken at thinking about having to go start her life again that it made her burn with anger at how unjust life could be.

Life. Not Nelson.

She couldn't talk herself into being angry with him. Not when she'd seen that very real, raw pain and terror at the thought that he could have left Orrin without a father. Without anyone, really. Orrin wasn't completely human, and despite knowing him for a year, she had no idea how a shifter would blend in amongst humans. Going back to his people seemed to be the only solution. She wasn't immune to the way he'd looked in that bed. So ill, but burning with a father's love and protection for his child. She'd seen another side to him then as well—a softer side that she would never have believed existed. Maybe his brush with death had changed him? Since then, something had shifted. He was still the same gruff and brusque Nelson she knew and loathed, but there was a softness that she hadn't seen before, flashes of humor, flashes of the man he could be. She wasn't made of stone. He'd asked for help, and she couldn't find it in herself to say no in that moment.

She'd meant what she said. Orrin wasn't her child, but she loved him. She was forty-two and chances of finding someone, settling down, and having her own family were pretty much zero now, and she accepted that. But if she could

help that little boy settle into his new community, then that would mean the world to her.

Nelson cleared his throat. “There might not be an after.”

She clenched her hands between her knees. “Right. But you’re going to try.”

“I am.”

It seemed impossible that he was so strong and healthy. It hadn’t even taken a week. Maybe it was the antibiotics or maybe it was the shifter in him, but after she’d had to help him out of the hospital and into the backseat of her car and drive him home, he slept for a day, then he got up and refused to be still. A few days after that, he told her he was going to Greenacre to set up a meeting with their alpha for the following week.

Even on the weekend, when she’d visited her dad, she couldn’t make herself calm. His speech was severely reduced and limited, but he kept trying to ask her what was wrong. It made her feel terrible. Even Orrin probably thought she was a hot mess. She’d slipped up in their lessons all week. She couldn’t concentrate. He nearly beamed her in the face with a baseball when they were just playing catch in the backyard, which they did all the time, because she was so distracted.

“Is it wrong to say that I’m glad we’re finally getting this over with?”

Yeah. They probably should have got their stories straight. Thinking about every possible way she could mess this up, or they could both mess it up, made her stomach feel

even rockier and it was already not doing so great. What would the bear shifters do if they found out they were lying? She thought about Nelson's scars and shivered. Was that an example of shifter justice? He still hadn't told her what the bad blood was between him and the folks of Greenacre, but it was clear he was already apparently in their bad bear books. They should have come up with an exit strategy.

"I'm sorry."

"What?" She didn't mean to say that out loud. It just sounded so foreign when he apologized. "It's fine. I agreed to this. I want this for Orrin." She didn't say so, but she privately thought that Nelson was lonely too. He wore it well, but ever since he'd mentioned going back, he'd been *different*.

Maybe she was imagining it. He'd been busy, meeting with people in the city and a few nights he'd been late out in the barn, probably making plans for if he had to take a couple of weeks off from being the top shark in the loan shark infested sea.

She'd tried to avoid him the rest of the time, so how would she know if there was anything different about him.

There is. Just because she couldn't define it didn't mean it wasn't real.

"I'm sorry that you're upset and stressed. You don't have to go into the meeting if you don't want to. Sam is kind. I know I told you he's a good man. He's mated to a human woman, and they have kids. The meeting is at the town hall on main street, but Sam doesn't live far. His mate is going to be there to take Orrin over to play with their kids. You could go with her, if you like."

It was an easy out, one she wanted to take with just about all of her being. But would a true *mate* just bail on her partner like that? The whole mating thing was probably another thing she could have clarified. She knew that word basically meant wife or partner, but how did two people who were supposed to love each other act? She could barely imagine being someone's wife. She'd been so independent for such a long time.

She was astounded when her stomach clenched in a different way, to think about abandoning Nelson to be picked apart and eaten alive by his ex-clan. She felt strangely hollow, almost bereft. Maybe even angry and irrationally protective. Those men didn't like him. They would judge him. They might be kind in principle, but they probably had some bad feelings from the past in reality. She wasn't worried Nelson would lose control and his bear would mess a lot of shit up and there'd be a great big brawl. She hadn't even really been fearful of that in the hospital, even after Nelson clued her in to what his real fears about the place were. Orrin mattered too much for him to just lose it like that, in any form. She'd never seen him shift, but she had seen him and Orrin out at dusk before bed, sometimes wrestling playfully as bears, and always, it seemed that they were both so under control and happy in that form.

The first few times had been quite something.

“No. I'll stay with you. As long as you think it's safe.”

“It's absolutely safe.” He understood that she meant for Orrin. “I haven't told you as much about Greenacre or shifters as I should have, and I realize what an asshat I've been on that point.” He quickly looked at the rear new mirror to see if Orrin was listening. “I mean, how mistaken I was. There is nothing that my clan loves more than their young. They are so

protective of them. All children are a gift.” His eyes strayed to the mirror again. “Are you excited to meet other shifter kids, bud?”

She turned and watched Orrin nod. He bit his bottom lip. He was nervous, like they both were. “I’m excited,” he said. “And I promise I’ll behave.”

“He knows he might hear things about me that aren’t the best,” Nelson told her. “We’ve talked about that. Do you remember what I said?”

Orrin’s voice was deep for a child his age. Not nearly like his dad’s, but one day, it probably would be. “That everything they say is probably true, and that I don’t need to defend you.”

“That’s right. It might be like that for a little bit, if we stay.”

“What if I don’t like it here?” Orrin asked, sounding more like a scared six-year-old than a brave eleven-year-old already past his shifter transition.

Lottie’s heart squeezed. She wanted to get into the backseat and hold Orrin.

“It’s your decision to make, but if we are invited to stay and given a place, then I think we should give it a shot. We’ll see how it goes. If you don’t like it after an honest try, then fair enough. No one is going to force you.”

“Okay.”

“These are just doubts. Everyone gets them before they do something they haven’t done before.”

“Even you?” Orrin couldn’t believe his huge, strong father might feel discomfited in the inside.

The truck made a right hand turn and a wooden sign for Greenacre popped up, bracketed by towering trees. The whole place seemed to be trees and sky, with just the peaks of the mountains showing in the distance. At some point, they must have entered an area more densely wooded than anything along the road, and Lottie was so preoccupied she hadn’t even noticed how they were suddenly hemmed in.

“Even me.” A deep breath and then, Nelson made another turn and like magic, the gravel road ended, and pavement began. One more turn and they were on Greenacre’s main street. It looked like any other small town street with buildings lining either side. No one would ever have guessed, if they hadn’t known, that this town was so special and secret.

“It seems like anyone could find their way here,” Lottie said. She stared eagerly out the window without trying to dial back her curiosity.

“Anyone could. Greenacre has guards and they have cameras. The woods are secured, even at night. But this main street is a tourist destination and that’s how Greenacre blends into the world without being overly suspicious. If anyone thought this place was actually a commune or some civilization away from civilization, then they’d get curious and that curiosity wouldn’t be satisfied until it was too late.”

“For them?”

“For shifters and their secret.”

Nelson must have practiced it, because he smiled and then dropped it. It was so fake it almost made her laugh. “Don’t do that,” she warned.

“It’s not right?”

“No. Just be your usual broody, glowering self. That makes far more sense. You can be a family man and still be grumpy.”

“The point of this is to show that I’ve changed.”

“Yes. Which you will. But not with fake smiles.”

The truck stopped in front of a smaller building with wood siding stained a golden hue. The thing was complete with the fake façade that you’d expect from a holdover from another time.

“I’m going to meet the other kids now?” Orrin’s voice was a mixture of hope and trepidation.

“Yes, honey.”

“They’re waiting inside, as far as I was told.” Nelson unbuckled himself and got out of the truck with grace and elegance that someone who was huge and scowly and scary shouldn’t possess. She took Orrin’s hand as he leaped out, her belly a mix of anxiety and hope as well.

Nelson walked up the concrete sidewalk and held the door open for them. Without thinking, she trailed the fingers of her free hand over his at the door. The contact was explosive. She wanted to spin away and take a minute to curl her fingers into a fist and wonder at the strange sensation.

Inside, an explosion of laughter and childish giggles and screams hit them. She stared blankly at the happy scene. Kids everywhere. Kids chasing kids. Children of all ages and sizes. The hall was one large open space and the kids raced through it, whirlwinds in a contained area. There were women too. No one was stoic and unhappy. There were men—huge men—more impossibly built men like Nelson, but they interacted with the kids, with the women, they were talking and laughing, not lined up in a row waiting to pass judgement on them.

It took a few seconds for their presence to register, but when it did, it was like someone dropped an unhappiness bomb on the room.

The men and women quieted and started to gravitate towards their children, gathering them up. The kids were still loud and boisterous, but when they were made aware of the new presence in the room, even they stilled.

The whole hall froze as surely as if a gust of ice just swept through the door and frozen them all in place.

One woman, a petite blonde with ice blue eyes, came over to greet them first. She walked with confidence and grace. The way she held herself reminded Lottie of the way dancers moved, like their feet weren't even touching the ground and they were just gliding.

“Hi.” She offered her hand and a bright smile to Lottie. “I’m Lily. Sam’s mate. I’m really glad that you’re here.” She looked like she meant it, and then she turned to Orrin. He wasn’t hiding behind Lottie or his dad. He stood at Nelson’s side, trying to be brave, but she could see how nervous he was, and she’d never wanted to hug him more. “You must be Orrin?”

Orrin nodded.

“I’m so, so happy to meet you.” Lily turned and looked around the room. “Boys! Come over here and meet Orrin.”

At her command, a horde of boys of all ages raced across the room. They were smiling, and one the smallest one, an adorable little dark-haired toddler, almost tripped over his own feet, the tallest boy scooped him up and set him up on his shoulders with ease.

“These are my children,” Lily said. The little guy up there is Knight. We have two Knights here, but this one is mine. And this is Leo, Hudson, and Rowan. Leo and Hudson are twelve and ten now. I think that’s just about your age, Orrin?”

“I’m eleven,” Orrin confirmed. He studied the boys and they studied him back. The four broke into mischievous grins suddenly.

“Want to play in the woods with us?” Leo asked. “We have a fort that we’re building.”

“A fort?”

“Out of logs and branches and stuff,” Hudson said.

“And moss and dirt,” Rowan added.

“Knight likes dirt, so we let him do that. We have to watch him, otherwise he’ll run off and have adventures on his own and that’s not safe, but for a baby, he’s okay.”

“For a baby, he’s awesome,” Lily said, and as she laughed, all the joy and love for all her children was there on her face. “And if anyone else wants to come, they’re more than welcome.”

While they’d been talking, the slow roundup of all the kids in the room had taken place. They stood next to their parents, or with whoever was watching them.

“I don’t think we should do big introductions at the moment, because that’s a lot, but maybe... I don’t know. A few of us are going to stay, but all the kids are going to go out and play. It’s a special day, having a new family come into the clan, and while we didn’t want to overwhelm you, we wanted to come out and welcome you.”

There wasn’t a bunch of introductions and handshakes, but people nodded and smiled at them as they walked past. Most of the kids were in a hurry to get outside. As the room emptied out, the happy, frantic energy dialed down. Lily watched everyone go, and she was the last to leave. She held out her hand to Orrin.

“You can come with me, if you want. I’m going into the woods with the boys to supervise. There’s no way that Knight won’t wander off and get into all sorts of his own adventures. His big brothers love him, but they get caught up

with what they're doing, and all it takes is a moment and he's off."

Orrin took her hand shyly, but at the door, he turned around and gave them both a huge, confident smile. It made Lottie relax until she felt Nelson stiffen beside her after that door shut. All the kids were gone. Most of the women and half the men too. There weren't any chairs in the room, no table set up to stand judgement over them. The whole thing was very informal, but she felt Nelson's tension acutely.

Something was wrong.

The tension in the air reached a breaking point when one of the three women who had stayed walked over. She was statuesque, and the way her dark hair was swept back into a tight bun suited her sharper features. She might look almost severe, but her eyes were kind.

"Hello, Nelson." That soft greeting made Lottie's heart beat faster. She was only reacting to Nelson's sharp intake of breath beside her. "I'm not staying, but I just wanted to say that there aren't any hard feelings. It's been five years. I'm not afraid of you and I'm not against you coming into this clan. You owe Trace your life and I believe that you'll keep your vow."

Lottie burned with the desire to turn and ask Nelson what this woman was talking about.

One of the largest shifters in the group stepped forward. He had such a mixed expression on, half menacing and half trying not to be, that Lottie almost took a step back. He walked over and curled an arm around the woman's waist and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "He didn't tell you, did he?"

Lottie stayed quiet. She didn't look at Nelson.

“He kidnapped my mate and our twins when they were just babies. Took them to his barn and held them hostage and waited for me to come rescue them. I'm Trace. I'm the one who gave him those scars, it happened when we were little more than kids. It was truly an accident, but I punished myself for that day for years. I thought there was an evil inside of me. It really was an accident. But accident or not, you burned with the need to take revenge. That's how I met my mate. Nelson's thugs kidnapped me one night. I escaped and got to the road and Josephine nearly ran me over.” He paused and Lottie saw his eyes track over to Nelson who stood silently. “In a way, I have you to thank for bringing me down the road I was always meant to walk. One of peace and not anger and bitterness. You might have given your vow when I spared your life, and it might have been five years, but I don't trust you. Josephine is an amazing woman with the biggest heart and while she's found forgiveness, but I can't just set aside what happened. My vote, for you to come into this clan, is a hard no.”

“Trace.” Josephine looked up at her mate, and just her calm expression sapped away some of his anger. “We haven't got to that part yet.” She took his hand. “Why don't we go get a cup of coffee. I've decided that I'm going to stay for a little bit longer. The clinic can wait half an hour more.”

“I'm fine,” Trace insisted. “It's not like I'm going to tear him limb from limb if you're not here to calm me down. I'm perfectly controlled.”

Josephine smiled wryly at him, but the love they shared was also very obvious. “I can see that. Maybe herbal tea for you. I don't think you need the caffeine.” She turned her bright smile towards Lottie again. “What about you? Can I get you anything?”

“Oh. I- no. I’m fine. Thank you.” She wasn’t fine.

She totally *not* freaking fine.

She couldn’t betray Nelson by rounding on him with an accusatory look. She didn’t know half the story, but how could he have taken a woman and her two children like that? They must have been terrified. How could he ever want to tear apart a family the way he had? Five years ago? Orrin would have been six. What if someone had hurt his son? He would have lost his mind. He would have died from the pain of it. How could he have done that to another person?

“Are you sure? I think that Sam wants to get started, and I can’t say this is going to be the happiest meeting. It will probably be rough before it gets better.”

The clinic. Josephine said something about the clinic. A medical clinic?

But the night Nelson dug that bullet out of his shoulder, he’d said there was nowhere to go. He could have come here. Been with his own clan, even. He couldn’t because he’d once kidnapped the woman who was the doctor. She was so kind that she probably would have treated him no differently than anyone else and worked hard to fix him up, but he hadn’t been able to face her.

Lottie struggled to control her anger. How was this farce ever supposed to work if Nelson didn’t tell her anything she needed to know? Did she even want it to work? Maybe she’d leave as soon as Nelson and Orrin were settled here. It was like tearing herself into tiny pieces to think about leaving

Orrin, but how could she even pretend to be with Nelson when she was this angry with him?

“Maybe a cup of tea,” she said weakly. She’d given her word to see this through, and so she swallowed back what she felt and turned to Nelson. “Can I get you anything?”

His face was inscrutable. How could he stand there as if he didn’t feel anything? Did he? Was he just that good at hiding it, or was there nothing at all under that façade? Maybe he was so used to doing bad things, it was just engrained in him. How could she possibly leave Orrin if that was who his father truly was? She’d tried to convince herself there was good underneath that surface. That at the heart of him, he was a man badly injured by life, but there was the possibility that he could love and be loved, that he could put good into the world, if given the right chance.

That was probably a big pile of steaming naivety right there.

He shook his head.

“Alright. I’ll be right back then.”

She went with Josephine to the hall’s small kitchen, off to the side. Pitchers of juice sat out on the counter, most empty. Two industrial looking coffee makers had full pots under them. A large stack of white mugs stood overturned in the corner. Beside that was a basket of teabags.

Josephine took a mug and poured hot water from the red spigot on the coffee machine. “Careful. It’s hot enough to scald when it comes out of here.”

“Thanks.” Lottie took the mug from her and forced herself to pick a teabag. She took something herbal. Apple cinnamon. She probably didn’t need any caffeine either. She was jittery enough too.

“I can tell you didn’t know about it,” Josephine whispered. Her face was so open. There was zero bitterness or judgement there. “It’s in the past, but it’s not in the past. I’ve never got a chance to tell Nelson that I truly forgive him. It was five years ago, a lot has happened since then. Sometimes, I still think about it, but only to wonder what ever happened to him. Trace has never said anything, and I was never going to ask. He still gets upset about it. With shifter law, if one spares another, that person owes the other his life. Trace spared him. Nelson gave his word that he would never hurt Trace again, and I believe him. When Sam called a meeting last week and let us know that Nelson wanted to come back to the clan, Trace was upset. He’s been upset since. I’ve tried to talk him down, but I’m afraid he’s still having a hard time with it. I’m sorry. We’re not here to attack you.”

“I can see that. Truly.”

Josephine poured a mug of coffee for herself. She grabbed a small steel carafe and poured in cream. She did another cup up, but with black tea, and she added cream to that as well.

“Nelson is... he’s an interesting man. How did you two meet?”

They really should have rehearsed something, but they hadn’t, so she told the truth. “I got hired to teach his son. I am a teacher- uh- by trade, but I had some family issues come up and I needed, that is, the job I was working at, I loved it, but I

needed to make more money. I absolutely adore Orrin. He's a great kid. He's so, so sweet and thoughtful. He's brilliant too." She was getting flustered. It was probably best just to stop.

Josephine picked up the two mugs and somehow, because she must be a truly remarkable human being, she nodded in understanding. "When I met Trace, he was withdrawn. He was bitter, in his own way. He was wounded and hurt. He didn't believe that he deserved good things. He thought that he was a danger to everyone and that's how he was going to live his life forever. It takes a lot of courage to love someone who believes, with every part of their being, that they don't deserve to be loved."

Tears burned behind Lottie's eyes. She was such a fraud. She was a liar and a pretender and this kind woman... it was too much. She wasn't worthy. She wasn't courageous. She was just here because she loved a little boy too much not to be here. Orrin lit up when he'd gone with Lily. He looked so excited to be with the other kids. She had to keep that in her heart. Orrin. This was all for him. Not Nelson. No matter what else happened, at least in that, she was justified.

"They won't tear him apart. Nelson was born here, and he belongs here. In the end, everything will be okay."

Lottie bowed her head over the steaming mug in her hands. "Thank you."

"I meant what I said about being happy that you're here. Trace and I, we have five children together now, and there are many other kids here in Greenacre. It's a lovely place to grow up. I think that the decision to come back here was the right one." Five? Josephine looked freaking fabulous for having five kids. As if reading her mind, she grinned. "Luckily, they all came with just two pregnancies. The wild

twins you might have seen running around when you arrived are ours, and the triplets look like they're on the same track. I'm so glad that they're being raised here, it's the perfect environment to bring up kids. If you've heard the expression, it takes a village, it really does, and Greenacre is one of the best."

"I... thank you again." She really didn't know what else to say. She couldn't ever hope to be that open and honest and she felt desperately out of her league.

Undeserving.

Undeserving. Yes. That was the word. She felt a hundred times more undeserving of that kindness, but she forced herself to exit the kitchen and rejoin Nelson anyway. He was going to need her, and fake or not, she was going to have to be there at his side.

Chapter 5

Nelson

This was beyond humiliating.

No one told him that getting on the road to being a better person and finding inner peace and all that sappy nonsense would be filled with so much emotion. He was used to feeling nothing but anger. When he set that aside, other shit crept up and filled the holes. Not all of it was bad. The love he felt for his son was a good thing. But this? Because he truly did want a place for Orrin, he could stand here and take it. He hadn't expected this to go any better than it was currently going.

It could have gone a lot better if you'd told her.

It turned out that Loretta hearing about the past from Trace and Josephine wasn't actually better than her hearing it from him. He'd thought it might be. He'd actually hoped that maybe it wouldn't be brought up and he'd have time to tell her later.

Dumbass.

She had every right to be wary of him. She walked out of the kitchen with Josephine, cradling one mug. Josephine had two. She passed one to Trace, then stepped back and excused herself, saying that the clinic really couldn't wait any longer.

Loretta took her place at his side, but she looked extra guarded. He could tell from her rigid spine and hard posture that she was angry with him. She might have just gone from disliking him to hating him, and fuck if that didn't throw salt on top of all the scars that should have healed up a long time

ago. He smothered a sigh. Sometimes, it seemed that life would have been easier if he'd abandoned all hope of living it. He should never have come back from it.

If he hadn't, he wouldn't have had Orrin.

If he hadn't, he wouldn't be here right now, and right here was a shitty place to be, but hopefully the immediate future would be better.

Loretta sipped her tea quietly. He smelled cinnamon and apples. They stood with their backs to the door, too far into the hall. They were committed now. A half circle of huge shifters, men the size that he was, stared him down. Sam stood in the middle, his guards, Kier and Tavish beside him. He knew them from when he was younger, and he recognized them still. Trace stood to Tavish's right, and on the far left, by Kier, was a man that he didn't know. There was something about him, but Nelson didn't think he'd been born in Pinefall.

Sam noticed the shift of his gaze. "This is Clay. He lives in Greenacre now, but has ties to the clan that now lives on the land bordering ours. I don't know if you remember Kier and Tavish."

"Yes."

Sam was far too good. He wasn't going to just have his little council stare him down for the rest of the afternoon. "Kier and Tavish are my most senior guards. They also work with Trace and Josephine at the clinic. Clay is here to represent Pinefall. Do you have any objection to anyone being here?"

"No."

“Alright, I’ll get down to it then.” Sam was so relaxed and at ease. The other shifters looked like they wanted to pounce on him and tear him apart. Not the one at the end, Clay. He seemed completely undecided, but then, he wasn’t born a Greenacre shifter and didn’t really have a stake in this. “You wanted a meeting because you expressed interest in coming back to live in Greenacre with your son and your mate.”

“That’s right.”

At mate, Loretta’s hand froze halfway to her mouth. The cup hung in midair, and then she finally took a sip. How long would they have to keep up the charade if they stayed here? A few months? Would she ignore him like she had in the past week? Shut him out? Would she pretend that she couldn’t see what he was doing like she did at the farm, turning a blind eye to the operations she obviously understood far too well and didn’t like? It was funny, how he wasn’t one for apologies, but again, they sprang to his tongue. Not for these men, but for her. He shouldn’t have dragged her into this. Shouldn’t have asked her to lie. He could have at least prepared her. Admitted to all his crimes instead of just the few she already knew about. Since when did it matter what anyone thought about him?

Her opinion only mattered because Orrin loved her so much and he didn’t want to lose her for his son’s sake.

Liar.

“As a Greenacre shifter, you were never banned from this clan. We don’t ban people. Your family chose to leave. You were only thirteen at the time. It was your father who made the decision. As our laws state, there’s nothing prohibiting you

from returning here, but you would have to abide by Greenacre law.”

“Yes.” He’d stand here all day, with all those sets of eyes burning into him, judging him silently, if that’s what it took.

“You’ve given your word that the past is the past and you owe your life to Trace. You understand what that means?”

“Of course I do.”

“In addition, you’d be expected to work to contribute to the wellbeing of the clan.”

“I understand.”

At last, Sam finally looked the slightest bit uncomfortable. “This community is a haven for shifters. We live in plain sight of humans, and it works because we blend in. We don’t need undue attention drawn to ourselves. If you were to rejoin this clan, then your other business ventures outside of it would have to stop.”

He’d been half prepared to hear it. He could sell everything off. He’d have more money than he’d ever know what to do with. “I can sell my businesses. I have them layered under shell companies anyway. Nothing would lead back to me. I’m keeping the farm. I can rent it out, but that is my son’s heritage. My father bought it and now he’s dead. It’s my right to be able to pass it down to Orrin.”

Kier and Tavish exchanged looks, but Sam never broke eye contact with Nelson. “If you could meet a timeline for the sales of your businesses, within the next three months, then I

don't have a problem with you keeping that property. I would suggest you do rent it out, though. Derelict buildings tend to attract the wrong kind of attention. Can you meet that timeline?"

"I can get it done sooner, if I have to."

Sam nodded. The rest of the shifters were silent, until Trace cut in. "If you don't want to part with your property, if you have land where you're safe and if you have money, then why come back here? Why not stay there?"

It was a valid question, and it was asked without malice. Nelson didn't feel attacked. "I expressed to Sam my concern that if something should happen to me, Orrin will be taken care of financially, but he'll never properly know what it means to be a shifter without a shifter's guidance. He doesn't have any friends. I hired a private teacher instead of sending him to school. That's how Loretta and I met. She's still teaching him, but she also feels that he needs more than what we can offer. He's an eleven-year-old boy. He deserves friends. He deserves to know where he came from. I want to give him every opportunity, but there are things that money can't buy."

When Trace looked at Loretta at the mention of her name, Nelson had the ridiculous urge to step in front of her and shield her from his view, even though there was no hostility in it.

Trace sighed. "What's wrong with your eyes, Nelson?"

"Excuse me?" He tried very hard not to immediately get defensive. Showing any anger here wouldn't help him one bit.

“Why are your eyes so black? That’s not normal. They used to be like that. Back when we were kids. I remember even then, it was like looking inside of you and finding nothing in there. Are you sure that you’ve changed? Or is this some scheme to get in here and cause all sorts of chaos? Because I swear to god, I will end you. No one here would hesitate. You so much as breathe wrong or endanger anyone here, and this time when I fight you, I won’t spare you.”

“Trace.” Sam put out a hand. Trace shook his head, but fell silent, obeying his alpha. “We understand that there are going to be hard feelings and some people might be skeptical at first. I’ll admit, your eyes are... very dark, but eyes are eyes. We’re born with that eye color. It has no reflection on who a person is.”

“It’s just hard for me to believe that five years ago, he kidnapped my sons, when he had a son of his own. He understood the pain that would cause. And taking someone’s mate? He had to know that would drive me out of my mind and he did it anyway. He had me tortured before that.”

“I’m not going to win any upstanding citizen of the year bullshit,” Nelson admitted, but kept his voice level. He felt the anger rising, but wasn’t all of that true? Didn’t Trace have a right to his questions? It was only fair that he pay penance or at least answer for his actions. Beside him, Loretta made a sound in her throat, but she still didn’t move. She was so close to him, but it also felt like she was standing across the room. “My business is what most people would call unsavory, and I’ve made a lot of money doing it. I lend money the way most banks don’t and won’t. That’s the end of it. Yes, I’ve made mistakes. I’ve let bitterness and anger rule me. There was a time when I thought I’d be better, but that time... passed.”

That was as close as he ever got to speaking about Kara. He’d never told a soul about her except for Loretta, when he was in

the hospital, and he clearly hadn't been in full control of himself. He continued, "I don't even truly know why I did what I did to you, Trace. Except that sometimes I just woke up and blamed it all on you. All the loss. All the pain. All the rage I had in me. I blamed it on the scars, and I blamed those scars on you, and when I kept fixating on it, it nearly destroyed me. When you spared my life, it really did change me. I didn't become a new man, but I did realize that I couldn't live that way. I had to be better. For me. For Orrin. The past five years have been me trying to do that. I'm still not there. I don't know if I'll ever be there. I do know that I'm sorry for what I did, and I wouldn't hurt anyone here. Orrin is what matters most to me in the world, and I want this for him. I've been thinking about it for a long time. Years. I had a recent... *Incident* that reminded me I'm not immortal. I know I can't wait to do this forever. I think the teenage years are hard ones. Orrin needs to be here. I couldn't put it off any longer. Whatever you require me to do in order to come back, I'll do. No one has to trust me now, but I hope that I'll be allowed to prove myself in the future."

Clay must have had a better sense of humor than most people in Greencare, because his mouth curled up in a wicked grin. "We're going into December, and we were just talking about how Greenacre has never been much for Christmas, but with so many children here now—both shifter and human—and with us taking human mates, that tradition is more meaningful than ever. We did talk about decorating the main street and having a Christmas committee and maybe even having someone dress up like Santa."

"You expect this to be a Christmas miracle?" Trace ground out. "Letting him back?"

"Nelson loves Christmas." Loretta's voice was so soft and tiny, but it seemed to echo through the hall. Everyone paused.

“What?” Trace asked flat out. He couldn’t believe it.

Nelson couldn’t believe it. At least that much they agreed on. Christmas. Goodness fucking sakes. He and Orrin never celebrated Christmas. He wasn’t a holidays person and he bought his son gifts and things all year round. He didn’t need to make it silly by filling his head with nonsense about silly things that were just part of a commercial world that he didn’t even want to live in.

“Yes,” Loretta confirmed. She switched her mug over and slipped her hand into his. Over the years, Nelson didn’t just construct walls around himself. He built fortresses. So many walls. Guards. Safeguards for those. That fortress was pretty much impenetrable, but he felt the heat of her hand go right through him.

“I- I love Christmas. That’s true.” He put on his best stoic expression. Normally he could be lying or telling the truth and no one knew the difference, but it counted. It mattered right now.

“Great.” Sam clapped his hands together and his big grin was far too easy and far too real. “You can be in charge of the decorating committee. *And* you could play Santa. The kids would love it.”

“If you want a Santa of nightmares, maybe,” Trace threw out there. “If you want to let him in, Sam, I’ll abide by it, but I’m serious. I’ll watch his every move.”

“We could vote on it as a clan,” Kier suggested.

Sam frowned. “No. No, I don’t want to do that. Nelson is within our laws to ask to come back. He’s a part of us. We

haven't turned anyone away who needs a home in Greenacre. If we have to reevaluate that decision at any time, we'll do that, but not without good reason. Nelson, you and your family are welcome here. You're under my protection." Sam stepped forward and didn't extend a hand. He clapped him on the shoulder with his firm grasp. This man could have been mistaken for being so naively kind, but Sam wasn't like that. He wasn't a fool. He was fair. And kind. And if someone chose to take advantage of that, Nelson had no doubt the entire clan would make it their business to repay that malice and protect their alpha.

"Sam, I don't think everyone will like this," Kier pointed out, stepping forward with Sam. "I'm not questioning you, I'm just saying that there's going to be backlash."

"There was backlash over Sebastian. Over the rescue mission. Over allowing humans to live here. I'll deal with this the same way."

"What if someone challenges you for alpha? What if someone else decides to run?"

Sam turned, his face placid. He was so calm. Nelson wished for just an ounce of that inner peace and surety. "Then someone else decides to run and the clan decides. I'm here to serve them, protect them, lead them, and guide them. If they no longer want that, then I will gladly give up the position and support the new alpha in doing the same, as long as our clan is safe and as long as it's a good place to live."

Trace looked like he was holding back whatever it was he couldn't just spit out with Sam right there. Kier looked unsure, Tavish was frowning in concern, and Clay looked like he wasn't entirely sure any of this was his business, but he too had his doubts.

Sam had made his decision and he counted it as final. “It will probably take you some time to pack and deal with your business ventures, but if you give me a week, I’ll have a cabin ready.”

The dubious expressions remained all around the room, but Loretta’s hand clenched in his and he let out a small sound of relief he truly wished he could have held in. He wasn’t the kind of man who ever gave flowery speeches, but he knew what he owed Sam. “Thank you.” He was going to give him a chance, despite all the evidence pointing in favor of his being a right asshole.

“It’s not a problem, Nelson. But when you get here, you better get started on that Christmas planning. We’re serious about it and the kids here deserve it.”

What the hell? That wasn’t just a joke. Was it punishment or payment for his being allowed in? Was it some kind of test? If it was, he couldn’t afford to fail it.

Thank goodness Loretta was sweet and bubbly enough to be believable. “We can’t wait!”

Chapter 6

Loretta

“What’s wrong, honey?”

Because she’d grown so used to deciphering her dad’s speech since his stroke, she was used to him taking his time. The words might be what other people would call slurred and barely possible to understand, but she knew what he was saying.

Where should she even start?

She didn’t want to upset her dad, so telling him about the whole fake girlfriend thing in a human-sanitized way that he’d understand wasn’t a go.

“I’m just tired.” She forced a smile. “Last weekend I told you that there was a possibility that the family I work for is moving. Do you remember?” He bobbed his head up and down. “It’s more than a possibility now. They’re moving for sure, and they want to go as soon as possible. They’re going to be living more remote, in a cabin in the middle of nowhere—” That was mostly true at least. “So I’ll be staying overnight in Seattle when I come to visit. It’s not that much longer of a drive, but I want more time to spend with you. Anyway, I spent the whole week packing boxes and trying to keep up with Orrin’s schooling. He’s so excited that he can’t focus on anything at all right now except just getting there. I know I said they’re going to be remote, but it’s a small town, a resort style town, and there are other kids his age for him to play with. He’s going to be going to school now for the first time, so he’s really excited about that too. I’m basically just going to be sort of nanny, I guess.”

She'd said too much. It broke her heart how some people would look at her dad and see an unfortunate old man with a ruined, sagging face and a body that no longer worked properly after his stroke. They wouldn't see his beautiful heart or his sharp mind, all his wisdom and kindness, and a lifetime of teaching her to be strong. She'd been so afraid after the stroke that it would be it for him. That he'd want his life to be over because he wasn't mobile, because everything was an uphill battle. In the past year, he'd regained so much function in his one side, growing strong because the other refused to work. He'd learned how to talk again. How to sit up, how to feed himself, how to use a wheelchair. He didn't see his life as over. He was happy to have survived that stroke and every single day was still a gift.

Lottie took so much inspiration from her father. She was so, so lucky to have such an amazing man in her life.

Her dad's room was much like the other rooms in the home. Small, but comfortable. A hospital style bed with rails, a couch that turned into a pull-out bed, a few chairs, a round white table, a bookcase on the far side of the room, and two huge windows. He sat on the couch, bolstered by pillows, while she sat on one of the chairs she'd pulled over from the table. It was easier to talk facing each other than to have to have her dad worry about twisting himself up on the couch. Eye contact was important to him.

“You're worried that you won't have a place anymore?” he asked.

She waited while her dad patiently sounded out every word so they were as clear as he could make them. “I don't know,” she responded truthfully. “I'm not sure what I'm even worried about right now. Yes, I guess I'm scared that I won't be needed. I'm really attached to Orrin. I'd miss him so much.

It's just- I- maybe I'm worried a little about leaving him with just his dad. I think he needs a mother figure in his life. There are other moms that he'll get to know when he makes friends, but it's not the same."

"You're worried about his father then."

"His father isn't like you. He's..." She couldn't tell him about anything that Nelson did. She didn't want to drive her dad insane with worry. Living out in the middle of nowhere with a man who owned and operated a lucrative loan shark business? Hard no. She'd told her dad that Nelson was involved in lending money. He probably assumed capital ventures or banking.

"Yes?" Her dad waited so patiently. His eyes searched her face, and she was afraid she was being far too transparent.

She couldn't very well say that she had no idea that Nelson had kidnapped people. That he'd then basically done a fight to the death and lost, knowing full well that his son could have been fatherless. That he'd let the darkest emotions consume him so completely that he acted without conscience. She knew he could be heartless where his business was concerned, but she'd had no idea how bad it really was.

"He's experienced a lot of loss in his life. A lot of hurt." He'd lost Orrin's mother. His wife. He must have truly loved her. She couldn't imagine the Nelson she knew opening up to anyone, let alone falling in love and getting married. "He doesn't talk about her, but he lost his wife when Orrin was born. I think she died giving birth. He's done things he's not proud of, and he says he's sorry for them, but it's just... I don't know." Shit, that was all wrong. He was totally going to worry if she left things like that. "He's trying again. Trying to do

better. I do know that he loves his son and he's trying to be a good person, but why is it so hard for some people?"

"He's done things that shocked you when you found out."

"Yes." She might as well admit it. The truth was all over her face and she knew it.

"We've all made mistakes."

"These are mistakes of another level."

"Are you worried for your safety?"

The thing about her dad's face now was that it was so hard to read. The emotion didn't come across properly in his expression or his voice. "No!" She was quick to assure him. "No. I guess it's just a lot of change that I'm upset about. Yes, I'm worried about becoming redundant. I'm not worried that if I leave that I won't be able to find another job." She would never tell her dad about Nelson's offer to pay for his care. He'd definitely be upset about that. He wouldn't want to accept it. It was bad enough that he didn't want to burden her with the cost of the home. "I'm just tired, I guess," she repeated.

Maybe that was part of it.

Maybe the other part was that she knew that she was eventually going to become redundant, and it already hurt so much to think about leaving Orrin. She'd never had a position like this before, and having one child in her life instead of thirty or forty or more in a classroom was so different. Not that

she didn't love her students or teaching because she did, but she was with Orrin just about every waking minute of the day.

"You've been like his mother." Her dad voiced everything she was thinking.

"Yes. But I'm not. I've always known that."

"It's not too late. You could find someone. You could start a family."

"I would never start a family of my own. I could adopt, or volunteer, or foster. I know that takes time to get the process going, but I could. You've never bothered me about why I hardly dated or why I never found someone. Everyone else in the world thinks it's so strange. I've never been very good at being like anyone else, I guess." She'd never had a best friend. She did have friends, tons of friends. But most of them were the kind of friends who she could look up for coffee once every six months and they were more than satisfied with that, and honestly, so was she. "I've always been too independent. I never found someone who could appreciate that. I made teaching my life. I don't know. Maybe there is something wrong. People want to be with other people. They want to love someone. Why have I never wanted that?"

And why, as she asked that question and knew it was the truth, did such a vivid image of Nelson's scarred face, his sharp cheekbones, the twisted and jagged marks on the one side, and his black eyes haunt her like he was right there in the room? She sat there and images flashed in her mind. Him playing with Orrin outside every single afternoon. Him digging out that bullet without flinching. That huge, strong body in the hospital bed, terror and grief so vivid in his eyes. Her fingers covering his so protectively. The way he stood his ground so bravely in that hall when it had to be absolutely mortifying for

him to be basically put on trial. Her hand, nestled in his again, just for show.

He was the complete and total opposite of any man that she should be attracted to. He was honestly pretty terrible, but...

Just but.

Maybe she was wrong about herself. Maybe she was an awful person too. A good person wouldn't be attracted to someone like Nelson. She'd be appalled. She should be, and maybe part of her was shocked and incredibly disappointed in what she'd learned on top of what she already knew, but there was something else.

There was a part of herself that still thought he had more to offer. That he wasn't just the past or even the crap from the present. That underneath all of that suffering and the layers of scars and gruffness, and the attitude that put the fear of god into people, he was much more.

She thought he could be beautiful. With the literal and figurative scars.

And maybe that made her utterly freaking crazy, ridiculous, and sad.

"You've always tried to see the good in people. I think when you meet the right person, you'll know it."

"Define right." That was too huffy. Too defensive. Her dad didn't seem to mind.

“The one that makes your heart come to life, even if it’s in ways you didn’t expect and didn’t think possible.”

“I’m so old, dad. Too old for that. Anyway, it’s just a what if. It hasn’t happened.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just been a rough week.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re allowed to have a bad week.”

“I’ll get through it, whatever happens.”

“I know. You’re so strong, but you have a big heart. You’re a beautiful person. I’m so proud of you.”

“Dad!” She swiped at her burning eyes as she started to tear up. “If that’s true, then it’s only because I learned it from the best. You and mom.”

He nodded. Even though her parents were divorced, they’d always been so respectful and kind to each other. They’d divorced later, when she was in her thirties, and they were in their late fifties. They’d still remained good friends and there was never a shred of animosity between them, as far as she knew. Not many people could do that, but they still called each other every week, to check that they were doing okay. When her mom was diagnosed, her dad was a rock for both of them. Her parents were two truly unique and special souls. She refused to think that her mom’s soul wasn’t out there somewhere in some other form.

“Do you want to finish our story?” Whenever she came, she spent a large portion of the time reading to her dad. He found it hard to do that on his own and while he listened to audio books when she wasn’t there, it was something special that they both really enjoyed.

Lottie nodded. She took the book from the nightstand by his bed. Her dad had a soft spot for thrillers, and even though they were always basically the same to her, she’d read anything that made him happy because that made her happy too.

It annoyed her that when she cracked the book to the spot she’d left off last week, she had the most intrusive thought. *What makes Nelson happy?*

She knew what made Orrin happy. Everything made him happy, and that was such a blessing. He was so easygoing, and he loved life so much. But his dad? She’d given her word to be a fake mate to him, but in all the time she’d spent living in the same house, she’d never really wondered about it. What would truly make Nelson happy? Was there anything in the world? There had to be. Aside from helping him with the move and the adjustment to Greenacre, with fitting in and belonging, could she make his life easier too, not just Orrin’s? If his dad was happier, wouldn’t that be a great thing for Orrin? Maybe then it wouldn’t hurt so much to leave him when she had to go.

That’s not why you’re worried about leaving. That’s not why you want to know what makes Nelson happy.

He was an impossibly hard man, but she’d seen real emotion from him several times in the past two weeks. If he could feel acute grief and terror, then couldn’t he feel joy? Didn’t he want to feel joy, even if he didn’t know it? Maybe he’d given up on that after he’d lost his wife. After what sounded like a

very tough childhood. He was marked on the outside. He'd had to grow up like that, being seen as different. Disfigured. What did that do to a person? It didn't sound like he'd had a mother in the picture. He'd left his clan and lived an isolated life on the farm. By all accounts, he knew more loss and sadness than anything else.

Had he just given up on living except where Orrin was concerned?

He wanted everything for his son, but did he want anything for himself?

What was one thing that would bring him joy?

“Honey?”

“Sorry.” She laughed at herself for being distracted and started reading, but for the rest of the afternoon, she never stopped thinking about that question.

What was one small thing she could do to bring Nelson joy?

That wasn't the original question, but somehow, in her mind, it changed and then it was *the question*.

Chapter 7

Loretta

“Ouch!”

“Are you okay?” Orrin hovered around her and the box she’d just slammed down onto the floor because the pain shooting through her back wouldn’t let her carry it another step.

“I’m okay. I think.” Her back muscles spasmed hard. Thank goodness she’d bent over because at least she could breathe, but she wasn’t sure if she could straighten up again.

“You should have let me and dad take the boxes. He told those guys when we got here that he could do it himself and we didn’t need any help. We kind of did though.”

“We’re almost done. We’ll be okay.”

Orrin picked up the box that she was having so much trouble with. He might have been thin and tall in his pre-filled out lanky almost teenage body, but he managed that box just fine. “We have bear strength,” he said, flashing her a smile.

She forced herself to straighten up, ignoring the pain that shot up and down her back. What she needed was a good massage, but she doubted there was anything like that in Greenacre. Maybe. They had a clinic, a vintage store, a restaurant, a butcher shop, a town hall, and a school. There were far more houses in the place, once you ventured off the main street and went back into the woods, than she’d thought there were.

Houses or cabins? Most of them were log. Was it a house if someone lived there all year round or was it always a cabin if it was made of logs or cedar siding?

Orrin carried the box to his room. She was on her way there, at the back of the cabin. Cabin. Definitely a cabin. The log interior, gleaming hardwood floors, pine cabinets, and wooden furniture were all very cottagey. The living room was more spacious, with large windows that faced the woods and the backyard. The layout was a little bit strange, with the kitchen right off the front door and windows there that faced the gravel street, a few other cabins, and more trees.

The two bedrooms were basically the same size, and the cabin was built on one level, with a decent sized bathroom. At least they had running water and electricity.

Two bedrooms.

She'd noticed that as soon as she'd walked in, but thankfully the living room was large. She'd buy a darned air mattress if she had to and bunk down there, but the couch looked comfortable enough.

It would be fine for as long as she was staying. Which probably wasn't all that long.

A fresh wave of sadness assaulted her and her back spasmed so badly at the same time that she could barely catch her breath.

Orrin took her hand and led her over to the bed. The cabin came furnished and his room had a double bed. All the furniture, just like the kitchen and most of the living room, was made of pine. The bed was the log variety.

“I think someone made all of this,” she panted as he helped her sit down on the mattress. They hadn’t found the bags with the bedding in them yet. When they did, would she even be able to walk in order to put anything away or make up Orrin’s room?

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

She met his worried, soft brown eyes. “I’m okay. I just need a second. And maybe a couple of ibuprofen.”

“Is that in your purse?”

She did have a bottle in there. She’d completely forgotten about it. “It is.”

“I’ll get it.”

She didn’t have time to thank him before he raced out of the room. He was back in under a minute, holding her leather messenger bag. After an entire morning of packing and long hours of unpacking, she’d blanked on where she’d even set it down.

“Do you need some water?”

“Oh. Yes. Please.”

Orrin got that for her too. He came back with a huge glass filled to the brim. She almost laughed as she sipped a little off the top so it wouldn’t spill everywhere. “Thank you so much.”

Orrin sat down on the bed beside her while she took two pills and drank half the glass of water. She didn't realize how parched she was either. Who knew that not having to deal with moving furniture would still be so tough or that an eight-foot truck box could hold so many boxes? Tie downs were an evil thing, but they didn't have to make two trips, stacking it all up so high.

Most of her own things were in storage in Seattle. What she'd accumulated over a lifetime amounted to a five by ten unit. When her mom found out she was sick, she'd insisted on dealing with most of her things herself. Her family never had any heirloom pieces of furniture or antiques. Her mom had kept a few boxes full of her school projects all the way since kindergarten, some special Christmas ornaments, a few of her grandma's handmade sweaters, but that was about it. They'd moved a few times growing up and each time, they seemed to pare down.

Her mom was kind of a minimalist and maybe she was the same way, even though she hadn't ever really thought about it. She had kept her mom's favorite things, but her mom was pretty strict in her instructions before she had to go into the hospital that she wanted her belongings donated so no one had to go spend agonizing days cleaning out her house. She'd had to list it after, but that was such a blur. Her dad helped her find a realtor and it sold fast, but there really wasn't any equity in it. The ten grand she'd cleared after the sale had quickly been eaten up when her dad had his stroke. He was renting a condo when it happened, and he didn't have much in the way of savings, and no pension.

“What are you thinking about?” Orrin asked. “How much your back still hurts?”

“Oh. No. I'm okay. Thank you again for the water and for getting my purse.” He smiled at her, but it died away.

“When we were here last time, one of the other kids said something to me. About dad.”

She froze. Shit. She could only imagine. “He did tell you that might happen. Do you want to talk to him about it? I can come with you if you want.”

“It’s okay. They just said that I didn’t really look like him.”

“O-oh.” She studied Orrin carefully. “I think you do. But your dad is a grown man and you’re only eleven. Physically, you aren’t built like an adult. Your eyes are lighter, and your hair too, but you have the same cheekbones and the same jaw, I think.”

“I think they meant the scars.”

“What?” She gasped. It was tactless, but she was caught so off guard. She could hear Nelson moving boxes and hoped that he hadn’t heard what Orrin had just said. “Your dad got those when he was not much older than you, he wasn’t born with them.”

“I know. He said in a fight. I think everyone knows, but I still wondered. I think the kids here think dad is a bit scary. Maybe that’s what they meant. Because I’m not.”

It didn’t matter how much her back hurt, Loretta reached for him. She hugged him hard and her eyes teared up when he hugged her back, his arms around her neck. Orrin was never shy about hugs. Even when she’d first met him. Nelson might be the big bad monster in some people’s story, but she’d never known him to be shy about being a good dad. She’d watched

him pick Orrin up outside when they were playing many times. She was the one who tucked Orrin in at night, but she always heard Nelson pop in to say his goodnights and before she got there, she knew that it was him doing that for Orrin.

She'd never really asked what their routine was because Nelson was someone she didn't think she really could ask. Things were so tense and awkward between them when she'd first taken the job, and it hadn't changed much over the months. She tried to include him as much as possible, but he was busy. He hadn't just hired her as a teacher, he did mean the position to also be a sort of nanny, since it was a live in one and she'd understood that without being told.

She wasn't going to cook herself breakfast, lunch, and dinner and not make something for the rest of the household. He supplied everything in addition to paying her well, including all the groceries. She'd made some assumptions and she'd asked Orrin about some things over the year, especially at first, to get a sense of what his upbringing had been like. Nelson taught Orrin how to read. Their lessons might have been brief, but he did teach him well. Orrin was incredibly smart, so he likely didn't need to sit for hours to grasp the concepts of math and grammar that Nelson put out there. Most of Orrin's teaching was done through real life experience.

Science lessons in the woods. History and health lessons as they went about their day, instruction in play. He'd had the additional job of preparing his son for his first shift, and he'd done that all on his own. That was the one thing she couldn't and probably wouldn't ever be able to help with.

Nelson might not have done a perfect job, but he'd done a good one, especially all on his own. She might have had to start with basic lessons, but they'd progressed quickly, and she didn't think Orrin would have any trouble at the school.

If anything, making friends might be a challenge, but she hoped not. She hoped he wouldn't have any trouble at all.

She hoped she wouldn't either.

What was she going to do all day now that Orrin wasn't there to teach? What would Nelson do now that he was in the process of selling his business? Or closing it. She wasn't sure how saleable loan sharking was.

"It might take a while to get used to living here," she told Orrin, stroking his hair. He rested his head on her shoulder and let her side hug him. "I think everyone will be kind. It's just hard at first."

"It wasn't hard when you came to live with us. I liked it. I love dad, but I always wondered what it was like to have a mom. Dad always made me read for an hour a day and in a lot of the books, kids had moms."

My heart. She was going to die on the spot. She loved this boy so much. She didn't want to alarm him by crying, but closing her eyes against the tears wasn't much of a defense. She'd been so careful about this subject. She didn't want to hurt Orrin and Nelson never broached it. Prying was something she just didn't do because it could cause so much harm.

She hadn't even known what happened to Orrin's mom until Nelson mentioned her in the hospital.

"Do you have a picture of her?"

"Dad does. His favorite book is this super old thick copy of this book about war. He keeps a few in the cover of it." He

paused for a second, then added, almost defensively, “he’ll let me see them anytime I want to.”

“Does he ever talk to you about her?”

“Yeah. When I ask. When I was little, I used to ask for stories, but when I got older, I could tell it made him sad. One time, I asked him if he wished that she hadn’t had me, but he said that he never would wish that, and she never would either.”

“Sweetheart.” It sounded like she was talking to an adult. How could a child even grasp that kind of concept? How hard would it be to even have grappled with something like that? “I’m not your mom, but I hope that you know just how much I love you. You’re a wonderful, smart, kind young man and the world is a much brighter, better place because you’re in it.”

Orrin looked up at her. His eyes were completely dry, like he was used to having this conversation, or like he’d spent a lot of time thinking about it already. She couldn’t imagine how Nelson’s heart would have been crushed by those questions.

“Do you think you could stay? I know dad said we had to act like a family for a little bit, so we could live here, but would you ever marry him for real?”

I never, ever should have agreed to this.

“Your dad and I are just pretending because the community needs to see past the scars and past what happened. We weren’t sure if anyone could do that if he didn’t have a mate. I don’t truly know why that was so important, but he felt it was, especially to the people here. I think that without me, they’d have trouble seeing his good heart because on the outside, he can be a little scary. He’s not used to being around other

people and he can be gruff. I'm the buffer between him and others right now. And I'm here to help you adjust. But when people get married, they have to have feelings for each other. They have to like each other. No, more than that. They have to love each other."

"But you like my dad. You talk to him and you get along. You've lived with us for ages already. You always ask him what you can do to help out. You cook all our meals. You both look after me. That's what moms and dads do."

"That's true Orrin, but a marriage is also about trust and respect. It's about something deeper. It's a special feeling that two people share. I don't know how to explain it so that you understand. Those kinds of feelings are adult feelings. I know that sounds like a copout, talking about adult things, but you won't develop that kind of bond with someone for many years yet. It's far beyond friendship."

"Dad likes you more than anyone in the world. I can tell. He wouldn't have asked you to fake it if he didn't kind of mean it for real."

"He would have done anything to come back here because he thought this was what was best for you. That's what parents do for their kids. They'll do anything and everything they can to see them thrive, not just survive."

Orrin didn't seem to mind that she was trying to defend herself against what he was saying and was getting more and more flustered as the minutes went on.

"Well, you could stay anyway. Like here. Maybe. Even if you don't live with us?"

“Maybe.” She’d been working that over in her mind, trying to figure out if she’d be allowed and if she was, how she could make rent, what kind of job she could take, what life would look like. She would have to take Nelson’s money to pay for her dad’s care until she could figure something out, but she wasn’t going to take it indefinitely. That wouldn’t be right. “I’m honestly not sure where I would fit here or how it would work, but I’m trying to figure it out. If I can’t, though, I would go back to Seattle. I could come and visit you. I hope that’s months away,” she added. “It would break my heart to leave, and I know it would be so hard for you. Sometimes, though, that’s unfortunately part of growing up.”

Orrin hadn’t been coddled or babied in his life. It was also apparent to her that while Nelson was a great father, he often told it like it was. As a result, she could see that Orrin understood. He was sad, but eventually, he’d be okay, and she would do everything in her power to still be in his life, even if that was in Seattle.

“Orrin?” Nelson’s voice echoed through the cabin.

Lottie started guiltily. “I’ve been sitting here instead of unpacking or helping.”

“That’s okay. Bear strength, remember. Dad’s strong. Me too.” He jumped up. “I’m coming!” He called. “What’s a casserole?”

“Um, something you eat. It’s like a bunch of different foods baked in a pan together.”

“Ah... dad always called that a stew. When those men tried to help us and dad told them we were fine, a few minutes later, a nice lady tried to leave us something. She called it a casserole.

Tuna casserole. Dad didn't know what to do, so he just shook his head and she nodded and left."

God. Maybe she should have been outside handling the boxes instead of moving them into the appropriate rooms inside. "That's okay. I'll go and talk to people later. Or, if someone else comes over to welcome us, I'll make sure I take the casserole. Don't worry about it. Your dad was probably just embarrassed. Like I said, he's not used to being around people."

"Me neither, but I'm happy we're here."

"Orrin?" Nelson's voice got closer. "Leo is here asking if you'd like to go to the fort with them and play. Do you want to go?"

"Are you okay if I go for a bit?" Orrin asked her.

"Yes, honey. I'll be fine." There he was, eleven years old, and already looking after her. "Thank you for asking, though."

"Don't lift anymore boxes. Ask dad."

"I won't. I'll just start putting things away."

"Can you make us a casserole one night?"

She laughed. "Absolutely. Anything you want."

"Okay." He threw himself into a hug one more time and raced out of the room.

She was so glad that already he was being accepted as part of the clan. Even if Sam sent his kids over to ask, it was a thoughtful gesture. She was left with a stack of boxes, an aching heart, and a head ready to burst with far too much new information.

Nelson absolutely did not feel anything for her. She was just his son's teacher. Maybe some part of him was grateful to her, in a way, for being what he couldn't be to Orrin, and for acting as a buffer, like she'd said, between him and his old clan. She was exhausted from packing for days, loading the truck, unloading, and now the unpacking. She'd had a conversation with her dad just two days ago that touched on all the *touchy parts* and it was all just because she was so tired. There was so much change. It was overwhelming. That was all. Two days ago, she asked herself what she could do to bring Nelson joy.

Hopefully, it was unpacking boxes and getting things put away because that's all she felt she could do at the moment. She didn't have the strength to tackle the rest.

Chapter 8

Nelson

Orrin was at school.

It was such a strange thing to comprehend and now that it was real, Nelson was like any other parent. Worried sick. Aimless. Displaced. He'd turned their world upside down, and he wanted Orrin to love school and become a part of the community, and that was happening, but it was just so *difficult* at the same time.

Life was never straightforward, but he was used to knowing what he felt about it. Not knowing made him restless in his own skin and he didn't like it.

He had to go to the hall, after dropping Orrin off at the small school, and meet with Sam, Kier, and Tavish. The meeting was awful. He came back to the small cabin that he couldn't quite think of as his yet, muttering under his breath.

He didn't realize he was doing it until Loretta stopped unpacking a box in the kitchen and gave him a funny look. "What's wrong?"

She looked as upset as he felt about Orrin not being there. She had no idea how to put things back together, but she was throwing herself into doing what she could to physically get their lives in order. She'd walked with them to the school, had greeted the teacher, Colin, and they'd met Stephanie, who also worked there with the kids. They both seemed like truly nice people. It was still hard to believe the clan had opened up enough to allow humans. Yes, Loretta was there, but seeing

them living and working in Greenacre as their home was something else entirely.

“I mean,” her face softened with understanding. She always did that. Got right to the issue. “I mean, what’s wrong other than everything?”

“It’s this Christmas shite. They were serious about the decorating and getting the town all festive and awful. This is just a terrible form of retribution. It’s going to be utterly humiliating when I fail, which of course they’re setting me up for.”

“Ugh, I shouldn’t have told them you loved Christmas. I was just trying to help. I’m sorry.”

He sighed so long and hard that he just about wore himself out on sighs. “What the hell do I know about Christmas? It’s a human thing. We only ever celebrated stuff like the harvest festival or full moons.”

He threw his truck keys on the handcrafted pine table. The whole cabin was so full of handmade touches, like someone cared about them coming. Like they were wanted and valued, and it made him so desperately uncomfortable that he felt like he was smothering. Antagonism was far easier to deal with that kindness, and he never took anything from anyone for free. He hadn’t driven anywhere that morning, but he’d taken his truck keys out of habit.

“I don’t think that hell and Christmas should go together for starters.” Loretta unwrapped a stack of plates and set them on the counter.

“They’re talking about decorations and trees. The whole deal. Putting on a play with the kids, and they’re still insisting that I somehow find a Santa suit and wear it! They were right about a Santa from nightmares. That’s what they’ll get if they make me do anything so absurd. Whoever heard of a not so jolly St. Nick who looks like this?” He pointed at his face and Loretta paled. Her lovely cupid’s bow flattened with displeasure.

“Everyone knows that it’s just for fun,” she pointed out. “You could say that you’re an emissary. The kids at least will be impressed, and they’ll appreciate the effort. As kids we always knew it was old Mr. Johnson from down the block playing Santa, but you pretend. It’s fun.”

“They call me a monster, but they think that lying to children and feeding them that crap around the world is a good idea?”

She did that soothing gesture with her hands that meant calm the fuck down already. He couldn’t. He was too worked up over this. “I don’t think people here do the traditional Christmas, and that’s the point of making a big thing out of this, it’s to make the non-shifters feel like they belong. It’s all just for fun. Maybe it can be the start of a tradition here. What happens out there in the world doesn’t matter. No one has to lie to the kids. It would be like putting on a play. Everyone knows it’s not real, but they still get so into it.”

“I have a headache,” he said flatly. He did. He’d had one for days. The throbbing at his temples was starting to get annoying. “A monstrous one for a monster.”

Loretta shook her head. She didn’t go pale this time. The opposite happened. Her cheeks flushed. “No. I don’t like that. I don’t like when you call yourself that.”

“You’re a fake mate,” he wasn’t trying to be unkind, but it came out that way. He was shit at this. Talking about anything that meant anything with other people. With Orrin, it was easy. His son belonged to him. He was a part of him. It wasn’t easy, but at least he could do without feeling like he was going to climb out of his skin. “You don’t have to advocate for me when no one is around.”

She ignored his icy tone. “I do it because I’m a nice person and it’s what nice people do, you should maybe try it sometime.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that, so he just stayed quiet. His head was going to explode. It was too much. This was all too much.

“I was thinking about making a casserole for dinner,” she said, changing the subject. “Meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Orrin asked me for one.”

“He told you about the casserole?”

“And about how you refused help.”

“I didn’t need it or their leftovers.”

“I don’t think that’s the point.”

Honestly, she was probably right, but it was done now. “I have more wretched things to do than worry about offending the housewives of Greenacre.”

She didn't have to give him a scathing look for him to realize what she thought of that. "Have you ever heard that you win more friends by being a nice person even if it's forced than by being a douchebag? Oh? You're surprised. I'm sorry, but I'm too old not to say what I think."

And damn if he didn't appreciate that about her.

"Repeat after me," she instructed. It looked like she was trying to hold back a smile, and that made her green eyes dance, which drew him in against his will. He couldn't look away. "I will not offend anyone here by using the term housewives. And Christmas isn't so bad. I'm frustrated, moving is hard, change is hard, but I'm going to get through it without burning anymore bridges, and next time someone tries to give me a casserole, I'll certainly accept it with a thank you and a great big smile."

"I'm *not* repeating that."

"Suit yourself." She bent at the box, but gasped and swung her arm around to her lower back.

"What's wrong?" He was immediately on high alert. He wanted to race over to her and examine whatever was hurting.

"Nothing. I think I pulled a muscle earlier. Everyone says forty is the new twenty, but I'm not so sure about that, at least in my case." She looked him over and quickly looked away. Her eyes still touched every inch of his body like she was saying that he was fit enough for a near fifty-year-old. He didn't like the way that settled in his gut, her noticing that he was in good shape.

Also, what was he supposed to say to that? That she looked beautiful? The regular shit about her not looking a day over thirty—which incidentally was the truth.

Nope. It was far better not to go there. But he'd thought it, and that was disturbing because it meant that his brain had processed that information and was going to store it somewhere.

Fuck, of course it processed it. Loretta wasn't just pretty. She was gorgeous in every conceivable way, from the physical to the manner in which she lived her life. Walking a path of patience, understanding, and empathy, but that didn't make her afraid to speak her mind. She was funny too. She put up with a lot and she handled it all so well. *She* wasn't afraid of change.

“Anyway, talk to me about the Christmas thing.” She lowered herself back down to the box and started taking out more newspaper wrapped dishes. Glasses and mugs mostly. “They can't expect you to do it all by yourself.” She rummaged some more and muttered, “where the heck is that casserole dish?”

“They were talking about a committee, but they want me to take charge of it. Like I said, they're setting me up for failure. This is a test.”

“Suppose it is. So what? The best leaders are the ones who listen and delegate. I don't think you have a problem giving orders. Just turn it around and do it in a nice way here.” She angled differently, probably because of her back, but his eyes were directly drawn to her peachy round ass in a pair of jeans that fit her like a glove. Her loose sweater rode up too, exposing a flash of creamy skin on her back where those jeans started. Or ended.

You should not be looking at her ass. Christmas. Focus on Christmas.

“They probably expect everything from me, or I’m going to fall short of the mark. I can’t let anyone down because I’ll really be letting Orrin down.”

“You could get reindeer and a sleigh.”

“Reindeer? Do you have any idea how animals react when they sense a bear is near, and somehow they can tell that we aren’t entirely human even when we’re definitely in human form. I’ve said that we make other animals nervous. That would be a disaster. Plus, where in the ever loving hell would a person rent a sleigh from?”

“I have no idea. I’m sure we could find a place.”

“We?”

“I am here as your mate. Fake or not, I can help you out. I don’t have anything to do when Orrin’s at school. As a couple people would probably expect us to plan this together. I’m not going to let you fail, so stop worrying about that.”

“I’m not worried about it.”

She reached the bottom of the box and straightened with a huff. She didn’t stop, but grabbed another one. It had already been sliced open, so she pushed the flaps aside. “Ah-ha! There it is!” A glass baking dish seemed to make her incredibly excited. The small things. They mattered to her.

“I’ve been looking for this the whole time. You can’t make a casserole without a casserole dish.”

“You can’t make Christmas if you hate it.”

“Yes you can. Just fake it until you make it, Santa. We’re clearly doing that already.”

“Alright, here’s your list.” He was being snappy now and he couldn’t help it. He wasn’t annoyed with her and he wasn’t taking it out on her, but she was standing there looking so thrilled with her discovery, all glistening eyes and beautiful smile and that gorgeous body, smelling like vanilla and coconut and all things tropical, and he was dialed in to the tune of it was starting to drive him crazy. “One Santa suit. One sleigh. Six fake reindeer.”

“I think you mean nine.”

“Why nine?”

“Because there are traditionally nine of them.”

“How do you know that?”

She walked to the sink and started washing the casserole dish while he just had to stand there and be amazed and drawn in like a magnet. Leaving the farm and moving here had shifted everything. Change wasn’t good. Space. He needed space. He needed a trip to Seattle to deal with settling his business there.

“Because I grew up with all that stuff and I know the song. Do you want me to sing it?”

“I do *not* want you to sing it.”

She hummed something else while she rinsed the casserole dish and set it on the other side of the double sink to air dry. She kept going, washing up the plates and mugs and bowls that she’d taken out and stacked there.

“Alright, continue.”

“With what?”

“Your list.”

How was he being so badly beaten at his own game and why did she sound so cheerful about it? “It hardly snows here, at least not the deep type that lies for more than a couple of days so it probably won’t be a white Christmas. All it does is rain and the snow that comes melts on and off and turns to mud. So we’ll need fake snow. Boughs of holly or whatever that is.” He paused, noticing the smirk on Loretta’s face. “What?”

“You haven’t been watching some Hallmark movies for ideas, have you?” she asked, as she placed a couple of upended glasses to drain.

“No,” He growled. Of course he wouldn’t watch those damn movies—if by watching she meant paying attention from start to finish—he might have fast-forwarded through a couple though, but that’s a secret that would remain between him and Orrin’s tablet. “So plenty of greenery. Decorations.

They'll want real trees, and they'll probably want them decorated alive—that is, not cut down. They were talking about some sort of play, which will likely involve singing. Probably gifts. Some kind of dinner. What place would fit everyone? The hall? Whatever or wherever it is, that will have to be decorated. I don't know where the money for that is coming from, but I'm certainly not footing it."

"Not to mention the food. That's what makes Christmas amazing is all the cooking."

"Dammit, this is getting out of hand."

She shrugged and kept washing dishes. "You could just organize a potluck, do some Christmas carols with everyone, have greenery and candles, get the kids involved in making handmade decorations for whatever trees are getting them, and then have the Santa suit. Go old school and do a more minimal Christmas. I always loved handmade ornaments and gifts. All the other stuff is just so commercial."

"Exactly. Which is why we never do anything for Christmas."

"Every message of every Christmas show, book, movie, song, and anything else ever has been that love is the main message. Cherishing the people around you. Opening your heart and letting that warmth in. That's the greatest gift."

"Great. I like your idea. It sounds easier. Let's all give someone we love a hug, get some oranges, string some popcorn on a holly branch and be done with it."

She laughed. It was a big, hearty sound. She didn't normally laugh like that and something even warmer than

anything else he'd felt so far flooded through him. "We could write something out and you could bring it to whatever committee they're going to make, or planning group or whatever happens with that, and everyone will get excited and want to contribute and you'll hardly have to do anything. It's a smart plan. You can't fail at that if the whole community is coming together. I think that's the way Christmas should be. That's the point of all of this. Coming back home. Getting to know people again. Becoming something bigger than just you."

He really needed to get out of there before that heat in his chest turned into something messy. "Perfect. Let's go with that. I have to go to Seattle for a few hours. Are you okay here until I'm back?"

"You'll be back before Orrin is out of school?"

An hour there, an hour back... He'd probably get zero business done, but what he needed was time to clear his head. He could make calls and when he got there, turn around and come right back. "Yes."

"Alright then. I'll just keep unpacking."

"You don't have to do that. You could leave it until Orrin comes home and I can deal with my own things."

She turned around, her expression completely open and still amused. "I wasn't going to touch your things."

What was wrong with him that hearing her say that sounded dirty? Almost like an innuendo. His whole body burst into fire. The air between them felt combustible. Cold. He needed the cold. Fresh air. A long drive.

“Alright. Thank you.”

“Just to be clear we’re having casserole for dinner, freshly made and *not* leftovers—though there’s nothing wrong with leftovers—and we’ll be sitting around the table like a family. And I’m making it, so you can’t reject it.”

“You told me I couldn’t reject it anyway. I shall eat it with a foot-wide smile plastered over my face.”

She bit her bottom lip to keep from laughing, but that just made it look red and plump and full. He tore his eyes away. “Yes. That’s right. You’ll enjoy it.”

He did enjoy her cooking. Anything and everything she made was delicious. Sometimes, he skipped meals just because he didn’t like the comfort of sitting at the table. It was fine with Orrin, but with Loretta as well, it felt too familiar. It felt like something he could want and wanting only ended. All things ended. All things hurt.

“Doubtful.”

“Oooh, is that a challenge? I’ll make it extra tasty just because you have so little faith in my casserole skills.”

What was this? Banter? Friendliness? Was she flirting with him? And what was he doing, having a heart to heart about fucking Christmas shit with her?

“I have to go do bad guy loan sharking stuff now. I’m going to ruin at least four people’s lives in the next hour alone, and so many more when I shut down the business. I’ll make

sure I'm an extra asshole when I call in all the debts and I'll send my employees—which you like to call thugs—out with a vengeance.”

She blinked at him, but then she just turned around and went back to the dishes and started humming something he was sure had to do with Christmas and that made him feel like it was so obvious that he was trying too hard to be a jerk and she wasn't the least bit bothered. What was going on? At the farm, she *hated* what he did.

He left the house in a huff and didn't feel the least bit better when he got in his truck, got out of Greenacre, and hit the freeway. If this was Christmas, all family and community and bullshit, he didn't want any of that spirit spreading to him.

Chapter 9

Loretta

Moving was hard. Starting life over was hard. Nelson and Orrin had gone back to a place where they had baggage, or at least Nelson did, whereas most people moved away for that very reason.

Nelson was home in time to pick Orrin up from school the previous day, which they'd done together. It was only a ten-minute walk from their cabin. Nelson was so quiet. They'd returned home and after Orrin told them everything, which took over an hour because he was so excited he kept having to add in things he'd forgotten, they'd eaten dinner. Orrin was still chatty and brimming over with excitement about everything he'd done at school, and that made it so Nelson didn't have to say anything at all. He'd eaten four helpings of the casserole, which must have meant that he liked it after all,

After dinner, he'd taken Orrin to the woods for a walk, and she'd finished unpacking the rest of Orrin's things so he could be comfortably settled in his room.

When they first arrived, Nelson had insisted that she take the other bedroom and he'd have the couch—but the idea was ridiculous. He'd have to practically fold himself in half to get settled on there, so eventually he had let her take it. Though not without some grumbling. She'd slept on the couch for the two nights they'd been there, and while it wasn't bad, it wasn't the best. Her back hadn't recovered from whatever she'd done to it moving boxes and she felt like forty-two going on seventy.

After she and Nelson walked Orrin to school, she didn't really have any choice but to go back to the cabin. She'd spend a few hours putting the rest of the things away and then it would be done, and she could work on that list she was half joking about the day before. If Nelson was going to settle in well in Greenacre, he was going to need help. To everyone else, there wasn't anything fake about their relationship. She'd need to start doing what a good mate would do and going to socialize and get to know people. If she made a bridge for Nelson, maybe things would be easier. Orrin was already so in love with the school and the other kids. She was going to do everything she could to make sure he could stay.

At least that was the plan until she started tackling the last of two boxes in the kitchen. She was bent over an open drawer, putting away the wooden spoons, spatulas, and flippers she'd just washed when her back let her know in no uncertain terms that it was finished with unpacking for the foreseeable future, and maybe everything else.

"Oh my god!" She grasped the counter as the pain shot through her, pulsating out from her lower back locking her in place. It hurt so much she could barely breathe because every time her lungs expanded, she could feel the pressure in her back mounting, like they were touching her spine when they were full of air.

"What happened?"

Nelson had been in his room, assumably putting his things away too, but she hadn't gone and checked. It was still so strange, being home without Orrin at the same time. She was basically tiptoeing around the newness of it. Not that he'd done a single thing to make her uncomfortable. It was just that when the house was quiet and she wasn't preoccupied with anything, she was far too aware that Nelson was hotter than

the surface of the blazing sun. She'd hardly been able to look at him yesterday when they talked in the kitchen.

"Nothing." Yeah, right. He wasn't buying it, given that she was still bent almost in half, one hand splayed out on the counter like she was holding on for dear life in turbulent seas.

"I can see it's not nothing. Did you hurt yourself?"

"My back, I think I put it out," she admitted, letting out air because it felt so good to have her lungs deflated. She dreaded the next inhale.

"Do you want me to call Josephine? Or take you to the clinic?"

"Oh god. No. I'm fine. I'll just take an ibuprofen and I'll be alright."

Nelson's vice went about a full two octaves deeper than it normally did. It was sandpaper rough with memories. "Kara's back used to hurt her sometimes. She'd go for massages. I don't know if anyone around here can do that, but I could drive you to Seattle if you could get an appointment. It helped her a lot."

"Maybe, though I'm not sure I could even get in a car right now."

He sighed like it hurt his lungs to be full too and she angled around so she could see him. It meant keeping one hand planted on the counter and looking under her own armpit. The cabin was more modern than she expected, and she mostly got a full view of the gas stove to the side. On the way to walking

Orrin to school, she'd seen chimneys with smoke coming out of them. They must have had woodstoves to heat the place, but as far she knew, everything in their cabin ran on propane. The fridge, stove, and furnace all seemed to be powered by the large green tank at the side between their house and the other cabin close by.

A wave of guilt stabbed through her. She hadn't even gone to say hi to her neighbors yet. She was definitely going to get her back straightened out and she was going to force herself to go out that afternoon and get to know people, no matter how much it hurt.

And she was going to check out the backyard and maybe even go for a walk through the woods they were surrounded by. If that was allowed. She didn't want to run into bears. Or mountain lions. Or people doing shifter things that she shouldn't be privy to —so, also more bears. Man bears.

Nelson stepped forward and she finally saw his face. He was naturally tanned. Even when the sun hardly shone, and it was constantly cloudy and rainy. It was like he created the sun himself. His eyes were so dark she almost couldn't tell where the iris met his pupil. They were such intense eyes, especially the way he was studying her. The good side of his face was angled to her, and she wondered if he did that on purpose. Usually, it seemed like he didn't care. He wasn't going to apologize for who he was. She'd often thought he delighted in scaring people. Not her, but the men he worked with.

She'd noticed too, how he tended to run hot. He wore t-shirts in the dead of winter, and outside, hardly ever a jacket. The most he ever threw on was his worn, wool plaid, but that was hardly thicker than a button-down shirt. Though thinking about it, at the meeting when they first arrived, the other men were also wearing seasonally inappropriate clothing, so maybe it was a shifter thing?

“I’m fine,” she whispered, realizing how silent he was standing there. Poised, like he was trying to make a decision.

“Can I help you?”

“No!” That was too fast and too sharp. “I mean, it’s not necessary.”

She had the craziest idea that if he touched her anywhere, she would come unraveled. Maybe not all of her, but some part. The pain wasn’t just in her back anymore. It was spreading through her body, transforming itself into something much more primal. Who knew that red hot lust could feel far more acute than backpain?

His eyes narrowed. “I give good massages.”

I don’t doubt it. Look at those hands. Huge, strong, man slash bear hands. No. Women give great massages too. The size of the hands doesn’t matter.

She had the bottle of ibuprofen put away in the cupboard already. She could reach for it. It would be fine. It was not fine.

When she tried to take her hand away from the counter, her back straight up attacked her like a whole colony of murder hornets were living in her spine. The pain closed in at the corners of her vision and her head felt like it was packed full of cotton.

Suddenly, those big hands were on her body. One on her shoulder and the other at her waist. “You’re not fine. It’s either

the clinic, an appointment in the city, or you let me give it a shot.”

“Says the man who dug out a bullet with a knife and then nearly died because he knew what he was doing.”

He grunted, but it sounded more like the grunt that’s a reluctant smile that turns into an even more reluctant laugh. The sound made the fire in her body worse than the pain in her back.

“Either way, let me help you to the couch so you can try to lie down flat.”

He wasn’t going to take no for an answer, so she had to lean on him and let his strength do all of the work. Which he did. Effortlessly. He did run warm. Or maybe that was just the fire in her own body consuming her. She’d never been the kind of person who could do physical things with someone who didn’t mean something, and she hadn’t dated anyone in three years.

Three years.

No wonder her body was turning into a minefield at the proximity of a man who was so ferally male. And strong. And warm. She wanted to arch into the hands splayed across her body.

It was a relief when he helped her to the couch, but then her back spasmed and it wasn’t a relief at all. She groaned, turning herself around to spread out on her belly. That was half bliss and half a mistake. Her breasts pressed into the leather couch cushion, which was firm enough to give resistance, which made them actually *hurt*.

That was too much. Far, far too much.

“Will you let me try for a few minutes? You’re in a lot of pain. Even if I can relieve a bit of it, then maybe you’ll be more comfortable when I take you for an appointment somewhere.” His tone of voice told her he wasn’t going to let her not see a professional. “This isn’t like the knife thing. Although, I knew what I was doing then too. The infection was just unfortunate.”

“Because booze isn’t a good substitute for a hospital with proper sanitation?”

“Maybe. Maybe I shouldn’t have gone out and kicked that guy off my land after. I don’t know. Sometimes, you just get unlucky. Kara would be in real pain and I’d do this for her and it would be help. But, if you’d rather I not try, I understand. I’ll call some places in Seattle and I’ll carry you to the truck.”

She would absolutely die if he carried her.

And if they went to Seattle, would they be back for Orrin at the end of the day? It was way too soon to just both not be there for him. She didn’t know anyone here well enough to ask if they’d watch him for a few hours. She certainly wasn’t going to be able to drive herself.

“Okay.”

“Not unless you trust me.”

She cranked her head around. “What?”

Why did he look like that? Like her trust mattered more than anything. Why did he have to be so beautiful with all his muscles straining at that t-shirt, those very worn in jeans hugging his thighs, the grey woolen toes of his socks sticking out below? Why did he have to look so strong and capable? Why did the whole cabin suddenly seem like someone had turned the heat up to tropical levels?

“Do you trust me not to hurt you?”

“I think it’s going to hurt before it feels better.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Alright.” She shut her eyes and buried her face in the crook of her arms so the couch didn’t smother her. “Alright, yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, I trust you. Yes, I’d like you to try and make this stop hurting because it’s unbearable.” What part? Could he hear that catch in her voice? The catch where her body very much wished he could make *everything* stop hurting?

She wished she could get up and crack open all the windows.

She heard him move. Heard his knees hit the floor. “I’ll be gentle.” There was something wrong with his voice too. Like he was fighting his own sensations, twisting and writhing inside him like a pit of snakes.

She had her own snakes going on. It was just sensation.

The way his hands came down on her lower back and his fingers started working over her shirt. It was all sensation. It did hurt, but immediately, she felt the knots that seemed to be tied around her spine start to spin out and loosen up. The pain was immediately coupled with relief, which made what he was doing almost enjoyable.

She bit down on the side of her hand and tried not to make a sound. She didn't want to gasp in pain or moan at how good it felt to be able to drag air into her lungs again without her back sending nasty ripples of agony up and down her vertebrae.

Nelson really did give a good massage. One. Because she'd never let this happen again. If she needed one, she'd go to Seattle, no matter how much it hurt.

She couldn't stand being this close to him again.

Her body couldn't take it.

She knew it wasn't just recent feelings either. She'd known for a long time how obviously muscular he was. She'd tried to tell herself he was bad sometimes. But it was the sometimes that haunted her. No one was all bad and no one was all bad all the time.

His hands worked magic on her back. She had no idea how long it had been. Forever. Not long enough. He hit spots that made her flinch, but it didn't hurt anymore. The knots were mostly gone. She'd probably just aggravated a muscle and it was turning into jelly under his careful touch. So was she. She was being pressed down into the couch. She was pressing herself down to keep herself in place.

I can't want this. I can't want him.

There were too many echoes in her head. Half her own voice, half what her dad said, half what she'd said to him, and then that one endless sentence that played over and over where Orrin said that his dad *liked* her.

Nelson left the painful spot alone and searched higher, higher, all the way up her back, so tenderly and carefully, massing out any pain that might be there.

Suddenly, she was struggling to get air again. Except it didn't hurt. Not her back. It was everywhere else. Everywhere. All of her.

I can't want this. I can't want him. No. But she did. All of her did. She'd never wanted anything or anyone *like this*. It wasn't about can't or logic or choice.

“Stop!” The word exploded out of her, and Nelson immediately backed off. He took his hands off her body.

She swung around, and it should have hurt, but her back didn't even give a twinge of protest. He was there on his knees, his hands hanging loosely in the air, and he looked destroyed. He was upset, thinking he'd hurt her.

He'd hurt her. He'd hurt her terribly.

Her body was a traitor and an enemy and something that didn't even make sense anymore.

She leaned forward and threw her arms around his neck. Even on his knees, he was huge. Commanding. He was massive and strong and she needed him. Her lips crushed against his, and he was so stunned that he didn't respond.

She tried to pull back. It was wrong. He didn't want this. She couldn't want this.

His hand cupped the back of her head and almost reverently, his fingers smoothed through her hair. "So soft," he said, and that awe was real.

He kissed her. It wasn't tame. Nelson could take the pain away with a massage, He could touch her hair like it was made of precious materials, but he couldn't kiss her softly. She didn't want soft. She wanted his mouth devouring hers. She arched into his hand when it curled around her hip and pulled her right off the couch. She fell onto him, and he leaned back to catch her. She was practically straddling him, and in her tight-fitting yoga leggings, she felt everything. All the seams of his jeans and the heat of him, and then she rocked her hips and she felt the hardness of him right against her center.

Sparks shot off behind her eyes at the contact. She wanted to do it again. And again.

He nipped her bottom lip and splayed his hand over her lower back, driving her into him. He wanted it too. He kissed her like fire, with his teeth and his tongue. She was going to explode. Some part of her was going to tear apart. Her heart? Her chest? Her lungs? Or was it something deeper, all the pleasure already banked and building just from being in this position.

"Nelson!" The sound of a fist pounding against the front door broke them apart.

She would have fallen back, but he caught her, lifted her onto the couch, and got to his feet in a swift movement. He stood in front of her, instinctively becoming a human shield between her and the anger in that voice.

“Nelson, get out here right now!”

“Don’t,” she begged, heaving for breath. “Don’t open the door.”

“I haven’t done anything.” He turned around and his face was all despair.

She was the one who wanted to stand up and throw herself in front of him. Be his shield. “Let me go out then.”

“Are you insane? That’s Trace and he’s pissed off.”

“He won’t do anything to me.”

“No. No, I’m not taking that chance. If it’s me he wants, it’s me he’s going to get. Vow or no vow, he asked me to come out.”

“Nelson!” She grabbed at his arm, but something had been set off inside of him. Something wild twisted his face.

She wasn’t fast enough to really get a good hold on him. He stalked to the door and threw it open. It didn’t even seem like he was conscious of her right behind him.

“How could you do it? Two days? Really? That’s as long as your word lasted?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he growled. Her skin crawled at the menace in his voice. She wanted to beg him to shut that door and talk to her. She wanted to go out and put herself between whatever storm was about to land.

“We all knew you were only coming back here to cause problems. We all knew it, but Sam is too good-hearted. He made a space for you. I said that you were beyond redemption. I told him that you didn’t even have it in you to love your own son enough not to use him to pawn your way in here. Sam trusted you. A good man gave you his loyalty and put you under his protection and you repay him by trying to replace him?”

Nelson’s chest heaved and his shoulders with it. Good. At least he was breathing, or trying to. He was trying to control the rage, even as he was clearly blindsided. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Replace him? Replace who? Sam? Sam was the alpha. That made no sense. Whatever Trace was angry about, he had it wrong.

“I release you from your vow.” Trace stepped back and from her position behind Nelson, Lottie saw him open his arms wide. “This ends right here, right now. Get out here and fight me. This time, you’re not going to win. You will never be alpha of this clan. Never. Because I’m going to tear you apart right here, right now.”

“Nelson,” Lottie begged. “Please. Don’t do this. I don’t know what he’s talking about, but it’s all wrong. You haven’t done anything.” She wasn’t going to ask him if he had, perhaps,

done something truly awful. She knew he hadn't. She knew that Trace was wrong, and this was all a misunderstanding.

If she just threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around him, he wouldn't leave. She *knew* he wouldn't. She moved, but she wasn't fast enough. Nelson exploded out the door. She'd glimpsed him as a bear before, running through the woods behind his farmyard with Orrin, or sometimes, straying to the backyard, but he usually stayed out of sight.

He wasn't out of sight now.

And he shifted midstride, exploding with horrifying speed and the sound. Jesus, the sound of that change. It was like a human being thrown at a brick wall. Bones snapping. The sick, sick twist and crunch. And then a blur of blackish brown fur with deep scars, twisted tracks that marred the magnificent grizzly every single place that Nelson was marked.

He didn't turn back for a second.

Chapter 10

Loretta

Lottie was so small. What could she do against a grizzly in a rage? But no. Something had changed. She'd changed. The last five minutes of her life had irrevocably altered her. She no longer belonged to herself. She wasn't even sure how she knew that or trusted what her brain was telling her body, but she did, and she ran. She ran, terrified she'd be too late. She ran, even though she had no breath and her heart felt like it had stopped. Nelson was something to her. He'd been something to her since the day she'd met him. He thought he belonged to no one, but that wasn't true.

She flew out the door after him, moving on pure instinct. Her whole body was a raw, bleeding nerve, one wretched long heartbeat, one terrifying impulse, and the fear that she was going to be too late.

Because Trace hadn't shifted yet. Not fully. He was down on one knee. Nelson reared up. He stood on his hind legs, and he was just far enough outside that it gave her room to fly out the door in her bright pink socks and get in front of him. He'd paused instead of charging immediately. Instead of flying to a blind rage, he'd paused. He hadn't just torn Trace apart. If he was going to fight, he wanted a fair one.

There wasn't going to be any fight.

She threw herself at a grizzly that was impossibly huge. Claws that could shred her, teeth that could take her apart with a single angry snap. She didn't care. This was Nelson, and she couldn't let him do this. He'd spent so long putting his soul back together. For Orrin. For himself. And in the past year,

unknowingly, bit by bit, she'd started to fall for that lovely, wounded soul. If he'd done it to her, then that kiss told her that she'd done something to him over the year as well.

He might be a bear, but his soul would know hers.

“Stop!” She latched onto anything she could find, her arms opened wide. He was a wall. Solid. So hot. Utterly terrifying and magnificent. “Stop, Nelson, please! If you do this, there will never be forgiveness. Not from him. But for yourself. You won't forgive yourself. So, please. Just, please, don't do this.”

“Loretta!” A hand, tugging hard at her shoulder. She tried to shrug it away. She held on tight, grabbing handfuls of Nelson's fur. “Get away from him. You can't get between a fight like this! He's crazed. Step away!”

The roar rattled through her. Not through her ears, not loud enough to hurt, but a wounded keen from the bear as he bent his head past her to blast Trace.

Trace stumbled back, hands raised up, palms forward.

She tried to cling to Nelson, but he twisted away. Not roughly. He didn't hurt her. Her hands just detached and then he was gone. He didn't charge past her and go right for Trace. Instead, he lumbered off towards the bush. He disappeared quickly, and the sounds of him crashing through faded out in just a few seconds.

She stared blankly at Trace, who seemed to actually be frozen in shock.

“Why?” Her cheeks were wet, she realized. She didn’t care. She didn’t care that she was crying. Her pain was nothing in this moment. “He didn’t do anything. He had no idea what you were talking about! You came here and you attacked him, and you undid everything he has tried for years to rebuild.”

Trace bowed his head. “Not everything.” She had to strain to hear that quiet voice. “He could have killed me, and he didn’t. So, not everything.”

“Tell me how to find him.”

“No. Please, don’t go after him. Nelson has always been unpredictable. I don’t care what you are to him, he could do something terrible and not even know it.”

“That won’t happen. I have to find him. Please.”

He inhaled so sharply that it rattled in his throat. The silence that went on between them tore at her heart, impaling it on its thorns. “If you’re going, then you should bring a change of clothes. If he shifts back out there, he won’t have them, and if thinks that we’re out here waiting to attack him, he’s definitely not going to come out.”

“Are you? Are you going to be waiting out here for him?”

She didn’t know this man, the man who had torn Nelson apart when they were just kids and quite possibly changed the whole trajectory of his life. He’d had a lot more bad than good, but that twisting, sorrowful, hard road led them right here. She’d always wondered what was wrong with her, that she’d never found her match. She’d never found anyone she could picture spending her life with. She was an anomaly to everyone else. The one who stood out as being weird and maybe even

unnatural. But maybe all of that was her own hard road too, and this was where those two twisted paths intersected.

“No. Yes, we’ll be here, but not like that.” Trace could be lying to her, but she didn’t think so.

She wasn’t going to take chances. “Give me your word. That seems to mean everything around here.”

He studied her and that hardness in him didn’t drop away, but he relented. “Yes. You have it.”

She didn’t wait for him to walk away. She charged back into the house. She found her boots, tying them so fast that she made knots. They’d hold. That’s what mattered. She pushed open Nelson’s door like she’d done that morning, she heard the crash and found him in his room, on the floor. She’d been forced to be calm for Orrin when all she wanted to do was panic. She stayed calm now, going to the pine dresser. All the boxes were unpacked already. Nelson was efficient, but then, he’d brought so few of his own personal things. She grabbed an extra shirt, jeans, underwear, and the plaid jacket that was hanging from a hook on the wall.

As she ran back out the door and shut it, she realized that the scraps of fabric all over the ground were the remains of clothing and shoes. She was blind to it before, and now she saw it there, littered all over like confetti. The ruins of something that could have been.

No. Almost the ruins.

She was going to pick them up.

She was going to find Nelson.

As soon as she stepped into the thick woods, dense and dark with towering trees, thick branches, shrubs, and a soft, squishy, earthy floor that hadn't known anything more than a footprint in probably centuries, she realized how silly that notion was.

She wouldn't be able to find Nelson in here, alone, with no idea where she was going, no sense of direction. But he could find her.

She hadn't even stopped to put on a jacket, and she only now realized how cold it was. She wasn't going back. She pulled on the wool plaid instead and was instantly surrounded by a scent she didn't even realize was familiar. Fresh air. Earth. The subtle spice of a rough man with a good heart.

There were no paths, and she picked her way through the trees. She was more frantic than careful at first, but gradually, her steps slowed and she took more care. The trees had roots everywhere. The ground was rocky in patches. The moss was damp and slick over everything.

She kept walking. She didn't wonder how far. She'd walk as far as it took.

"Nelson?" Maybe it wasn't the smartest idea, calling a bear to her. She couldn't let Trace's cautious warning rattle her. Nelson would know her. She was also cloaked in his scent.

She walked on and on, until she turned around and realized that she had no idea which way was back. If Nelson

didn't find her, would anyone? The panic was instant. Her throat closed up. She had to force herself to remember how many times she'd advised her students how to stay calm even when they were afraid, and especially in an emergency. She'd been sitting beside her mom, holding her hand, when she passed away in the hospital. She'd known the end was near, but the moment was still so painfully surreal. The cancer was cruel and her mom fought for so long, she fought until her body just gave out. The end meant that she wasn't in any pain any longer. It meant that she was free. But, no matter what she'd told herself in those few moments after it happened, nothing could soothe her. She'd only remained so calm on the outside because the numbness and finality of those moments stayed with her for hours, paralyzing her in a dreamscape that hadn't felt real.

That was one of the worst moments of her life. If she got through that, if she got through her dad's stroke and recovery, she could get through finding her way through the woods. And, if not, Trace knew she was out here. If she wasn't back by nightfall—which happened so early now that the shortest day of the year was only a few weeks away—he'd have someone come and find her. The people of Greenacre knew these woods.

But what if a bear came for her? A man as a bear? How would she know the difference.

Stop it. It's fine. They'll know you. Nelson will know you, she told herself.

She pushed forward, trying to keep all her senses open for any sort of movement.

Eventually, hopelessness started seeping through her like the cold and the damp soaked her feet inside of her boots.

The damn things were supposed to be waterproof, but she felt like she was walking through a bog. She wasn't even close to giving up, not by a long shot.

Nelson was the one who found her. He moved through the trees, shaggy, huge, but graceful, twenty feet in front of her. He used the trees as cover, but she could see the patches where the scars were and the hair wouldn't grow on his face and shoulders, running to his back.

She stopped immediately. "Oh my god." She didn't realize how frozen her hands were until she dropped the clothes she'd kept such a tight grip on the whole way.

In the next breath, she ran. He stayed where he was, hidden between massive trees, ancient trees, and she raced over the earth, leaping roots and scattering moss and dirt, old leaves, old pine needles. She didn't use a scrap of caution. She ran straight to what should have been the source of danger. She hurtled at him like he was her salvation and wrapped her arms around his neck. She clung to him, trembling, tears streaming down her face. Her fingers dug into the thick ruff of fur around the bear's neck.

She wasn't going to let go. She was never letting go.

That moment was surreal. Surreal in relief. Surreal that they were deep in the woods, but she'd found him. She wasn't alone. And he wasn't either.

Lottie lost herself to the feeling, until it was like she was floating, the woods their own dreamscape. She didn't let go when she felt the bear *shrinking*. Not through the far more subtle, less violent rearranging of bone. Not when the shift pulled her down to her knees because Nelson landed on his. She kept her hands on his shoulders and pulled herself close.

She breathed in the goodness of him. The woods clung to his hair and skin. After that transition, it was hard to realize that he was vibrating. No, he was *shaking*.

“Oh my god. Here.” She unbuttoned his wool plaid and flung it over his shoulders. He was completely naked, and she kept her eyes glued to his face.

Her hands. She needed them there. She pressed her palms against his cheeks. One against the scars, the other against smooth skin.

“Why?” The way his face twisted in anguish made her stomach drop. “Why would you risk your life? How could you put yourself in harms’ way like that?”

“How could I not?”

“For Orrin?”

“For you as well.”

For a long, agonizing minute she thought he was going to break down. That this was something he wasn’t going to come back from. “I didn’t—”

“I know. Do you want to go back?”

He frowned, a storm raging in his eyes. “Does it make me a coward if I say not immediately?”

Her heart throbbed because he was looking at her like the only thing keeping him out there was her. “Are we alone right

now?" She trusted his senses more than she trusted her own.

"Completely."

His expression emptied of everything except the raw need. Whatever walls she'd put up between them burned down completely. She could feel her heart beating so loudly that her pulse roared in her ears. She had zero control left, zero reasons in the moment why she'd ever needed it in the first place.

They were standing together, but apart. He'd taken care not to touch her and she'd taken all the care in the world to preserve his modesty. Not anymore. He hauled her up against him, grasping her waist. He arched towards her, and she closed her eyes and parted her lips. She was ready for him, ready for the fury of his kiss. It still caught her off guard. It still nearly knocked her over. It still just about incinerated her down to the ground.

He was passion and fury, wounded hurt, and raw wildness. The kiss was out of control, but she didn't want to bring it back. He growled into her mouth and it drove her wild. She kissed him too hard, scraping her teeth over his lip. The way his hands tightened on her hips told her how much he liked it. She opened her mouth to him and gave him everything. His hand left her hip and swept up, over her breast, to collar her throat. She panted and turned her neck, giving it to him. His hand fisted in her hair, dragging her head back before his lips searched her jaw and kissed her throat.

Her legs buckled and she took him with her. She was falling, but he caught her and instead of hitting the ground hard, she was lowered down, his hands underneath her back, guiding her the whole way. She'd been holding his plaid. Where was it? He grabbed it and lifted her hips easily, sliding it underneath her. She wanted to incinerate her clothing and he had the same

idea. He tore at her shirt, kissing her lips, her neck, her collarbones, kissing a path to her breasts as the shirt gave way.

“I’m not a gentle man, Loretta.” He proved that by tearing her bra in half. It might just have been joined by a flimsy piece of fabric, but still.

She grasped his face and this time, the way she bit down on his bottom lip was intentional. “You always call me Loretta. No one calls me Loretta. Everyone calls me Lottie. I like it so much better.”

“If no one calls you Loretta, I want to call you Loretta.”

His mouth covered her nipple, sucking and scraping it with his teeth until she lifted right off the ground. His shirt was only half under her. She was damp and probably had dirt and moss in her hair, but she didn’t care. She wasn’t cold. Not when he was covering her with his own body and he was so furiously warm.

His hand pulled down the waistband of her leggings. “Don’t.” He stopped. All of him froze. “Don’t tear them off,” she corrected. “You can take them off, but don’t wreck them. I brought you clothes, but these are all I have, and I’m not going to walk back naked.”

He was gentle after that. He undid her boots like she was a child. Peeled off her socks and tucked them inside. His eyes, soft and dark as oil in the dark, stayed on her face the whole time. He slid her leggings off and took care with her thong, placing them neatly on her boots.

She was entirely naked now. Totally exposed to him. She wasn’t the kind of woman who had sex in the woods. She

wasn't the kind of woman who had sex with her boss either. With him, she didn't care what kind of woman she'd been in the past. She wanted him to remake her. She was bold with him. She wasn't shy when she spread her thighs to show him how wet she was.

“Fuck,” he swore, but his eyes were still so soft. “I’m going to ruin you out here. I’m going to put my mouth on you until you’re lost in me. When you’re coming on my tongue and coming on my cock, you’re going to be mine.”

It felt right to be claimed by a man who clearly never thought he'd be in this position again. “As a real mate?”

He was forced to confront and confirm it. Her heart sped up. It was already going impossibly fast. She watched Nelson's pulse drumming at his neck. It was fast too. “As a real mate, if that's what you want. I promised myself I'd never let another person in like before, but who am I to fight fate? Who am I to stand here and defy the entire universe?”

“You don't sound happy about it.”

“Am I ever a happy person?”

“I think so. But you wouldn't show it to anyone. Not anyone but Orrin. You keep yourself locked up. I don't just want you, Nelson. I need you. Who am I to fight the universe when for some reason, it's decided that out of all the people in the world, it should be you?”

“That sassy mouth. Fuck, I shouldn't, but I love it. I'm going to give you my mouth. I'm going to make you love it too.”

He spoke those filthy words and he made it a reality as he promised. She gasped when he made contact. Her hands dug into the dirt, and for the moment, the only thing that mattered was his mouth on her. It was good. It was pure bliss. It was so right and he couldn't stop. He wasn't going to stop. Not until he'd half killed her.

His tongue found her clit and he licked her until her whole body felt like she was all nerves, right on the edge. He stopped before he gave her too much. He smoothed her folds with his fingers and then he filled her with his tongue.

“Open your eyes, Loretta.”

She did, and she found him watching her like he'd never wanted anything more than to give her pleasure. He'd never looked so gentle or menacing. She watched his mouth on her, watched him lick every bit of her until she was writhing.

Nelson reared up and she watched him, her eyes gracing every inch of his body. He was so powerfully built, so undeniably beautiful. He smoothed a hand over the scars on his shoulder, ran it down his chest where they raked over his pec and down to his abs. His back and arm had taken the worst of it, but the silvery marks stood out there too.

“You make me feel like these are just skin. Like they're just a part of me. I don't know how or why you want me, but I feel like you see past these. I feel like you see past everything I've done. It's not who I am. It hasn't gone past skin deep.”

He looked like a violent man. He'd lived violence. She should have known in that interview that she'd never be the same after meeting him. Maybe she sensed it. Maybe she wanted to travel the path that would eventually lead her right here.

“I know that. Do you?”

When he looked at the ground, she threw herself at him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his lips with her own brand of violence. She was his storm, and she wasn't going to let up. He hadn't surrendered his armor yet, but it was starting to crack. When she pulled back, he stared at her with those dark eyes blazing with emotion.

He was on his knees and she straddled him. She ran her hand over his chest, over the scars, down between them. She kept her eyes on his as she closed her hand around his shaft. He was so thick and hard. His expression glazed over as she ran her hand slowly down his length. They never broke eye contact as she shifted, notching him at her entrance. She wanted to close her eyes as she sank down, but she kept them open.

Before, there was always a vague and respectful distance between them. But now? She'd breached every defense and he'd stripped hers away.

She sunk down on him, taking him inside her, but he was the one who moved first. He was all power and grace and she responded. It hurt a little, to be stretched like she was, but Nelson had both his hands on her waist and so when she moved, he guided her. He guided her until it didn't hurt. Until her body adjusted. Until she was rocking and panting, leaning forward to take his mouth in a kiss that felt more like a battle than a dance.

They moved together, setting a desperate rhythm that they both needed. It wasn't controlled. They were both very out of control. He filled her and she took every bit of his need and gave it back to him until they were both panting against each other's lips.

She knew she was going to come and she shouldn't have been afraid of it, but she was. She knew it was going to tear her apart. She knew it was going to be painful and incredible and that it might be the end of her.

He didn't tell her to come. He didn't command her pleasure. He just gave her all of him until there was no stopping it any longer. Until the pleasure was wound so tight inside of her that it had to release.

Release. No. It was a force that ripped through her, shattering her, claiming her. She was aware of her body in a way that she'd never been before. She was aware of Nelson, driving into her until he stopped breathing, and then he ground his face against her shoulder and made a low, primal noise. She felt the heat of him deep inside of herself.

They both breathed raggedly. She had no concept of time. It was like it didn't exist at all.

Nelson finally pulled out. She wasn't expecting tenderness because they were in the middle of the woods, probably in the middle of a crisis too, but she didn't expect him to look guilty.

“Shifter births are hard. They're incredibly dangerous. I shouldn't have just done that.”

“Oh.” His wife. Orrin’s mother. Was that what happened? She’d gathered that something had gone wrong with the birth, but even in modern times, birth was still risky and horrible things happened. She hadn’t realized that there would be any added difficulty in a shifter pregnancy. Shifters didn’t actually start shifting until nine or ten, so she assumed it would be just like giving birth to a human child.

Nelson scrubbed a hand over his face. If he looked anguished before, now he looked destroyed. “Fuck. Loretta. Jesus Christ. I’ve never been as afraid as I am now.”

“Shh.” She grasped his shoulder and worked her other hand around the back of his neck. Behind his hair. She was starting to shake. She needed more of his heat. More of him. All of him. She wasn’t going to let him break and she wasn’t going to let him pull away. She’d thought the path to freedom lay in the opposite direction, but she’d been wrong. She should have known it even then, when she felt so sick at the thought of leaving Orrin one day.

It wasn’t just Orrin.

“I’m very aware of my cycle and I’m sure nothing will happen, but I could go to Seattle and see my doctor and get something to be sure. I can go on birth control, or we could use protection in the future. Nothing is going to happen to me. I’m not going anywhere.”

“But you’ll want a child of your own one day.”

“I...” It wasn’t right to tell him that she’d made peace with the fact that it wasn’t likely to happen for her. The truth was, she hadn’t quite put the idea to rest. She didn’t want to be unfair to her child, but having a baby at forty-three or forty-four wasn’t *that* old, was it?

It wasn't the right time to discuss this. Not when they had people waiting for them on the other side of the woods. Not now, when all their emotions were either riding high or entirely ragged.

"I could talk to Josephine, if you're worried," she finished. "She just had triplets and she had twins before that. Multiple births are high risk pregnancies in any world, but she was okay. I think she's older too. I mean, that's not polite to say, but I think she's well over forty herself, which is also considered higher risk. That has to mean something. And you and I have seen how many children are at the school. There are women here who are mothers. Maybe, at the clinic, Josephine has something set up. Or some way of reducing the risks."

"She has triplets? How did I not know that?"

"I guess it hasn't come up. She told me when we went to get coffee that day you faced the tribunal."

He almost smiled at that word. Firing squad would probably have been more accurate. "I can see now why Trace is on edge. Doubly so. He has brand new young to protect. Not one, but three. How is she still keeping the clinic going?"

"I don't know. She must have someone here looking after them during the day." Her hand tightened at the back of his neck, as if she could hold him to her forever. She could feel his uncertainty and pain. His pain was now her pain. It had been her pain for a long time. His fear was her fear. He'd been left on this earth alone, without his wife, with a newborn child. That trauma would haunt anyone. "Nelson, honestly, if it's too much—if that's our decision—for us to bear, then we don't ever have to have a child. What you feel matters to me. If having a child is only going to bring you pain and suffering, if

it's going to break you or break us apart, then I don't want that."

"I feel like I'd be depriving you of something that would be your right."

"No." She kissed him to be reassuring, but she tasted his terror in it.

"And if you change your mind and it's too late?"

"My whole life has been filled with children. I've loved every minute of being a teacher. I love Orrin very much. I know that I won't feel like I'm missing out on something if I don't have my own child. If we stay in Greenacre, there are so many children. Maybe I can get a job at the school. I kept thinking there was nothing here that I could do, but maybe I was wrong. Orrin said there was only one teacher and a teacher's assistant. That's not very many. Maybe they could use another. My days would be full of children again."

If we stay in Greenacre.

That brought them both back around to the reality of what was waiting on the other side of the woods for them. Some terrible mistake that they had to face.

She very reluctantly let go and pulled away.

They dressed quietly. Nelson brought her clothing. He gathered up the ones she'd brought him and dropped when she'd ran to him. He made sure she was wrapped in his wool plaid before he took her hand.

“Oh my god. I didn’t bring you shoes. It’s cold out here, and damp.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not half as bad as walking through the woods with a bullet inside of you.”

Her stomach flipped over. She could have lost him. She would never have known his kiss or his touch.

“I don’t know the way,” she whispered, looking up into his face, looking to him for guidance.

He was never going to let her get lost because he was here. He’d made it. He was strong and healthy now. “I can get us out.” He’d see her through the woods and she would protect him against whatever was waiting on the other side.

He’d be the first to say that he didn’t need it and didn’t want her to stand between him and danger again or ever put herself in the path of harm, but everything had changed and they were real now and that meant that neither of them were alone anymore. Not in Greenacre. Not if they had to leave.

Not out there in the world.

Chapter 11

Nelson

Truth be told, Nelson expected an angry, pitchfork and torch armed mob at the edge of the woods by their cabin, waiting to take him into some kind of custody to answer for whatever crimes he might have committed. The irony was that whatever they thought he'd done, he hadn't, and the things he had done, he'd sort of been given a pass on. It was an accounting of the one sin he hadn't committed.

There was no mob. It was just Trace and Josephine, standing together. He had his arm wrapped protectively around her waist and she leaned into him even though she had a puffer jacket on that looked warm enough to withstand the worst winter blizzard. She had a bright red toque and matching fuzzy mitts. Boots on her feet. She looked warm and at ease. Trace looked like he wanted to tear something apart and burn it down. Maybe she'd insisted that she come with him. Maybe she'd forced him to bring her so that he didn't do something stupid. She was a healer and a doctor, and maybe that also meant that she had an innate intuition when it came to fixing more than broken bodies.

She gave Trace's hand a very obvious squeeze with her mitten when they appeared at the edge of the woods. He wanted to throw himself in front of Loretta, but he resisted. She leaned into him anyway, until their arms touched. She'd followed him through the woods single file for the most part, walking in the tracks he made, but a few times he'd turned around to kiss her or just look at her.

He had to admit that he needed her. He wasn't supposed to need anyone ever again. Needing was dangerous. Needing almost killed him. His love cost a wonderful woman her life.

That's not what happened. You're not responsible. You didn't kill her. You both wanted a child. She wanted to be a mother. Orrin was the greatest gift for you both. She'd tell you that right now, if she could.

He swallowed the painful acid that burned at the back of his throat and pushed down the icy shards of dread that dug into his flesh. Eleven years. He hadn't known another person intimately for over a decade, but that wasn't why he burned for Loretta now. Out there in the woods, he'd felt every single emotion that he'd pushed away come crashing down on top of him all at once. He was alive now where he'd been dead before, and waking up *hurt*.

Trace cleared his throat after Josephine gave him a not so subtle nudge. "Nelson. I'd like it if you would come with me to speak to Sam and the others." Another prod of an elbow in his ribs. "Please."

Loretta edged up beside him. "Can he put shoes on at least?"

Trace's eyes whipped down. "Um, alright."

"Am I allowed to come with him?"

Nelson didn't know if he wanted Loretta there or not. He didn't feel like he was in danger any longer, but if there was even the slightest chance, he wanted her here, at the cabin, where she was safe. On the other hand, he wanted her with him more than he'd ever wanted anything. He wanted her at his side, because out of sight, he couldn't protect her.

She doesn't need you to be with her every minute of the day. She's sassy, she's brave, she could kick a lot of ass herself if she had to. She was stronger than he was in so many different ways. Probably every way other than physically.

“I’m sorry, but it would be better if you didn’t,” Trace said.

Instead of being offended or fighting that decision, Loretta accepted it with grace. “Josephine, I was wondering if we could talk for a few minutes? About medical things?”

Josephine smiled widely. She was the type of woman who didn’t hold a grudge, but she easily accepted his mate. He’d wronged this woman, scared her out of her mind, he’d brought trauma to her life, but she walked through life like it hadn’t ever happened. She chose forgiveness and happiness instead of anger and despair. She was a strong woman and he’d bet that her personality made her the best doctor. One who cared, but also one who saw what others just couldn’t see.

“Absolutely. Do you want to come to the clinic? I left Tavish there, but he’s going to have to go meet with Sam and the others as soon as I’m back.”

“If you’re busy, I can come by another time.”

“No. Please. Come by now. I would love to talk. Sam’s younger brother Aeron came back to Greenacre six months ago. It was perfect timing. He just finished his masters in Psychology. He wants to do that here, but I think he just needed a breather. He went hard on school for almost seven years straight. I needed a babysitter and he volunteered, even though three babies are a lot. We live on top of the clinic. If you’d like, we could pop up there. Things have been quiet today and I have cameras on the lower level, so I’ll know if anyone comes in.”

“Really?” Loretta’s excitement was a searing pain in his chest. She loved children so much. They weren’t nearly finished their conversation from earlier, but it had to wait. Not just wait. It was something that had to be developed as they grew together. He had no idea what was coming for them in the future. “That would be amazing.”

He didn’t know what was coming at him or what had happened, but he had an idea that Landon had something to do with it. He’d come to him with that very same idea and it would be easy enough for him to spread rumors and start a fire that spread out of control.

“I’m just going to get my boots,” he told Loretta. She nodded, but instead of staying, she came with him.

Inside, he shut the door after her and found his spare set of winter hikers. His feet were cold and dirty from the walk through the woods, but it was nothing more than a small discomfort. Nothing compared to the anxiety he felt about what was coming. Good and bad.

“Socks. You need socks.” He stood there frozen, and she went to his room and came back with a pair. When he took them, her hand grasped his. “It’s going to be okay. Trace looks like he’s calmed down.”

“I didn’t realize he had new young. I swear, that does something to a shifter. Men can be just as protective as mothers. When Orrin was born, and he was so tiny and helpless... I can’t describe to you what it was like for me.”

“You were dealing with a lot of other things. Trace and Josephine seem busy with the clinic. They have the twins too.”

They seem very invested in the wellbeing of the clan. It's a lot for them. Plus, babies don't sleep at night, and they're going through that times three."

"You don't have to justify it to me. I get it. Sam and Trace were friends when I was here. More like brothers."

"Yes, it seems like Sam is more than just Trace's alpha. He wanted to protect him like family. I know that he came out here because you have history and he likely feels the most responsible for you. He spared your life. He... marked you. You're connected in ways that you aren't connected with anyone else here."

He hadn't thought about it that way, but there was truth in it. His life and that of the man he'd once hated were woven through with the same kind of threads that bound all lifecycles.

"Will you be okay?" He slipped the socks on and stuffed his feet into the boots. He laced them harder than he had to.

"You mean, am I okay about everything? I'm worried for you. I feel anxious. When I said medical questions, I was going to ask about the women here and the clinic. I wasn't going to ask anything personal. Our business is our business. I don't even have to ask, if you don't want me to. It's way too soon. I should just stay here. Actually, that's what I'm going to do. Talking to her is like betraying you, in a way. I don't really have a right to do-

He cupped her face, cutting off her words. "You have every right. It's not a betrayal. It's not like you can ask a regular doctor about these things. I know nothing about what's being done here at Greenacre, medically. If you're at the clinic with her when I'm there with them, I would feel better knowing you're safe when I can't be with you." Numbing out his urge

to make sure he could keep her safe at any cost was going to be difficult.

“Nothing is going to happen to me.”

“Other people besides Trace might not be very happy if they’ve heard whatever this rumor is. I’m already on their shit and suspicion list. I don’t want anyone to confront you. I think Josephine came with Trace to ask you to go with her, but you brought it up first.”

“I don’t know that people are cruel here, Nelson.”

“You don’t deserve to have anyone accost you, even if it’s in a kinder way. You’re above suspicion. People trust and love Josephine, I think. She’s probably worked real miracles here. When I was growing up, there was one doctor and he wasn’t great. We had very limited medical supplies.”

“Do you think that you would have—”

“Healed differently? Not been so scarred with better care? I don’t know. But that doesn’t matter. What matters right now is you. And Orrin.”

“Orrin.” Her hands fluttered and she looked stricken. “Is he okay at the school? Should I go get him?”

“I think the less disruption the better. If the clan felt there was truly a risk, they would have gone to the school immediately and sent the children home. Shifter young mean everything to the clan. They’d protect them first and at all costs. I think Trace heard something and came over here immediately, without thinking.”

“I can see that. Rage blinds people sometimes. Do you think that it will be okay then? If those steps weren’t taken?”

“The kids here aren’t cruel. As a clan, the whole place survives or the whole place dies. That’s the mentality. Shifters stick together. They help one another. They love and care for one another because even if we aren’t blood, we’re all family.

“I don’t know what time it is, but I’ll make sure that if you’re not there to get Orrin after school, that I am. I’ll come back here, and we’ll wait for you. I don’t have to answer the door, and I can tell him whatever you think is best.”

“Thank you.” He couldn’t admit to how he felt because he couldn’t find the words. Sick worry. A small trickling of relief because *she* was there. He kissed her in place of trying hopelessly to say what he meant. But no, there were suddenly words. “I’m afraid that the good things are always taken away. I’ve had that fear with Orrin since he was born. I’ve known loss. It’s been proved to me that the threat is real. The universe can be cruel. Maybe it’s a law of nature.”

“No.” She was all sweetness in the face of his worst fears. “No, you’re not being punished. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“I don’t believe that, but we don’t have time to talk about it now. We will, as soon as we can. Thank you for telling me. I know how much courage it takes to talk about what we’re feeling. Putting it into words makes it so visceral.”

The pain was sharp, but he forced himself to let her go, to take her hand instead of taking all of her. He forced himself back out into the grey light of a cloudy, wind whipped winter day.

“Wait!” Loretta stopped so abruptly it jarred him. He thought she was looking at the shredded remnants of his clothing from earlier. No. She was looking at him. She unbuttoned his plaid and draped it around his shoulders. She waited until he put his arms through and helped him with the buttons even though he was perfectly capable. “I’m going to be right here when you get back. Me and Orrin. No matter what happens.” *You won’t lose me.*

Josephine broke away from Trace. Her smile was kind and reassuring. Loretta fell silently into step beside her and together, they walked past the cabin to the gravel road. He was at the right angle to watch them leave. They already appeared to be deep in conversation. Their heads inclined together. There was nothing in Loretta’s posture that seemed hesitant or wary, and certainly nothing in Josephine’s.

Nelson looked reluctantly at Trace. “I’m not asking for myself, but I am asking for Loretta and my son. If you’re going to tear me apart or bloody me, then tell me now and I’ll make alternative arrangements for them. They don’t need to see that.”

Trace kicked the ground. The path from the house had some kind of crushed rock on it. A circle spread under his toe. “I might have been a little hasty about that. No one is going to do anything to you. You’re still under Sam’s protection. He does understand why I went off like that, but he’s not pleased. Challenging you like that wasn’t right. I endangered both of us and your mate. I apologize.”

He was uncomfortable with the kindness people showed around here. A man like Trace who should hate him was standing there apologizing with the utmost sincerity. He was still physically imposing. It didn't make him appear the slightest bit weak. Listening to his mate and cooling down, seeing reason, and admitting he'd been wrong didn't make Trace a fool. It made him a man that Nelson could respect.

"I never thought Loretta would throw herself in front of me like that." Too late, he realized he'd spoken out loud.

"She's your mate," Trace said with understanding. "Small but mighty is kind of a thing around here."

"I... I'm learning that."

"I have no idea what's going on, but I hope Sam has it figured out."

"I might have some idea about how a rumor like that started. I just don't know where to go from here."

Trace studied him without animosity. He seemed to realize they were on the same side. "I hope he has that figured out too."

Chapter 12

Nelson

Simple amazement could knock a man off his feet. He'd been knocked off his balance for hours. When he walked in the door of his cabin, he was nearly bowled over for real.

Orrin threw himself at him and Nelson scooped his son up, lifting him off the ground in a tight hug. Nothing in the world was as good as this. Especially not when Loretta appeared, close behind. She hung back, chaffing her hands down her arms anxiously, but what she felt was all there in her eyes.

"I made something to eat. Are you hungry?"

He wasn't, but he knew she was worried about him. "Starved."

"We waited for you!" Orrin announced. "I helped. We made homemade pizza. It won't take that long to cook, right Lottie?"

"Just twenty minutes or so."

"Ahh. That's just enough time for me to tell you both everything that happened."

"I've already explained the basics," Loretta said. "But the very basics." Meaning, she didn't want to tell Orrin anything that would scare him. He was sorry that she'd had to do that by herself. "I'll go put the pizza in and I'll be right back."

Nelson led Orrin into the living room and they sat down on the couch together. As soon as Loretta joined them, she sat on the other side. He put his arm around Orrin and then did something he hadn't done since he was much smaller. He pulled him into his lap.

“The first thing I want to tell you is that Loretta and I have decided that we'd like to start dating. Do you understand what that means?”

Loretta paled. She never would have told Orrin anything without talking to him first. He probably should have asked her, but he knew that she'd rather have him talk to Orrin about this, as his father.

“Do you know what that means?”

Orrin nodded and he grinned instantly. He turned to Loretta. “I told you dad liked you for real.” She looked like she was going to fall off the couch.

“Oh?” He raised a brow. “You told her that?”

“I could tell. Don't be mad.”

“I'm not mad. I'm not mad at all. Maybe, when I asked Loretta to pretend to be my mate, I didn't know what I really felt myself. Sometimes we're the last ones who know. It's been hard for me, since your mom died, Orrin. When people get hurt, the natural instinct is to not let anything hurt them again. That's how I've lived. I'm not saying it was right. I am saying I want to be better. I want to make Loretta happy, and I want to be brave enough to admit that I'm happy.”

“Being happy is a good thing. You should be happy, dad. Lottie too. It’s been better ever since she started being my teacher. I’ve been happy too.”

“We’ll do our best to make sure that you’re always taken care of and that you find as much joy in this life as possible,” he promised. He wouldn’t have been able to say those words even a year ago. He could have admitted to always being there to protect his son no matter what, but joy? Joy didn’t seem possible. Maybe that’s what he always meant by telling Orrin that he wanted a better life for him than he himself had.

“You’ll always come first for us.” Loretta set her hand on Nelson’s knee and blinked back tears.

“There will be lots of change, but we’ll make sure it happens slowly,” he added. “Loretta is human, humans use the word dating for the start of a relationship. Taking a mate is different. To the rest of Greenacre, we’re mates, but we won’t be that until Loretta is ready.”

“At school, I heard Hudson say that you don’t get a choice in a mate. You just are with the right person and that’s what happens whether you like it or not. They’re your destiny.”

Nelson didn’t want that concept to terrify Loretta. She’d taken the mates thing to be more of a boyfriend girlfriend family situation, as humans understood it. He’d tried to explain to her in the woods how he felt, but he was never good at talking through emotional things.

“I think that’s maybe true as shifters understand it. When you find your mate, it’s the one that you’re meant to be with. You can be in two places in the world and still be connected to that person. You can be apart for a long time, but you’re always tied together.”

“Does that mean mine is out there, waiting for me to grow up? What if I don’t even like her? What if I want someone else? Does destiny mean that I can’t change my mind no matter what?”

“That’s a hard question. I don’t have all the answers for that. I think that a connection is real, but so is choice. You can choose to be apart. You can choose how you want to act, and those actions have consequences. But the concept of a mate is that one person who is right for you. The time might have to be right as well, but destiny says that no matter what happens to you, no matter the time, it will eventually lead you to that special person and after that, apart or together, you will always be connected.”

Orrin studied him intently, trying to understand. How could he explain to an eleven-year-old what he could barely grasp as an adult? That concept of destiny scared the shit out of him. How could someone ever feel like they’d live up to something so heavy?

Loretta also studied him closely, but she didn’t say anything.

“What happened with your meeting?” Orrin asked, changing the subject. He’d already easily accepted the idea of him and Loretta together. It seemed like everything he wanted, which made sense. He was cherished and loved by both of them. Why should they not cherish and love each other for real if they could act like they were doing it? It was probably much easier for him to grasp as a child because he didn’t understand all the complications that came with being an adult.

Maybe childish wisdom was the best wisdom.

He'd struggled with how to tell Orrin about the meeting which had set him so off-kilter. How would he tell Loretta?

"Someone spread rumors about me running for alpha. Here at Greenacre, you have an election, like you do to put people in as government officials in our country in the human system. It's a little bit different here, but people vote for who they want to lead them, and that person leads until there's another challenger, or until they want to step down. In the end, the clan as a whole gets to decide who leads them. A good alpha also cares about the people who didn't want them to get in. They don't want divisions in the clan, so they want to hear those people and address any concerns they have. That's why Sam called that meeting today, and he told me that he'd like me to make those rumors a reality and run against him for alpha."

"What?" Loretta gasped. "What are you talking about?"

Orrin seemed mystified as well, but then slowly, he grinned, warming up to the idea. "You'd be a good alpha, dad."

Hearing his son say so poured so much warmth into him that his eyes prickled. He was not going to tear up because he didn't get misty eyed, but there were his sinuses, stinging like he'd just inhaled spilled pepper. Orrin's opinion might be biased, but truly, it was the opinion that mattered the most to him.

"Sam has what I think people would call an abundance mindset." Loretta noticed his reaction and she was blinking away tears too. There was a time when he could hide anything he didn't want others to see. Now, he felt entirely transparent. That would take some getting used to.

"What does that mean?" Orrin asked.

Nelson had no idea either.

“It means that you believe that you aren’t in competition with anyone else. There are plenty of resources for everyone. You don’t have to work apart, you can work together. Even if people have different ideas about things, it’s okay because there’s the goal of betterment and goodness for everyone. I would say that to be able to value different opinions, even ones that others might see as threatening, as a good thing, you’d have to be more of an eternal optimist. That’s not a good way to explain anything. I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” Orrin said, even though he still looked a little blank.

“I think you’re right.” Nelson said. He’s not a head in the clouds dreamer. He’s a realist, but he does believe that all things and all people can come out good. I never knew how much power there was in that.”

“But you’re not going to do what he suggests, are you? You’re not going to run for leadership?”

“He wants Trace to support me as a candidate.” He’d nearly blacked out in Sam’s living room when that concept was put out there. Loretta was just as shocked. “Yeah. Having the backing of my most staunch critic would speak volumes.”

“But—but that doesn’t—why would he want that? Would Trace even be agreeable to that?”

“Sam thinks that if it’s come to this, then there needs to be a challenge. Not that he needs to prove himself, but maybe this is the only way that those members of the clan spreading

whispers can finally speak up and feel like they're being heard. He's heard them. He knows that their opinion is still a minority. But he doesn't know how to make them feel like they're valued any other way. He's given his time and attention. He's gone to speak to every clan member one on one. The majority still want Greenacre to open up and allow humans and other shifters here."

"So he wants you to put forward an opinion that's basically — I don't know what to call it other than intolerance, and that's not a good word." She glanced at Orrin with concern.

"I don't think that's really the issue. It might appear that way, but I think the shifters here who want Greenacre closed are more urging caution. They want that opening to be done much slower. I don't think they mean to kick anyone out or to say that taking a human mate is wrong. I do think that they have an issue with other shifters being allowed here, but that's a thing from history. Bears have traditionally been enemies with wolves for centuries. Having a wolf here makes some people uncomfortable. They can't look past the past."

Orrin stayed quiet and Loretta shifted, tucking her hands hard in between her knees. The quiet in the room stayed that way until she cleared her throat.

"Let me ask you again. If you're Sam's opponent, you'd have to take the other side and the opposite opinion. That means that you'd run on closing Greenacre to human mates for the time being, or operating on a much slower basis, and kicking out shifters who have found sanctuary here? I don't know anything about this. I didn't even know that there were other shifters here, wolves, or anyone else. My head feels a little bit like it's going to explode, so this is just me asking you. I'm not going to ever judge you. I'm just incredibly confused, because you don't believe that, do you?"

“I don’t believe that. Do I believe that some humans can be evil? Of course. Do I believe that they’ve hunted shifters in the past and that there is still extreme danger of us being exposed? Obviously. As far as wolves go, I haven’t met any that I’d want living in my community, but I’m open to the fact that there are many out there who don’t choose to live their lives that way. I’ve never met any other shifters besides bears and wolves. I know about the lab rescue from the spring, but I haven’t even met those shifters. Sam said they keep to themselves, and he’s given them that option and that protection. Their recovery is going to be a long one. Sam didn’t say and I didn’t ask, but I imagine that none of them are bears, or possibly only one.”

“And these people want them to leave?”

“I don’t think that’s the case. I just think they want to be cautious about who comes here in the future. Being detected has always been a fear of shifters, and Greenacre is a rare sanctuary and paradise. They’re afraid of losing that and their fear is causing them to think and act irrationally.”

“But if you’re opposing Sam, then you’d have to take that opinion as well.”

“I have no idea. Couldn’t I just say that everyone stays and that we proceed with more caution? That maybe the letting humans in goes on pause until a careful and detailed plan is set out? I’m obviously the opposite of Sam in every way. I think that the way I’ve lived would be enough to make it clear what kind of leader I would be.”

“But it doesn’t. You’d be a great leader, I know it. You do care for people. More than you’d ever show. Most people can’t even look another person in the eyes, but you do. You do every time, no matter who that person is. You see them. You’ve

suffered. You've been in pain. You've also lived apart and operated a business in the human world, which gives you a different perspective. No man could raise a child as sweet as Orrin and have a bad heart. You might think differently than Sam, you might have lived a different life, you might even operate differently, but that doesn't make you any less than he is."

"Yes it most certainly does."

"He would say it doesn't. He is saying that. He's the one who wants this to happen. He's given you his support. What does that tell you about the man he believes you to be? Would he let the leadership of this clan that he loves so much go to someone who would endanger it and ruin it if you did get voted in?"

"I—"

"Sam. The man who has taken time to listen to you. The man who understands you without you even having to say a word."

Orrin hadn't said anything. He sat so perfectly quiet, absorbing everything that was being said. Maybe he'd been mistaken in the past, not treating him like enough of a child, but he was getting older and older all the time, and hearing his dad speak frankly, as an adult, about the things that mattered most, frankly and honestly- that was important to Nelson.

"Of course he wouldn't ever hurt anyone, let alone this clan. He would die for anyone here, not for an ideal."

"So, the same man who sees that almost no one is a hero or a villain, because in real life people are just people who make mistakes, who love and have problems and triumphs—this

same man who you say is one of the wisest you've ever met— has given you his endorsement. He would do anything for his clan. He would never hurt anyone here and you just said he'd die for any of them. He's not doing this because he thinks it's a sure thing that he'll win. He's doing this because it's the right or the wrong thing. He's doing this to keep his clan together. Because he's truly a leader who leads with his heart. And because he knows that if you did win, the clan would be okay with you as alpha."

He laughed, which made Loretta scowl. "I'm sorry. Loretta. I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at me. *Me*. I would make the worst alpha. I'm selfish. I've made so many mistakes."

She and Orrin shook their heads at the same time. "And so what? That disqualifies you against caring? Against loving in the future? Against using your survival skills, your knowledge, and your business prowess? You're a smart man. You've survived. You're strong in every conceivable way. You can admit your faults and mistakes. I know that you won't believe me, but I think that you have a great depth of empathy and if there's one thing in the world that means everything, it's that. Listening. Understanding. Letting that be your primary motivation to take action. You have so much to offer here."

"I'm confused. I didn't think you wanted me to do this."

"You should do it," Orrin spoke up. And then, in the ways of an almost teenager who was half grown up and still half a child, he slid off Nelson's knee and stretched. "I think the pizza's ready. I can smell it."

"Oh my gosh!" Loretta jumped up. "I forgot to set a timer. You're right. Good thing you smelled it, or it would have been burned."

“We spent too long making the dough. I would have eaten it anyway.”

Nelson stood and put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “Thank you for helping with dinner and for taking care of things here while I was gone.”

Orrin took Loretta’s hand. “No problem, dad. But the pizza!”

After a long day, the pizza was important. It was so good to take that slightly over-cooked, homemade meal out of the oven and sit down at the table and eat. It was something a family did. Something that was so often taken for granted. He and Loretta would talk after Orrin was asleep, but right now, for Orrin, everything was good. He’d go to sleep knowing that he was protected and loved. He wasn’t going to worry about the future. No matter what it took, Nelson wanted every single day to be that way for him.

“I almost forgot. There’s a pancake breakfast at the hall as a welcome for us on Monday,” he said. “Sam wanted it on the weekend—he said they’ve done this before when new families come into the clan—but I told him that you go to the city to see your dad on the weekends and that wasn’t something we could budge on. So, Monday it is.”

“Pancakes!” Orrin loved anything dough related, especially if that dough also involved sugar of any sort. Fruit, syrup, chocolate, he was down for any of it.

Loretta shot Nelson a look from across the table. He knew she’d understood what he hadn’t said. That Sam wanted his answer before that, and he probably also wanted to make an announcement on that day or shortly after.

“What about the Christmas planning?” Loretta asked.

“I think that on Monday, Sam’s hoping we’ll meet enough people that we can get something organized on very short order.” He wasn’t sure how Christmas wouldn’t be overshadowed by something like choosing a new alpha. He could barely remember as a child how the process went, and he hadn’t been in Greenacre when a new one was elected.

“Can there be balloons for Christmas?” Orrin was pulling a string of cheese from the pizza and winding it around his finger, he looked so hopeful.

“That’s an excellent idea.”

“Maybe the kids should do the planning,” Loretta suggested seriously. “They’d give the best ideas. This is for them anyway. Maybe they should tell us what they’d like to see.”

“Another great idea. I think that most of the clan will come out for the breakfast. I’ll talk to Sam about getting them involved to start things off. We hardly have much time, but you said before that simpler was better.”

I’ll talk to Sam. Was he hearing himself? How had he gone from a hardened outsider faking his way into his old clan for his son, public distrusted enemy number one, to having their alpha’s ear as an almost friend?

Orrin pointed to the last slice of pizza in the pan. “That’s for you, dad.”

“Only if you’re both full.”

Loretta still had a full slice on her plate and Orrin had half of one left. Somehow, he had strings of cheese stuck to his cheek, his neck, his shirt, and his hair.

“We mostly made it for you,” Orrin said. “Loretta said that everything is better when it’s made from scratch with love.”

“Yes.” He took the last piece, his heart so full and changed. It hurt to feel it, but it was the right kind of hurt. “She’s right. This is the best pizza I’ve ever had.”

Chapter 13

Loretta

Lottie didn't consider herself shy, but she knew how easy it was to get overwhelmed. The first time she'd been in the hall, it seemed like a vast building from the inside with a few menacing people—minus Josephine, who hadn't been anything but welcoming. Now, the building was packed so full that it seemed to have shrunk since that first meeting.

The whole of Greencare hadn't turned out, or at least that's what Nelson told her, but it sure seemed like the entire clan was there.

She knew a few people from the school, Connor taught all the grades and Stephanie was his teacher's assistant. Lottie learned she was also Sebastian's mate and that they had four children. Stephanie introduced her earlier in the morning to her best friend, Elowen. She was Clay's mate, and Clay was the shifter who had represented the other clan, Pinefall, on that first meeting. The web of names and families were starting to knit together in her brain, even though it was very foggy all around.

She hadn't really had a chance to go and explore the main street yet, but Elowen ran the restaurant there. Near her was a vintage clothing store slash little bit of everything store that a woman named Glendy ran. Glendy had come to talk to her, and she'd pointed out her mate. She'd said that she shared her daughter with Clay, who was her ex-husband, and she and her new mate had a son together. She'd pointed out Clay's sister, Taylee. She also had two daughters and Kier was her mate. Lottie saw Tavish and his mate, a beautiful woman who she hadn't been introduced to yet, a few tables down from them. Sam sat with Lily and their boys, and at the table on the other

side of the hall, Trace and Josephine sat with their five children. Or tried. Their older twins were the kind of boys who would rather not sit still, and the triplets looked like they were heading the same way. They kept Aeron on his toes, crawling all over the place, and a few times Josephine and Trace had to go retrieve one of the boys. The older kids, as they finished eating, raced around. Some of them helped with the little ones, which was nice of them. They seemed to genuinely enjoy it.

She was so busy meeting new people as soon as they'd walked in that they'd only just sat down. Orrin wolfed his pancakes in two minutes and was off wanting to play with his friends. Of course, they let him.

“Are the- um- the shifters that were from that lab here?” She didn't know how to ask Nelson. She wasn't even sure if he'd know.

He lifted his head and looked around. The hall was pretty much deafening with the noise of conversation, laughter, and kids racing around screaming. “I don't think so. I've never seen them.”

“Okay.”

“Are you overwhelmed here?”

She toyed with a bite of pancake, scooping up extra blueberry syrup before she set it aside on her plate. “Maybe. What about you?”

“Definitely. Greenacre wasn't this big when I was still here. Or maybe it seemed that way. It's sad, but a lot of the older shifters have passed on. Lots of the kids I grew up with are

fifty years old now. Most of their fathers aren't here any longer."

Lottie noticed that the men outnumbered the women significantly. It made her think about why Greenacre opened up to take human mates. Was there an issue with the clan? Did they not have female babies? Though Glendy and Taylee had daughters so maybe that wasn't it. And what about the older children —where were their mothers? Nelson had only talked about a father and a brother. Had he not known his mom? She stored those questions away to ask him later. Maybe a lot later. Talking about it might be painful for him and he had enough stress to worry about for a lifetime. Her curiosity could wait.

"Sebastian isn't a bear, is he?" She asked in the softest whisper, leaning right in. "He doesn't look like a bear."

"No. He's a wolf. The one that a few people here are worked up about, I guess."

"He and Stephanie are sitting with Clay and Elowen. The women are good friends, but I think Clay and Sebastian are too. Just watch them for a minute."

Nelson did. "You're right." He had a stack of pancakes, like eight, covered in raspberry syrup. The best part about pancake day was that not only had everyone pitched in to make them, they'd also brought tons of homemade syrup.

"You're going to have such a stomachache after that."

"You're probably right about that too." Under the table, his hand sought hers and their fingers linked together.

A bolt of heat shot up her arm and a feeling deeper and softer and so protective landed in her belly. At the front of the hall, Orrin raced by with a group of kids. Sam's sons were finishing up breakfast and they'd joined in. Josepine's twins were over with the triplets, helping Aeron, but they looked like they had something devious on their mind. If they could involve their little brothers, then all the better.

"Josepine and Trace have their hands full. My goodness. Their twins are quite... wild."

Nelson gave her a rare grin. "I see that."

"They're all so cute though. Every single child here. This is a special place. I'm so happy that you wanted Orrin to come back here. It's perfect for him."

Nelson winced. "Until Sam makes his announcement shortly. If the other kids treat him differently after this, if anyone treats him differently—"

"You won't do anything."

"I won't, but it will break my heart."

She had to hold it together even though hearing Nelson say things like that made her heart twist in pain and in amazement. She hurt when he hurt, but that he could now express some of what he felt, or that he chose to for her and for himself, meant so much.

"I don't see the shifters that came to the farm that day. The one that you think started the rumors?"

“Landon. No, he’s not here.”

“Everyone is so happy.” The whole place was alive with good feelings and with laughter.

In the back, Connor was setting up a little station where the kids could go to tell him all their ideas for the Christmas they’d like to have, and he’d write them all down. It was getting to be crunch time. How many people would want to help Nelson with Christmas or anything at all once the bombshell was dropped on them?

After deliberating about it for days, Nelson decided to take Sam’s advice. He was going to run for alpha. He didn’t really want to and he wasn’t comfortable with it, but they trusted that Sam wouldn’t have urged him to do it if he wanted the exact opposite to happen. Reverse psychology wasn’t something he seemed very interested in dabbling around in. He was way too much of a straight shooter. Nelson very sincerely hoped he would lose, and it would be over soon. While the human system took a very long time, Nelson explained to her before the weekend that Sam would make the announcement about a clan gathering on Friday night and then a week from that time, the new alpha would be announced. Voting would happen in the morning of the following Friday and in the evening, in another clan meeting, the new alpha would be presented.

It all happens fast, but it doesn’t leave much time for Christmas.

She wasn’t sure which Nelson was more worried about now. While he hoped that he wouldn’t have to have anything to do with taking on the alpha position, he didn’t want to fail anyone when it came to Christmas. He’d been so against the

idea at first, but slowly, he was embracing it. Maybe because Orrin was growing more and more excited about it.

“Are you happy?”

She started. She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't eaten a single bite. Nelson's pancakes had somehow vanished. “Oh. I- I'm just tense about this announcement and what's going to follow.”

“Me too.”

“And about my dad.”

She and Nelson hadn't taken any steps to rush their relationship. They'd told Orrin and he was happy, and that was the one thing she'd been worried about. She was still sleeping on the couch. Her things were packed neatly in the one suitcase she'd brought with her. At the farm she had a dresser and her own space, but so far, the couch was alright. After putting her back out Nelson had once again insisted she have the bed, but she stuck to her guns. He needed it more than her. Since the afternoon in the woods, they'd kissed and touched and he'd given her massages, but they hadn't spent a night together. She didn't want to just move into his bedroom. She wasn't sure either of them were ready for that.

She did think about it, though. Some nights the couch was horrible, and it wasn't about her back.

“You haven't told him.”

“No, I didn't tell him on the weekend. There's very limited information I can give him. I know that if I said we

were dating, he'd be concerned, because you're my boss and he'd worry that it would complicate things. He'd also want to meet you and wouldn't be satisfied until he did. Maybe I'll tell him right before Christmas and we can all go together."

She always thought Nelson was beautiful, but when he looked at her like she'd just given him the world, she was so moved. Most people didn't want to do the meeting the parents thing.

"I would be so honored to meet your father. Orrin has hardly been to the city, but I know how much he'd enjoy it. I think your dad would love him."

"Oh, he would be so thrilled to meet Orrin. He's heard so much about him."

"He'd be more cautiously not so thrilled to meet me," he said flatly, but with a hint of his signature sarcasm that was less biting and more playful with every passing day.

"No, darling." She tried out that word. A word she'd never used on anyone. He didn't keel over. Instead, he let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, chair and all. "He'd be thrilled to meet you because he trusts my judgement. I may have dropped a few hints already."

"Did you tell him that I look like I was thrown through a plate glass window? Or that I fell face first into a paper shredder?"

"God! No!"

“Tell him it was a car accident then. It’s probably the most believable thing.” He studied her pancakes. “Are you going to eat those?”

She sliced off a huge bite and held out the fork to him. He leaned forward and ate it. “Mmm. That syrup is good. I should have picked that one.”

“I can’t believe you like pancakes. You never eat them when I make them.”

“I’m trying to not hold myself to such a rigid asshole standard anymore.”

He was just finished saying so when Sam stood up. The room immediately hushed, and even the kids stopped running. It was just something about the way he stood there, with such intent, that brought the room to a halt. Even the triplets froze. It was kind of hilarious given that Aeron’s shirt was in the process of being torn half to shreds as toddlers piled on top of him in a sitting position on the floor.

“Thank you all for coming.” Sam’s big voice boomed through the room. And then, when everyone still remained frozen, he dropped the bombshell about the clan meeting on Friday night. He mentioned the woods and that it would take place at midnight, and whoever couldn’t make it would be briefed about the goings on of the meeting.

He was so calm that after he was done, people actually all visibly relaxed. He sat down beside Lily and didn’t look the least bit concerned about what was coming, and whatever the outcome, it was going to be stressful for all of them. He either didn’t feel that negative emotion churning inside of him or he was just really good at projecting confidence. When he looked at Lily, she took his hand and he beamed at her. As a result,

only a few confused looks were shared around the room. The kids gradually went back to yelling, screaming, and chasing each other, and they received very few of the accusatory looks Lottie was expecting.

When Sam pushed to his feet again, the room again went dead quiet. Lottie held her breath. Beside her, it didn't seem like Nelson was breathing either.

“I'm sorry, I forgot to add that you all know that we're going to be doing something for Christmas this year. It's coming fast and we still haven't really decided what that's going to be. I'm going to be opening up all the hall all this week, every evening, if anyone would like to make decorations or come up with ideas. It's three weeks to Christmas and that means the countdown is on. However it happens here, it happens. It will be a unique Greenacre tradition. I'm so proud of everyone and the spirit of this community. That's what truly matters.”

He sat back down.

“Did you come up with that idea?” Lottie whispered. Nelson hadn't mentioned anything.

“I did tell Sam I didn't feel up to doing this alone. With what else is coming, he agreed. It's better if the whole community pitches in. I suggested that if there could be a meeting place where decisions could be made, people could get involved, decorations created, and fun to be had, the process getting there might be more important than the entirety of the actual day.”

“That's very creative.”

Nelson's cheeks actually got a little pink. She was wrong. He could get more gorgeous. He just had. He looked absolutely edible in that black Henley and jeans. It seemed that most of the other men in Greenacre wore the same style of outfit. Long sleeved shirts, work jeans, and work style boots. Nelson matched them without even trying.

The room went back to the same level of cheerful conversation as before, or nearly the same. It gave her hope that maybe everything would work out. Maybe she wouldn't spend the week dealing with crippling anxiety about this coming Friday and the Friday after that. Sam would ensure they didn't have to leave Greenacre—he'd made that clear when he'd spoken with Nelson again the week before—and that above all, all three of them would be treated with respect throughout the entire proceedings and afterwards, but still. They were all so new here and she was worried for Nelson and Orrin, as in the short while they'd been in the town, she could see how good it was for the both of them to be back among their own people.

She just really, really hoped it would all be okay in the end.

If Nelson was thinking the same thing, he didn't show it. She envied his stoicism sometimes.

“Are you for sure not going to eat those?”

“Goodness. You'll have to spend all day cutting wood to burn that off.” It felt good to talk about something else. To laugh, even just a little.

He snatched her plate closer to himself and picked up her fork, but then he leaned in even closer to her. His breath

sent a shiver racing up her spine. “As soon as the kids go off to school, I’ll show you a better way to work off ten pancakes.”

They’d had the event in the morning, but school would be back in after lunch for the kids, since it was Monday.

She turned into him to hide her flaming face. He better not bug her about her blushes either. “Technically that would be closer to eleven,” she whispered back.

It was seriously thrilling to act like teenagers, especially when she’d never done that before, not even when she was one. Because she’d spent a lifetime never finding anyone, a lifetime committed to her work, a life that she saw as being fulfilled by her work and her love for her family, and whatever hobbies she chose to have, it was extra exciting and that much more precious to realize that she’d been given the rarest of gifts now, after she’d pretty much given up on any of those things happening.

“In that case...” Nelson’s tongue lapped at her earlobe, but no one could see because her hair was in the way. “I’ll make the appropriate adjustments.”

Chapter 14

Nelson

He hadn't meant to wake anyone, but after sitting alone in the bathroom in the middle of the night, Loretta knocked quietly on the door.

"Nelson? Are you okay? Are you sick?"

Would it be cowardly of him to admit that being sick and not having to go to the clan meeting the next day would have been a relief?

Not that it would change the outcome. Even if he wasn't there, Sam would still go ahead and announce that there was going to be a challenge and a vote.

"Is the door locked? Do you need help?"

This was mortifying. Beyond it, in every way.

He stood up, shaking off the numbness in his legs and opened the door, which he hadn't locked. He'd been sitting in there, silently, for probably an hour.

Loretta looked beautiful in her plain purple t-shirt and fuzzy purple pajama pants. She'd clearly been awake for a while because she wasn't blinking sleep out of her eyes. They looked very focused, very green, and exceptionally worried.

“Hey.” She stepped in and brushed his arm with her hand. “I’m sorry, I’m not trying to be nosy, but you’ve been in here for over an hour, and I was worried. That sounds ridiculous. You can obviously look after yourself. I just don’t want you to have to do this alone. I mean, tomorrow.” She sighed, frustrated with herself. “Are you having bad anxiety about it?”

That would be one way to phrase it and it annoyed him to no end when he woke up in the middle of the night, caught in twisted sheets, drenched in a cold sweat, his stomach in his throat and a crater in his abdomen. He didn’t get sick. Ever. But as soon as he woke up, he felt that nasty shivery sensation that tightened his airway and he was sure he was going to be ill right there in the bedroom. He’d sat on the bathroom floor and tried to breathe through it and tried to talk himself down.

“It’s not logical because I agreed to this. It had to be done. That’s what I decided. Sam knew that and I came around to knowing it. This won’t divide the clan. I think it’s the one thing that can actually unite it, otherwise the bad feelings will just fester and go unattended, no matter what Sam does. We’ve spent all week at the hall, making decorations with the kids. Kier and Taylee went to the city and got lights, Sebastain and Clay and Elowen and Steph helped the kids put them up on all the trees lining main street, Sam and Lily helped make those wooden cutouts that everyone painted.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “It’s been a great week. Orrin is so worn out from school and all the fun after. There has been more laughter in my life, more joy, more community than I ever thought possible. We’ve been welcomed and we’ve been accepted. We’ve become a part of this place already. Is that all going to change tomorrow?”

He wasn’t wearing a shirt. He realized now that he was standing there only in his boxers. Loretta’s hand smoothed up his arm soothingly and stopped at his shoulder. Her fingertips brushed over the puckered flesh of the bullet wound. He’d

healed fast after the antibiotics from the hospital, but of course there would be a scar.

“Do you want me to sit in here with you, or would you like me to make you some tea in the living room?”

“Tea? I’ve never had tea in my life.” Before he would have scoffed and he wouldn’t have been gentle. He would have been a mega-asshole. Now, it was just a whisper.

“Mint tea helps.”

“People would laugh at me if they could see me now.”

“Oh really? What people? You don’t always have to be tough as nails and hard as steel. There’s nothing wrong in admitting sometimes that you’re worried.” She leaned against the bathroom door looking at him. “We can sit in here and just talk too. Or just sit if you don’t want to talk. There’s no right way to deal with this.”

He didn’t want her to have to sit on the floor with him. He couldn’t imagine anything so mortifying. But, at the same time, thinking of Loretta leaning in close, putting her head on his shoulder, and silently lending him her strength for as long as he needed it, hit him hard, like slipping into a hot shower after hours out in the pouring rain on a frigid night.

Yes, he loved warm showers. He liked slipping into a fresh set of sheets at the end of the night, or that first sip of good coffee when he woke up exhausted. Those things didn’t make him less of a tough guy. It just made him human. Even animals needed shelter and warmth.

Loretta took his hand and his racing thoughts smoothed themselves out. “I’ll try the tea then, if you’re going to have some too.”

“I would love some.”

She led him out of the bathroom, to the living room. The couch was made up with her bed, and when she scrambled to move the pillows and blankets, he felt like even more of an asshat. She made him sit, wrapped a plaid blanket around him, and then she dug in her backpack and got out a pair of pink wireless headphones. She passed them over.

“Here. I’ll put on some music, something relaxing. You sit and listen to it, and I’ll make tea.”

“I’m not putting those on.”

“Okay. It was just an idea.” She slipped them back into her backpack. She kept her luggage and her things behind the couch. Jesus, behind the couch. She didn’t have a room here and she didn’t care at all. She was so happy with just the smallest, simplest things. She wasn’t going to move into his bedroom. Not yet. He understood. He’d been afraid of that next step.

But right now he couldn’t imagine anything he wanted more than to take her to his bed and hold her next to him for the rest of the night. His heart didn’t fire off shivers of protest and his brain didn’t strain to remember the ache of the past. His hackles didn’t go up in immediate fear of what getting close to another soul could do to his own. He didn’t immediately head into thinking about obliteration.

Loving someone meant always going to that place of fear. He knew that with Orrin. There was always that edge of sharp fear that came with knowing that life wasn't forever, and that people could be taken away. It made him half crazy sometimes and pricked up all his wildly protective instincts.

Tonight, it was ironic that in the face of having a near panic attack, he was so calm about what he'd been most afraid of with Loretta. He knew he was going to move forward eventually. He just had to be ready.

He tried to push off the blanket, but she knelt in front of him and smoothed the edges over his lap. "I'm messing your bed," he protested without meeting her gaze. "I'm wrecking your sleep. It's the middle of the night. You don't need to do this, I should just go back to my room and try and sleep."

"A bed can be remade and I can easily catch up on sleep." She kissed his forehead. "Tomorrow is going to be a hard day. It's normal to have mixed emotions about it. That doesn't mean it's comfortable. But anyone would be nervous about this. I bet that Sam doesn't feel great about it either. He might appear that he does on the surface, but he probably has a lot going on in his head that he would never talk about. I'm sure that he's had many sleepless nights about problems in the clan, or about people here. He's at the head of all of this. He's taken everyone on his shoulders."

"Christ." Nelson threw his head back against the couch cushions. "If I get voted in, I'm going to- it's going to kill me. I could never take that on." He opened his eyes with sudden inspiration. "If they vote me in, can't I just turn it back over to Sam? Can't I refuse the position?"

Loretta's lips pursed. "You know I know nothing about this. But- I mean, doesn't an alpha usually have a beta? Like a

second in command? In the human world, obviously it's done like that all the time. I don't know about shifters."

He exploded off the couch so quickly that he nearly knocked Loretta over. He caught her around the waist and pulled her to him in one swift, instinctive move. "I'm sorry," he breathed against her hair. "I just had an idea and I need to go now."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and cupped the back of his neck with her hand. He had no idea if she knew what an alpha gesture that was in itself. With that touch, she made him feel like he was hers, like she was choosing him and claiming him. Like she was never going to let go. Other men might find it disconcerting, but he found it reassuring.

"Go where, darling?"

He even loved it when she called him that. It was only the second time and it should have been silly used on a man like him, but it sunk into his bones and made the back of his throat ache. "I need to go to Sam's house."

"But it's the middle of the night."

"You were probably right. He's probably awake."

"You could go in the morning."

"I can't. I need to talk to him now. Before he makes a big mistake. People heard those rumors about me, they expect him to announce what he's going to announce tonight. By some miracle, they've treated me without hate or malice, but I don't want this. Sam was wrong. He was wrong that this is the only

way to have people feel like they're being heard. You just gave me the best alternate solution without even realizing it."

She blanked for a second, but then she understood. "A beta."

"Yes. We've never had one in Greenacre that I know of. I'm not even sure what that means in terms of our world or our politics, but I know what it means to the rest of the world. It means a second. A part of an equation. Here it could mean a balance. Two parts of a whole picture. Competing ideas and good solutions. Everyone being heard. We are two very different men, but if we worked together, it could actually be a great thing for Greenacre."

"If you wait a few hours, I could go with you. We'll get Orrin off to school and—"

"I feel like I have to go now."

"But the clan meeting isn't until midnight, you have all tomorrow to speak to him. There's time."

"I know. It's just... a feeling. I have to do this *right now*."

"Okay." She didn't understand, but she was going to support him with the same fierce determination she always did. She stood on her toes and brushed her lips against his. "As long as you think it's safe, going out at night like this."

"I'll be okay."

"You'll wear a coat? It's cold out."

“Yes.”

“I washed your plaid for you. The top button was gone, so I sewed another one on. I hope that’s okay.”

His soul burned. A button shouldn’t matter so much, but she saw all of the things that needed mending in his life. She fixed them effortlessly. His shirt. His place in his clan. His heart. His mind. She saw what he hadn’t even seen in himself. She didn’t see a broken, scarred man who was as mean as he could possibly be. She saw the pure pain under that, but also the potential he’d forgotten he even had.

“It’s not okay. I’m sorry. I should have asked. I shouldn’t touch your things and—”

He kissed that doubt away from her. His mouth claimed hers and the room erupted into a wild current of energy. It flowed through them. The world spun, but it ended up in the perfect position. He was right where he needed to be. A wild fury of emotion stampeded through him, nearly flattening him, but he stayed strong. He stood strong because Loretta was there. She was there in his arms, kissing him back. His heart thrashed furiously against his ribs, giving them a beating of a lifetime. He’d been so proud that he was self-sufficient. That he was a man who didn’t need anything other than his farmhouse and his space and the life he was carving out for Orrin. He needed only that. Nothing else. Nothing more. He’d been so sure and so proud of that and it had all been so wrong. All of that went up in smoke the second he’d first kissed Loretta, and now it was a different burn. He was slowly transforming into a different person, not just because of her and not just for her, but because he was always meant to be that man.

For himself. For his son. For his clan. It was important that he knew how to stand on his own before he could offer to stand

for her. He needed to relearn what it was to be strong so he could offer her that strength. She was his helpmate and she'd opened his eyes, but he had to make those changes for himself. She'd accepted him exactly as he was, but that wasn't the best man he could be.

He was alarmed to see tears on her cheeks when she pulled back. "It sounds so wrong to say that I'm so proud of you. That makes it seem like there's conditions on my feelings, but there isn't. I'm so amazed that in such a short time you have so much feeling for your clan. It brings me joy to see you smiling and laughing with other people. It means a lot to me that you respect Sam. You wanted all of this for Orrin—friends and happiness, a sense of belonging, a clan, a place in the world, but you're finding it for yourself as well and it's so remarkable and beautiful. It makes my heart so happy."

You make my heart happy.

He kissed her tears, kissed her cheeks, her forehead, her lips. "I told you before that I'd given up on living," he whispered against them. "You don't know how true it is."

"Even with all the ghosts inside of you, there's room for me there too."

He thought his heart was beating hard before. He had no idea. He was so used to it beating in anguish that it felt like pure agony for it to pulse with so much joy. Another great irony.

Grief was a wounded animal and once it was inside of a person, it never left. It lashed out, used its claws, ripped a person to shreds. When they wanted it gone, gone, gone, it stayed, stayed, stayed. It was enough to drive anyone to the brink of losing themselves. He'd been there. The grief was real and it would always be real, but he hadn't understood that

light and happiness could still abide beside grief. They could thrive and they could grow.

“You know that question?” She didn’t ask him like she was afraid, but she was careful. She would never intentionally wound him. “The question everyone asks about knowing if happiness would end in despair, would you still do it? I know your answer. It’s yes. Every day you live is a yes. It’s the bravest thing I’ve ever known.”

His heart was in his throat now. It was like she was inside of him, seeing into his mind. She was instinctual in everything she did. It made his lungs impossibly tight.

She drew away, but it was forced. She still took his hand, not able to bring herself to let him go completely. “I’ll be here when you get back.” It’s what she’d promised him before. “I’m obviously not going to sleep now. I’m not worried, because I know that everything will be okay. It’s just impossible to sleep when I’m going to be thinking about you every single minute.”

My heart is with you too.

Her finger found the pulse point in his wrist and she let it linger there. He was astounded that something so small could be so intimate. He was still all anxiety, a bristling tension. He didn’t want to leave, but he had to go out there. He had to do this when he wanted to stay here more than anything. He felt like he was being torn in half.

“It’s okay.” Loretta kissed his cheek so sweetly. “Come with me. We’ll find you something to wear.”

He felt as helpless as a child as she led him to his room. She paused at the doorway, like the space was sacred. She saw the twisted sheets immediately. Over an hour later and they were probably still soaked. The bed was a wreck.

“Here.” She’d brought him clothing before. She knew where to find a clean shirt now. Jeans. Socks.

While he pulled them on, she stripped the bed.

“I know exactly where the fresh sheets are. I was the one who unpacked them and put them in the closet in the hallway. You’ll have a fresh bed when you get back.”

He couldn’t stop himself from following her into the hallway. She opened the washer’s lid and dumped the sheets in. She didn’t turn it on, since it would be too loud going while Orrin was sound asleep just down the hall.

She turned and he made sure it was right into his arms. His hands traced her hips and stayed on her waist. “I want you in my bed when I get back.”

“O-oh.” A sweet inhale and a soft gasp. Her eyes were huge.

“It’s what I want, but only if you’re ready. If not, then my want can stay a want for however long it takes you to feel comfortable with that.”

“It’s not that.” Her lashes fluttered madly. “I just don’t think either of us will be able to sleep after you get back.”

“Awake, asleep, it doesn’t matter. I want you by my side, always.”

She traced the scars on his cheek reverently, a caress that saw his suffering, his pain, and transformed it into raw beauty. She touched his lips and then let her hand rest against his chest. Her expression was entirely protective and even though that was his job, it made him feel so safe again. He had no idea he needed that. No idea it was missing in his life.

“Yes. Yes, that’s what I want.”

He kissed her soundly. “In that case, I’ll make sure I give the bullet point version to Sam so that our conversation is short, and I can get back here.”

She smothered a laugh by leaning against his shoulder. “Don’t do that. Take the time that you need. This is so important. Are you still nervous?”

“I am. If it’s this bad now, I still might throw up tomorrow, even if Sam accepts my idea.”

“Try the tea. It works miracles.”

She worked miracles. *She* was his miracle. He still nodded. He’d drink any tea, listen to anything she put on those damn pink headphones. He’d do anything she wanted. He’d let her take care of him. *Of him*. He still struggled against the idea of it, but honestly? Nothing had ever seemed so sacred as trusting another person enough that he could finally allow himself that vulnerability.

Chapter 15

Loretta

A meeting in the woods at midnight sounded rather ominous, but the reality was a lot less scary. When Lottie, Nelson, and Orrin arrived at the gathering, it wasn't spooky at all. The meeting place was deep in the woods. They'd worn warm clothing and sturdy boots, Nelson led, but he made sure that he didn't set a hard pace for the almost hour-long walk ahead of them.

At first, the shadowy figures could have been mistaken for trees, but then she saw people nod and smile at them. They were grouped, for the most part, in their family units. Shifters who didn't have mates or children helped with the ones who did, or stood off in their own clusters.

She wasn't surprised by the number of people any longer. In the open air, the gathered crowd didn't seem as foreboding as it had in the hall, even though she knew there were more people present.

There were far fewer children, but some of the older ones had been allowed to come. She noticed that Josephine wasn't there, and neither were her and Trace's five children. Lily stood beside Sam, her youngest in a sling on her back, the other boys grouped in front of them.

A subdued quiet clung to the woods. It didn't feel unnatural, but maybe it was a little mysterious in that way that special events are.

Nelson put his hands on Orrin's shoulders, and Orrin remained absolutely quiet as they walked towards the center of the clearing where an enormous bonfire had been prepared.

She'd been almost as anxious about this as Nelson was—though he'd seemed notably less so after his conversation with Sam. As she huddled against him, their arms touching, Orrin in front, a brand-new sense of calm crept through her like a stealthy fog, but instead of blinding her, she felt like she could see with new clarity.

People continued to trickle in. She had no idea what time it was. No one spoke loudly and there were no children rushing around laughing. Everyone was stoic and suspended. It was kind of like walking into a sort of holy place. One conducted oneself with dignity. It wasn't nearly like that, but there was a sense of awe that hung in the air and Lottie thought that everyone could feel it.

Magic. Not awe.

This felt more like magic.

It felt like the impossible.

The impossible was that she was here right now in any capacity. She was beyond humbled and honored that she was allowed to attend.

At midnight, or just after, Sam stepped forward. The entire place tensed as he walked to the tangle of branches. He had a torch in hand and when he was close to the prepared heap, he lit it and walked around touching it to the branches. He was patient and soon the small flickering of infant flames turned into a bright roar that gave off plenty of heat.

Everyone stood back a safe distance, but a neat, tight circle formed around that center, big enough to include everyone there.

“I’m so proud to call you all members of my clan,” Sam said, stepping back into the light where everyone could see him. He was so close to the fire, but he didn’t appear afraid. The orange flames reflected on his face and transformed him into a surreal being. “I’m proud that Greenacre is strong and that we can gather like this. That we have the freedom to be shifters.”

There wasn’t a sound in the gathering, despite the large number of people. Lottie couldn’t even count them all. There must have been at least fifty people there, or was it more? They still stood in family units their faces illuminated by the flames. She could feel the heat of the fire on her own face, but it wasn’t too much. Nelson’s hands flexed on Orrin’s shoulders and then relaxed. Orrin was still so still and transfixed by the whole proceeding.

Sam went on, speaking in his deep voice into the flame lit night. “We’ve always been what people like to call a democracy, but I’ve never wanted that to mean that the majority rules and the rest of the clan goes unhappy and feels that they’re unheard.”

There was a slight, restless shifting at that. Lottie looked around, but she didn’t see the shifters who had come to the farm. Had they just come to cause trouble, created a rumor, and left it at that? They could have cost Nelson his life that day Trace came to the cabin in a rage. Did they even realize or care? It seemed so cowardly of them that she hadn’t seen them since that day.

“I *have* heard you. Your opinions do matter.” Sam paused to let that sink in. “I just don’t know how to change our

laws myself. They're sacred. I can't apologize for upholding a system that has always worked for our clan. A system our ancestors set in place after coming here, fleeing persecution in Scotland. This land was their sanctuary. It meant freedom to live as shifters without being hunted and killed. Our great grandfathers and our great-great grandfathers said that every person mattered and that's something I still hold with today. I have dedicated my life in service to this clan, which means to every single person here. It makes me feel broken that there are divisions like this forming. I don't want our clan to break apart and I don't want anyone to leave."

Another ripple spread through the crowd, not really audible. More like a breath. A few stifled whispers.

"I have heard you. I'm still hearing you. Your thoughts and fears and concerns and cares do matter to me, more than you know."

Sam's eyes found them in the crowd and Lottie felt the moment Nelson became aware of that direct gaze. He inhaled deeply beside her, like he was shoring up oxygen for what was coming because he might not take a breath during any of it. She inhaled too, steadying herself. She set her hand on the small of Nelson's back, but she was tucked so tight to his side already that most people probably wouldn't see it.

"You've all heard the rumors, I'm sure, that Nelson was going to run for alpha. He was never going to, it was just talk. But the truth is, I would have welcomed the challenge."

No one made a sound at that, but anxious looks were shared between more than one couple there. There were frowns of confusion between the rest, including the younger shifters and older shifters who were standing alone, but still part of the community. They stood elbow to elbow and the

way their faces tilted to take in what the other was thinking caused a wave to pass through the circle.

“I thought that this was what our clan needed to heal the divide that’s formed between us. I asked Nelson myself if this was something he would consider and after explaining my reasons, he told me that he didn’t want to do it. He doesn’t want to be alpha of this clan.” That caused another shift in the circle. More heated looks. More confusion. Worries and frowns.

For his part, Nelson remained unmoving beside her. Lottie barely even heard him breathe. Orrin was just as still. She’d seen how he’d barely slept the past two nights. Even after talking to Sam, they’d lain awake together in his room for most of the night. They didn’t spend hours talking. It was the opposite. They just held each other in the dark and their closeness meant everything.

Sam waited for a moment and then continued. “Nelson did come up with a solution instead, that I think will truly benefit this clan. We haven’t had a beta here in years. I don’t know why the position died away, but it’s more than just having someone there as second. It’s about sharing leadership and taking on the protection of this clan.”

A whisper echoed in the night. The word, beta could be heard clearly, but Lottie didn’t know where it had come from.

“I don’t know how to heal this divide, when the majority of the clan already voted to open up and allow human mates. We know that there really isn’t an alternative for us, because there are so few female shifters left and almost none at all born here in Greenacre. Pinefall doesn’t seem to have that issue as a clan, but they’re a solid clan unit and we made this decision before they bought the land beside ours. They

haven't wished to take mates outside their clan for the most part, and I respect that. I respect every person, shifter or human, and I believe that there are many humans out there who have wonderful hearts. You know just a few of them because they are mates here now. They are mothers to our young, they work with us, live with us, heal us, care for us, and love this clan like their own because it is their own now. As for other shifters living with us, I've offered my protection and given them sanctuary and that is my decision as alpha and not a majority vote. I feel that this is the right thing to do, and it poses no harm to our clan. Hearts are hearts, whatever body they beat in, and hearts can be healed. I believe this is the place to do that, in love and safety. As alpha, I would never ask people I have given sanctuary and my word to leave here. I know this has caused some doubt and unhappiness here, and in the future, we could open up new additions like this to a majority vote if it's necessary." He stopped pacing and his gaze passed from person to person.

Lottie had only met Sam a handful of times, he's been warm and welcoming, but now she was seeing him as the leader of his people. There was a quiet power to him that had the assembled crowd transfixed.

He started pacing again, "I find that fear is often based on prejudice and the actions of many or a few throughout history. You might think I'm not cautious enough, but I have weighed every single decision I have ever made for this clan with so much care. I've lived here my whole life, and I am proud to call Greenacre home. I would never want to endanger or destroy my own clan. I would rather die. If there is anyone here who would like to challenge at any time for alpha, you know that I would fully support that. It's the way a clan grows and matures. I know I won't lead forever, and I have tried hard to be a good leader and always put the clan before myself. It's a challenging job and with Greenacre growing and changing, I think that we do need growth and change in our leadership."

Sam could stand in front of the whole clan and give a speech like that. In any other man, Lottie would have found some of it hard to believe. She had always thought that most leaders were a little bit vain and that the power went to their head, but not Sam. Every word was so genuine. When he spoke, it was with such soft authority that he drew everyone in. She found herself wanting to listen, wanting so badly to know what was going to come next. A natural born storyteller. That's what Sam was. But he was also a natural born leader. She'd only been in Greenacre for a very short time and already, she couldn't imagine anyone else leading this clan.

Sam looked around at all those gathered and smiled as he did so. He was already the kind of man that people could trust with their lives, but when he smiled, he appeared even more open and humble. "That's why I'm putting forward the idea that Nelson proposed. The reinstatement of the beta position. This work has always been a lot for one person and I've truly done the best I could, but I think we could be even better as a clan with another to stand at the helm and help share the load. That means sharing guidance, solving disputes, helping protect our land, our people, and our way of life. It means always putting Greenacre before the self. It means that we would have two sets of ears to try and solve these issues. Two minds to try and come up with solutions. And like I said, a different perspective, which is so valuable. I want the clan to vote on this and that's why I've called this meeting. Nelson might be new here, but he was born in Greenacre and he knows our ways. I know that some of you have had some doubts about his returning, and that's why I've asked Trace to put his name forward as beta."

If anything, that caused the greatest stir. The whispering and muttering started, a jumble all at once. The branches in the fire also popped right at that moment, as if highlighting the shift that went through the circle.

Trace stepped forward immediately. He'd been standing beside Tavish and Kier, who were also there alone, without their mates and young children. He didn't hesitate and that reverberated through the clearing like a yell and went on echoing, the shockwaves vibrating through the quiet night.

He didn't appear nervous in the least. He didn't have the same bearing as Sam, the same easiness, but that didn't translate into anxiety, at least not anything that appeared on the surface. He started speaking, staring into the flames.

“You all know what happened between me and Nelson in the past. I lived separately from most of you for years. I thought that pushing myself to the outskirts of the clan would help me control whatever monster lived inside of me. I thought for years that I was dangerous. I wouldn't listen to anything my family or my friends told me. I thought I was my father, that whatever was inside of him that drove him to do horrible things and act with violence was always going to be inside of me, and what I'd done to Nelson was proof of that. Those of us who grew up together would have called Nelson a bully before it happened. Some would have said he was troubled. It's not easy being a teenager, especially not a shifter teenager. He had far more control of his bear than I had and the fight that developed was proof of that. I had zero control. I refused to let anyone tell me that fights do happen and that it's part of being a young, inexperienced shifter. Nelson and his family left, and I let the guilt consume me. I'd nearly killed another clan member. I marked him and set a course for his life that would be forever changed.

“Meeting Josephine changed me. Having my own young changed my mind. You all know what happened five years ago. I never made things right with him and as a result of that fight, we let our whole lives be consumed with feelings of guilt and the desire for revenge. Both of us were living half lives, living in a sort of hell. He gave me his word five years ago that he would never raise a hand against me again. That's

our law and I believe his oath is sacred. I believe that one event can change a life the same way it altered the course of an entire one. It can change a person. Nelson has his own son. His own family. I know that he wants what's best for them all and that's why he came back to Greenacre. He wasn't able to be raised in his own clan. He wasn't able to call this place home. He still bears the scars that I put on him nearly forty years ago.

“Was I wary when he came back here? Yes. Because of our history, I chose to believe the worst. But I can see that change is real. It's real for him like it became real for me. Having children truly changes a man. That love isn't like anything else. But being loved by a mate will also work real miracles. I know it's soon, but I trust Sam's wisdom in this. I trust that having a person so different from our alpha would only be a good thing for Greenacre. I thought, when I heard the rumors, that Nelson had come back here to subvert this place and tear it apart as another form of revenge, but I was wrong. What I did when we were young was an accident. A horrible, terrible accident. But now? I'm a grown man and I'm choosing to believe in forgiveness and redemption. I've had other people believe it and extend it to me. They put their faith in me when I had no faith in myself. Nelson has made mistakes, as we all have, but he came back home to this clan because this is where his heart belongs. It's where all Greenacre shifters belong and it will always be their home. He's raised a wonderful son and he's chosen a mate who is wise and kind. There may be doubts because Nelson is so new here. I know Sam has more to say about the proposed beta position.”

Sam nodded, taking over again. “The position would be on a trial, which I think is only right, mostly so we can adjust and make changes to something no one can remember being done here before. It's not putting Nelson on trial. Just the position itself.”

“What if we don't want the position at all?”

The crowd cleared and at last, Lottie recognized the younger man who had come to the farm. One of them, at least. He was alone now, but he didn't need an entourage. He wasn't hiding now. He voiced that opinion loudly.

In response, Sam didn't seem to mind at all that he was being openly challenged by a member of his own clan who had gone to Nelson to subvert him, started rumors, and threatened to tear the clan apart. "I'm open to that. I want the clan to vote, and you don't have to be afraid to vote with your heart. I'll never be angry that an idea I had didn't work out. Being alpha means doing what's best for the clan. I can't say that enough. I hope that my time as a leader proves that I will always put Greenacre first."

That hardly seemed to satisfy the man. "What if we want the position, but we want to elect someone else?"

What was his name? Lottie searched her mind for it, but it just wouldn't come. She wanted a name. She wanted a name to stick to the face of someone who had caused so much trouble. She'd never been prone to thoughts of violence, but this man who acted like a cowardly, petulant child could have hurt Nelson irrevocably and that made a brand new, unknown emotion spark inside of her. It was sadness and rage, fear and helplessness, relief that it hadn't happened that way, all rolled into one.

"I could open it up like a challenge for alpha. If anyone wants to put their names forward for the position, we could add that candidate," Sam said.

"Maybe we should vote on the position first and then, after Christmas, if the vote passes, then we could put forward candidates," Trace suggested.

Sam's face brightened. Was this what a clan meeting did? It seemed like Sam felt like it was successful. He didn't mind his ideas being changed. "That's an excellent suggestion."

"It's the only thing that makes sense." The man snapped.

"I always listen to the clan's concerns, Landon." Sam answered.

Landon. Yes. That's his name.

Sam addressed the group again, "I'm not sure it's the only path, but it's something that could work for us as it did for our ancestors. Is anyone opposed if we hold the vote to decide on the position next Friday at midnight and then, after Christmas, in the new year, elect a beta if the clan wants that position installed?"

Silence.

"Alright. We will hold the vote next Friday, out here at midnight."

Lottie imagined that the town hall would be filled with ballot boxes, but it didn't seem like that's the way things were done in Greenacre. The primal rawness of standing around a fire with most of the clan gathered made things very real and that much more emotional. She had that surreal feeling again, as if time was slowed down and there was nothing beyond the woods but them, here and now, in this private, intimate gathering.

Trace stepped forward again. Nelson took one hand off Orrin's shoulder and slipped it around Lottie's waist. Her fingers curled into his wool plaid just above his waist, where her hand was still resting.

"I'd like to say one more thing, if I could." Sam nodded. Trace looked over to Landon. "We know that in this clan, the majority vote is how laws are passed, disagreements settled, and how everything else is decided. Sam is a good leader. He's one of the best alpha's we've ever had. Spreading rumors and creating discontent and discord here isn't the right way, that's not how things are done in Greenacre. This is a bad path that none of us should walk. Not when we have a man who you could go to who would hear you out on anything you have to say. Rumors lead to hurt and pain. Fears turn to bitterness and bitterness eats away at you. The majority vote might decide, but that doesn't mean that things can't change, or that decisions can't be undone with another vote. If you have something to say, if anyone has anything to say in the future, any concerns, please talk to Sam. Don't let them eat away at you. Don't think that nothing will change, because I thought that about my life once, and I was wrong. Everything changed. I had to change too. I had to open my eyes to seeing things differently. It's only causing yourself and this clan harm to be subversive when there's absolutely no reason to be."

Clearly having been called out, Landon took another step forward. The firelight flickered off his face. He seemed pale, but it was probably just the shadows. Certainly the sparks of anger in his eyes weren't owing just to the firelight.

"There is reason. We're not heard. Hearing means more than just you standing there like a stone letting our words bounce off you. I can voice my concerns over and over again, but if nothing is done, then what? You say that listening is a way of understanding, but you don't understand. You aren't listening to me and you aren't listening to the minority."

No one seemed to like that very much, but before anyone could say or do anything, Sam walked over and set a hand on Landon's shoulder. "I have heard you and I'm hearing you now. I can't change our laws, but maybe we need to vote more often on how we continue with opening up. I said before that maybe there needs to be a vote if other shifters would like to come here. You came with us on the mission to rescue those shifters from the lab and you know yourself that we had no choice but to bring them here. You were on board with it, or at least you seemed to be. What changed?"

Landon glared at Sam, he reminded Lottie of some of the older boys she'd taught. Teenagers filled with hormones and emotions they can't fully control. Anger with nowhere to go. Some of them acted out because they didn't know what to do with all of those feelings, others would try and push people just for the hell of it. This angry young man seemed lost.

Another younger shifter that Loretta had never met spoke up from the opposite side of the circle. "The problem isn't Sam or his decisions, Landon. The problem is you. Like Trace said. You're the one who needs to work through that. Sam is doing all he can."

"He's not putting us in danger." That came from Kier. "He would never do that. That would be against his oath as alpha. He's giving us a chance to survive. We've already been through all of this as a clan. If there needs to be changes, there will be. But hating on wolves and the shifters we rescued from a lab, just because they aren't bears and didn't grow up here isn't right."

Tavish backed Kier up. "We aren't here to spread hate and intolerance. There's no place for that here. If you're angry and you have things to work on, then we'll find someone for you

to talk to, Landon. If you don't want to talk to Sam, you can come to anyone here and we'll bring that opinion to him."

"And nothing will be done," Landon growled. "Yet again."

"If you can't see anything being done, then you're not truly looking. Nothing can be solved all at once and change is hard, and it can be uncomfortable. We all have fears we have to live with, but burning down this clan with that kind of aggressive behavior isn't helping anyone." Kier added.

"Burning down the clan?" Landon snorted. He crossed his arms defensively. "I haven't burned anything down. It's going to happen, with or without my involvement. Maybe without. I'm thinking about leaving, and I know I'm not the only one."

Sam looked crushed at that development and Lottie's heart broke for him. This wasn't fair to him. She was afraid that if there was a beta position and Nelson was voted into it, then he'd have to face scenarios like this and it would eat him up. A great injustice was being done to Sam.

"Anyone here is free to leave, and younger shifters often do go out into the world. We don't hold anyone here. Greenacre isn't a prison and being a part of this clan has never meant that you couldn't have a difference of opinion, or you couldn't fulfill the dreams that you have. We live in a world where most people are human. Greenacre is just a small corner of it. We're safe here. This is our sanctuary, but by no means is it the end of the world or all of the world."

"This isn't a time for diplomacy. It's not time for you to make a great speech to get everyone in your corner. You're the one driving people away. You and your policy of opening up this clan to let destruction in. You're poisoning it with our enemies. With people who will tear us apart. That's why we're

not going to stay. It's starting to be that the world out there is safer than being here."

Sam appeared to realize that this was an argument that didn't have a solution. He'd never been in it to win it, but there was no reasoning with someone who didn't want to see reason. It wasn't the right time. Like Trace said, he'd had one mindset for years and years of his life and it took something drastic to change it. Landon's mind wasn't going to change overnight. Maybe it was never going to change.

Still, Lottie could see how devastated Sam looked as Landon walked away from the circle. A few other shadows broke away and followed him. Kier and Tavish shared looks and Trace balled his fists at his sides, but smoothed them out a few seconds later. His nostrils flared as he breathed hard, forcing himself to be calm.

"I'm not sure what to say." Sam's pain was so evident in the strain in his voice. Lily and the boys moved away from their spot in the circle to surround him. She took his hand.

"You don't have to say anything," another shifter that Lottie didn't know spoke up. "We don't share that opinion. Part of being young is being a difficult fool half the time. What you've proposed is fair as alpha, it's fair and right. You've always tried to do what's fair and right. Not everyone can be happy. It's unfortunate, but this isn't some paradise where people don't make mistakes. We respect everything you've done and continue to do for this clan. Not everyone is going to be happy at every time, and we know how that makes you feel. You take on everything here, not just the good, but the bad. Thank you for calling the clan meeting tonight and for constantly trying to better Greencare and all of our lives."

That meant something to Sam too. He didn't just take the defeats personally. He took those words to heart as well. Lily nodded her encouragement, and her dazzling smile was aimed at every person gathered. That the clan supported her mate meant the world to her.

It made Lottie realize how she would feel if Nelson got elected as beta. Even though he'd proposed the position, she still wasn't sure he truly wanted to take it on. But if he did, and the clan supported him and came to him like they came to Sam, he'd take that personally as well. The good and the bad, he'd absorb both and both would be meaningful to him. She could see him growing here, growing into the position, growing as a man and a father and as her partner.

And she could see herself growing here, living here, being a part of a family with Nelson and Orrin and standing right beside Nelson as his partner.

Her heart was full and all the worries she'd felt earlier vanished as the gathering broke up. Sam and Lily stayed behind, as did Tavish and Kier, to tend to and eventually put out the fire.

Surprisingly, Trace walked beside them, saying nothing, through the woods, until he waved goodnight and took a path that diverged off towards the clinic. Lottie wanted to tell him to wish Josepine and their kids the best, but sometimes just a wave in return could convey so much emotion that words couldn't.

A few minutes after they walked through the cabin, Orrin sat down on the couch and fell right asleep. He'd taken off his boots at the front door, but he was still fully dressed.

“I’ll put him to bed.” Nelson scooped him up easily, even though Orrin wasn’t nearly so small anymore, and carried him to his room.

Lottie knew that they wouldn’t go to sleep for hours yet. There was too much to process and talk about. Now that the clan meeting was over, she hoped Nelson’s anxiety had dissipated like hers. But there was still the vote for the beta coming, and he’d have to wait until after Christmas to find out if he was going to be thrust into that position or not. She hoped that he could find a way to relax and see it as a good thing, whatever the outcome.

There was still Christmas coming. Given that he didn’t normally celebrate it and neither did Greenacre, all the decorations they’d made last week and everything they’d done was steps closer to a new holiday tradition that would be unique and so special.

She wanted it to be special for Nelson and Orrin as well.

Ten minutes later, he walked into the kitchen, looking every bit as tall and gorgeous as he always did, with that hint of danger and those dark eyes flaring with intelligence and hidden emotion. Her heart flared to life. He was hers. He was hers to care for, to take responsibility for, to walk beside and stand beside, like she’d thought at the meeting. It might be early in terms of their relationship, but the three of them were a family unit.

That meant sharing her life with him. Her thoughts and feelings. And her own family.

“I can make tea,” she offered.

“I’ve become a man who tolerates mint tea.” Nelson rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. The motion tightened all his chest muscles and strained the black t-shirt over them. Loretta noticed every single movement. Her head got that swimming sensation that she’d had earlier, but this time, for a completely different reason.

“Maybe one day you’ll become a man who likes it.” She poured two mugs and left them alone to cool.

Taking Nelson’s hands, she looked into the depths of his eyes. “I want you to meet my dad. I’m ready. Come with me tomorrow. I can call and tell him I’ll be there later in the afternoon. We could stay in a hotel overnight, all three of us. We could take some time in the morning to do some Christmas baking and make him a card. I know how much he would love that.”

Of all the things in the past few weeks, this seemed to weigh the heaviest on Nelson. She hadn’t meant to put extra pressure on him. She was going to say that it was fine, they could wait, when he spoke. “You haven’t told him, though.”

“I haven’t, but I think that he knows, in his own dad way. I could tell him first, if you’d like.”

“We could tell him together. I just don’t want to upset him.”

“He’s been dying to meet you and Orrin since I started working for you. This will make him so happy.”

“Are you sure? Because I imagine meeting the man who is dating my incredible, wonderful, perfect daughter wouldn’t make me very pleased as a father. I’m fully aware that no one would measure up.”

She pulled a face at that. “My dad doesn’t think like that. Some dads might, but not him. Maybe if I was twenty, he’d be a little bit more protective, but I’m not.” She hesitated, not wanting to cause Nelson pain, but he read the question in her eyes and in her mind.

“Kara had two sisters. Her family grew up in California and they moved up here. She didn’t have an easy life. Things were done to her when she was younger. Her dad was an alcoholic and when he left them, her mom had a string of boyfriend who weren’t...” He had to stop and collect himself, but Lottie could practically see the murderous rage twist his face. “If I ever found any of those bastards, I’d be hard pressed to stop at just brutalizing them. Her sisters moved to Europe as soon as they graduated. They haven’t ever come back. Kara cut all ties with her mom when she was seventeen. She graduated early and put herself through college. We met because she wanted a loan to start a small business, and no one would give it to her. I did. She was feisty. I didn’t want to give it to her either, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer. She kept coming back. Pestering my employees. Finally, she asked for the boss and she got the boss. I was intrigued. I wanted to see what kind of woman would fight that hard. I was thirteen years older than she was, but she stuck in my head. She made her payments on time. She never had a reason for me to come down there to the little cake shop she started, but I did. I hated Seattle, hated being around humans, hated how I always felt so on edge and how my bear didn’t feel right there. I couldn’t stop myself from going.”

“It sounds like she was really special.” Lottie didn’t want to be jealous of a memory. Jealousy wasn’t right. She felt an odd mix of grief, compassion, pain, tenderness, and wistfulness. She believed that people could love more than once in a lifetime. Opening up a heart that had been fractured was the bravest act. “Does it sound wrong that I wish I could have met her?”

Nelson's thumb smoothed over her chin, tilting her face up. "No. It doesn't sound wrong. She was wonderful. A truly great person who came from a terrible situation. She could have turned to anything, and she did have her demons, but she threw them into work. She threw them into having a passion for living. She was kind and funny." He stopped and looked away, over to the mugs steaming on the counter. "Should I even be telling you this? There isn't ever a second in my mind where I would draw comparisons. It's not like that. You don't have a memory or a ghost to live up to."

She grasped his shoulders, bringing his focus back to her. "I'd like to keep her alive for Orrin. He never met her. He'll want to know what his mother was like. He'll want those memories. You have a right to your past and all the emotions associated with that. Telling you that you could never talk about her would be like telling me I couldn't talk about my mom. It's important to remember."

"I remember only at certain times. You said there was room in my heart for you and the ghosts, but it's just you, Loretta. The ghosts are memories. They live in my mind only."

"I understand." She watched his mouth, watched him form the words. She watched his perfect lips.

He finally noticed her watching him and when he did, her cheeks heated. How could she explain to him what she saw when she looked at him? She couldn't even find words. Beauty was too simple. Nelson looked like an anti-hero. He'd probably always have the personality to match. But to her, he was a miracle.

He didn't kiss her even though his gaze lingered on her mouth, and she could tell that he wanted to. His eyes darkened and his

breathing shallowed out, but he still wanted to say something. She could tell it was important.

“I’ve been thinking about what to get you. What to get for your dad. What to get Orrin. It’s just that everything seems inadequate. That’s the problem with starting a tradition. I don’t want it to be underwhelming. I want it to be perfect. How do you find what to give to someone to symbolize everything they are and everything they mean?” That question, that was true vulnerability. He asked it with all of his soul and all of his being. “I thought I buried everything with Kara, but I didn’t. I didn’t bury my son. I didn’t bury my love for him. I didn’t bury the capability to feel and know other love.” His inhale shuddered through his nose, irregular and choppy, revealing the deep cuts that still weren’t healed inside of him. “How do I get you something to let you know how much I need you? How can I even think about letting you know? It feels like the greatest risk.”

There he was, and there it was. He was right. She was the risk. Caring for someone was a risk. Elevating that care to love was the greatest risk imaginable.

“You don’t have to get me anything.” Her eyes burned. “Nelson.” *You’re more than enough.* The words were on the tip of her tongue. “The best tradition of Christmas is just being there with the people you care about. Family. Friends. We’re back in your clan. The stuff we’ve done—the lights and the decorations and everything talked about, that’s for the kids. But Orrin knows. He knows that he’s loved. He knows that you would do anything for him. I don’t think he thinks that Christmas is about gifts. That’s not the experience he needs to have.”

“But if I were to get you something?”

“I only want you and Orrin, to be here, and to visit my dad. My heart is full.”

“I said I would pay for your dad’s care if you ever left, but let me do that for you. I have more money than I could ever need. I’ll help you find a job here at the school, if you still want to, but Greenacre is about sharing. We don’t do money and resources like other people. If you want to be paid, Sam will pay you, but if you don’t need to take a salary, then you don’t have to. It’s your choice. I don’t want you to worry about money. I don’t want it to feel like I’m your boss anymore. I want your dad to get the best care possible. Will you let me help you?”

This was a pride thing. Not for him, but for her.

She’d always paid her own way. She’d worked part time to help offset the cost of college and was used to taking care of herself. But she’d come to a brand new place where the rules of the rest of the world just didn’t make sense. If she could work at the school, she’d be doing what she loved, and if she didn’t have to take money for that because she didn’t need to, then she felt that would be right. Living here, her needs were met. She was provided for. She had a lovely home, she was starting to make friends, she would be a member of this clan. She would help out and she would share in a life that most people could only dream of.

If she spoke, she knew that she’d start sobbing. She nodded. Her heart pounded and her body felt all wrong. It was only wrong because she wasn’t close enough to this wild and wonderful man who knew her, who knew her secrets and who already had her heart.

She was crying anyway. She couldn’t hold it back. Nelson wiped them away with a soft caress and then he picked her up

and held her against him. She rested her head on his shoulder. He was fresh air, fire smoke, damp wool, and blissful familiarity.

“I think I’m going to carry you to bed, my dear.”

“I’m not tired. You don’t have to—”

“I wasn’t thinking about sleeping. I was thinking about abandoning all semblance of control. I want to let it all go. The past few days have been stressful, and we don’t know what’s coming with the vote. But I want here and I want now. With you.”

“I can give you that.”

“Good,” he purred in that dark tone that woke up every part of her body. “I don’t need anything else for Christmas. Not then and not now.”

Chapter 16

Nelson

He carried her into the bedroom, shutting the door behind them without even so much as jostling her in his arms. She laughed softly in his ear. He was already so far gone, so lost in his need for her, but the sound of that laughter was sweet gasoline, drenching him.

“This isn’t necessary,” she whispered. Her breath tickled his neck.

“It’s absolutely necessary. You’re my queen.”

“Oh, goodness. Set me down before I die of embarrassment. I’m not a queen.”

“Didn’t say you were a queen. I said you were my queen.” He righted her, letting her feet touch the floor.

The blinds were closed and there was no light creeping in, but he didn’t need that. His eyes adjusted quickly. One of the benefits of being a shifter. The bed was on the right-hand side of the room, the rest of the furniture consisted of two handmade dressers and a nightstand. One dresser remained empty, ready and waiting for Loretta. She hadn’t even unpacked her suitcase yet, Nelson had at first wondered if it was because she’d been ready to leave, but he realized as he got to know the woman who had been part of his family for the last year that she was there to stay and everything would happen in good time.

He stripped away her shirt and her bra, tore at her pants until they were off and then practically ripped her panties in half. She put her hands on his shoulders as the last bit of clothing gave way. She made a sound in her throat and it was more gasoline on his skin.

He might have been in full control of his bear, but the animal desire he felt whenever he was near Loretta, especially when she was gloriously naked, consumed him.

Her hand left his shoulder and found its way to the back of his neck. He loved it when she gripped him like that, her fingers curling over the hair there that felt damp from their time in the woods. Her touch was so hot, her fingers so light but so powerful. She swayed into him, tipping her face to his so that he could claim her mouth.

He'd never known anything as delicious as her lips. He ran his hand over the curve of her hip, over skin so soft that it was beyond silk. She was warm, not alabaster. She was real, not cold, hard alabaster even though she was as gorgeous as any statue of any goddess ever created.

He brushed the pad of his thumb over the hard peak of her nipple. No, it wasn't hard before his touch. But when his thumb circled it, it responded to this touch.

She kissed him hungrily, just as hungry as he was for her. She was his equal, his match, his mate in every way. He might have used the word dating so that he wouldn't frighten her, but he knew. Mate. She was his mate. What she was went deeper than any human word to describe a relationship. That was the animal need in him too, because what he felt went beyond language and went straight into pure instinct.

Her hands flew over his clothing, searching for openings. He helped her, savagely tearing at his shirt and jeans until they were gone. She took so much more care sliding his boxers down and then her hand went around him, circling the base of his erection.

She did something that she'd never done before and lifted his hand to her neck. Not the back of her neck, but to her throat. He put his fingers there, around that delicate, sweet part of her. Her pulse thrashed against his palm. He could see her looking straight into his eyes. No fear. Only desire.

He led her backwards to the bed, his hand still around her neck. Gentle. He was so, so gentle. She'd put it there because she trusted him not to hurt her. It was symbolic of what she felt and couldn't say. Like how she claimed every inch of him with that tender, sweet touch to the back of his neck.

He laid her down gently on the bed, guiding her back, but then he arranged her legs, propping her feet up on the edge of the bed. She was open to him, so open that he could see her glistening for him.

“We still don't have anything,” he sighed, gathering the little control he had left.

“I'm not on the pill yet. I haven't been able to get an appointment with my doctor, but I did book one. I'm sorry, with everything going on, I forgot to tell you. It's next week.”

There was no general store or pharmacy where he could go to buy condoms in Greenacre and he wasn't going to ask at the clinic if they happened to stock them.

“We’re playing with fire in the meantime. Pulling out isn’t a sure thing.”

“I talked to Josephine,” she whispered, studying him with wide eyes. “I forgot to tell you that too. So much happened and keeps happening. One of the reasons that she set up the clinic was for the new mothers in Greenacre. To help women give birth. She’s prepared for harder shifter births and higher risk pregnancies.”

He fell to his knees and took her hands, pressing them to his forehead. He bent over them, his fears lodged in his throat, his heart beating madly. “And so you want to risk it? You want to have a child and risk being taken away from me?”

“No. No, darling.” She pulled her hands away and cupped his face so he looked up at her again. “I’m just telling you that if something ever happened or if we ever did want a child, the clinic is here, and Josephine is an experienced doctor and is experienced with high risk pregnancies. It’s not something we need to think about right now, tomorrow I’ll run to a store in Seattle when we go and visit my dad and pick up some condoms.”

“I can run in.”

“You don’t mind?”

“No. Jesus, I don’t mind.”

She pretended to yawn. “Oh, well, for tonight I guess we’ll just have to go to sleep.”

“Tonight, I’m going to tie you up and gag you and eat your sweet pussy until you can’t possibly come anymore.”

She giggled. “Stop it. I’m already... I really want you. That’s making it worse.”

He snatched his t-shirt off the floor and raised a brow. “You think I’m joking?”

She stopped breathing.

“Do you want me to be joking? I can be joking if you don’t want to do any of that. Or some of it.”

She cautiously raised her hands, extending them towards the headboard. “Maybe I want to try it a little bit. But not too tight, something that I could get out of in a second, while you say filthy things to me.” Her cheeks were flushed pink and her eyes glistened.

Nelson could have died right there. He was so hard. He angled so she could see him, all of him and her eyes widened. He stacked her wrists together and slipped the t-shirt over one end. He made a light knot and bound the other end to the headboard. The bedframe looked sturdy enough and the posts were just the right size to easily be able to accommodate his hands as he made the tie.

“Is that too tight?”

She flexed her wrists. “No. It’s perfect.”

She trusted him totally. He'd never done this before, he'd just made the tie up and gag remark as a throwaway comment to lighten the mood, but it seemed to have set off a spark in both of them.

"I threatened a gag. Do you need one?"

She shook her head side to side. "No. I'll stay quiet." Her eyes burned with need. "Come here first. I want to be the one who tastes you."

She hadn't done that yet, and he almost hesitated, but she had every right to tell him what she wanted and needed, as he did to throw dark promises out there to get her excited.

He knelt over her and with her hands tied above her head, she appeared helpless. She wasn't. He guided himself to her lips and she took over. Her tongue worked over his head and she purred as she tasted him. She set the pace, taking more of him in her mouth. She was eager and it was *good* and he had to throw a hand out onto the wall to support himself.

His other hand, he wrapped around the base of his cock and he thrust gently into her mouth. He pulled back immediately.

"No," she protested. "Don't do that. I mean, don't pull back. I want this. I like this. You taste good. Salty and manly and amazing." She smiled at him. "Besides, I might be tied up, but I know that really, I'm the one in control."

He pushed slowly back into her mouth, letting her tongue swirl over him, letting her take more and more before he pulled back just a little. "Yes," he hissed. "You're the one in control." *You have all of me for always.*

She was perfect and she worked him with her mouth until he had so little control left that he had to break away.

He pulled back. They were both panting. He put a hand over her mouth as he reached down and pinched one of her nipples lightly. Not to hurt, but just so that she could feel the sensation. She groaned against his hand, the sound trapped by his palm. He pulled it away and let his hand travel down her body. He cupped her breast and circled her nipple with his forefinger, touched her ribs as she inhaled a heaving breath, and splayed his palm on her belly as she exhaled. He continued downwards and she spread her legs for him. He knelt between them. He could see how wet she was, and he couldn't last. He couldn't hold himself back. He licked her so slowly that her teeth knocked together as she tried to keep in a whimper of pleasure.

He had to be quiet too, even though he wanted to praise her, tell her how good she tasted, roar out his delight. He parted her and tasted her until her hips thrashed into his face. Her whimpers were louder and louder.

“Shh,” he cautioned in a whisper. “Shh, sweetheart. I'm about to fuck you with my tongue and you're going to want to scream, but you can't. You're going to have to bite it back. You're going to have to be perfectly silent when I make you come.”

“The dirty talk isn't necessary. I want you to do all of that already. Very. Badly.”

“I promised dark, wild, unimaginable pleasure. And you promised to be quiet while I gave it. So, if you feel the need to scream, turn your face into the pillow and let it take it.”

“Dear god, I’m not a—”

Her words were abruptly cut off when he filled her with two fingers. She was always so shockingly tight. Her walls closed around him, his fingers barely fitting inside of her. His cock punched in his palm as he closed his other hand around it. Loretta watched him as he stroked himself and her eyes on him were glorious. He thrust inside her and her hips rode it out, creating a rhythm with him. He brushed over her clit with this thumb, and she cursed at him under her breath.

She was beyond lovely, an angel in his bed with her hair mussed and her hands above her head, her hips rolling in time to the pleasure he was giving her. Her nipples peaked and on display, her chest heaving for breath. Her face already angled to the side, searching for the pillow. He watched the pleasure shudder through her, knowing it was just the first taste of what was to come. He watched as every muscle in her body reacted.

She was so beautiful, *so beautiful*, too beautiful to let a monster like him touch her.

No. She would never allow him to say that about himself. Monster, she wouldn’t allow it. She’d tell him about the good that she saw in him, and she’d be so assured of it that he’d believe it too. He’d believe it down to his tattered soul.

She was still so tight as he thrust inside of her. She soaked his hand. She thrashed against the bed. She was a wild, otherworldly creature in his bed.

She was going to come, but he had something else for her first.

He withdrew his hand and when she turned her face to accuse him of trying to torture her like an asshole, he ran his fingers

over her lips. She opened her mouth and her eyes went wide. He'd shocked her, but she still took his fingers into her mouth. She tasted herself on him and then he kissed her. He still had his cock in his fist and he ran his hand over himself, wanting her the entire time.

She was going to come with his tongue on her and when he'd kissed her thoroughly, he bowed his head and licked her until those earlier spasms of pleasure looked like nothing more than foreplay. He licked her until she came, hard, her legs locking around his head, her body trembling and shaking, her hands grasping the t-shirt binding to steady herself, her face thrust into the pillow to control the sound.

He had the taste of her on his tongue and he watched her as ecstasy shook her apart, and that's how he came. He came into his hand, the hot jets covering his fist. There was nothing until her. Nothing but death and anguish and his soul a battlefield. There was no room for pleasure. He'd thrown himself into work and drowned himself in making money. He'd raised his son and for him, he'd hung onto the last remains of his humanity. But pleasure? There hadn't been pleasure. He hadn't done this for himself. He hadn't wanted it. Pleasure was just a reminder of all the things he'd lost and all the things that were wrong with him and would never be righted. Pleasure was pain and not the good kind.

It was different now. He hadn't been able to see his way out of that mire or pull himself out of the swirling waters sucking him under, but Loretta saw him.

She pulled out of the t-shirt binding and threw her arms around him, pulling him down to the bed to stretch out beside her. He'd need to get up shortly and clean up, get a warm washcloth or take Loretta into the shower very quietly, but for a few minutes, they just needed to breathe. They needed to *be*, just as they were.

“As much as I missed you inside of me, that was nice,” Loretta sighed.

He raised an eyebrow. “Just nice?”

“Hmm.” She closed her eyes and put her hand on his upper arm. Her fingertips felt smooth against his skin. “I loved watching you. Watching what you were doing to me and to yourself. That was more than nice. But I still missed you. Does it sound incredibly desperate to say that I can’t wait for tomorrow night to be here?”

“Oh, incredibly.”

“Are you going to dirty talk to me every night?”

“You said it wasn’t necessary.” He wanted to kiss her. He would kiss her. But she was so lovely with that sultry smile and that delight in her eyes that he couldn’t do it yet. But when he did, neither of them were going to come up for air until they were lost in each other again.

She tucked her face back into the pillow to drown out her laughter. “I changed my mind.”

He watched her, feeling a sense of peace that he’d never felt before. Not just the afterglow, and god, he was loathe to use that word. It seemed silly for a man like him. But it was more than just the aftermath of pleasure threading through his muscles.

“When I first brought Orrin home, back to the farm, my dad thought I wasn’t going to make it. He probably thought the

same thing when I confessed that I wasn't going to Seattle for business and that I'd met someone and fallen in love. When I made that confession, my dad wanted me to be safe. He didn't trust my judgement, but he didn't tell me not to marry Kara. I think he saw that for the first time ever, I was getting close to happiness. Or at least I was learning how to get there. I wasn't soft. But I was different. My brother's land is over two hundred acres of bush. My dad went to live on that land, built himself a cabin and everything. It wasn't that the farm wasn't big enough for him, but he wanted me to have it. He wanted me to have the life I was trying to make for myself. After... after Kara, when I brought Orrin home, my dad showed up. He told me I couldn't do it. He saw what kind of man I was right after losing Kara and I don't think he thought I could raise him. He didn't volunteer. Didn't give me any solutions. He just left me. Less than a year later, he died."

Loretta quietly studied him in the dark. Then, she stroked his forehead with all her characteristic gentleness. "It's hard, raising a baby. You did it in the depths of your own hell. You put all of that aside for Orrin. You always have."

"I've never been the father he deserved. I've been halfway there, if that. But- I'm sorry. I don't even know why I told you all that right now. Right. Now. I could have waited. I should have."

"No. I understand."

"I want that to change. I want to be all the way the father he needs. And I want to be all the way the man that you deserve as well. I'll need your guidance for that. I know that I'm going to mess up. I'm so afraid that I'll wreck this and I'm never afraid of anything. Except losing you or losing Orrin. I'm terrified of that."

She placed a kiss on his temple. “I know, but we’re both here for you. As for my guidance, you have it. I’ll need yours too. Growing together means showing each other what we like, and telling each other what we need. It means discovering those things together because we might not even know them about ourselves. It doesn’t mean perfection. I will never expect that.” Tears glittered on her cheeks, but not from being wounded. “Earlier tonight, I kept thinking that I was so proud to be beside you. I want to grow into being mates, the shifter way. I’m pretty lost as to what that means, but I hope we can learn it together.”

“Yes.” He belonged to her, and all those times that she’d touched him and made him feel the same way, she’d put it into words now. “Together.”

Chapter 17

Loretta

“Oh, Orrin, you have glitter in your hair.” She ruffled his chestnut strands in the parking lot and of course the glitter stayed exactly where it was, and she’d probably still be picking glitter out of his clothes this time next year. “I should have known better than to add that to my craft supplies box. Everyone knows glitter is a terrible idea.”

“But it’s so fun. And my card is all shiny now. I think your dad is going to like it. Even if it gets everywhere.”

“We did shake it well,” she said. “I think it will be okay. And you’re absolutely right. My dad will love it.”

Glitter was one of Orrin’s favorite things in the world. But then, what kid didn’t love it? Before she took on the job of teaching Orrin, she’d put together a massive amount of home-schooling supplies and had a box filled with just about everything needed for crafting. Ideal for making a custom-designed homemade Christmas card, like the one that Orrin was proudly holding.

Nelson walked stiffly at her side. He liked to pretend he wasn’t nervous, but she knew him well enough now to know that he was. It wasn’t the same kind of anxiety that nearly made him sick to his stomach like the clan meeting had, but it was there.

She understood. She was nervous too, in a way, but she knew her dad would never say anything that would drive anyone away. Her dad might have doubts, but he’d save them for a private conversation between just the two of them and then

she'd be able to tell him what was in her heart. This would be a surprise for him, but her dad was one of those people who didn't hate surprises. Not that she was bringing Nelson and Orrin. She'd phoned ahead and he knew that. But the rest. That would be a surprise.

Maybe it wouldn't be. Her dad had the uncanny knack of knowing things about her before she knew it herself.

Orrin skipped ahead of them. He held the front door open like a little gentleman and they checked in with the receptionist at the front. It was Sherry on duty today. She was Lottie's favorite. In her late fifties, she was kind and motherly and always very welcoming. Plus, her every changing wild colored hair was always a hit. Today, it was half blue and half green.

"I liked that lady's hair," Orrin whispered to her when they walked down the hall.

"Me too. I wish I could do something like that with my hair."

Nelson snorted.

"Don't worry you're not going to come in one day and find me with neon pink spikes, I tried crazy colors when I was younger, and it's just not me." Lottie said with a grin.

On the drive from Greencare, Lottie tried to prepare Orrin for her dad's state of health so he wouldn't be alarmed. He'd come so far, but parts of his body still didn't work too well and his mouth drooped to one side making his smile a bit crooked.

She needn't have worried.

Her dad and Orrin were both all smiles as soon as they opened the door. Lottie's dad was in his usual position on the couch, bolstered up by pillows. His smiles might have been a bit lopsided, but they were still beautiful.

“Dad!” She knelt down and gave him a hug before she introduced Orrin and Nelson.

“What a fine young man,” her dad said about Orrin.

Lottie glanced at him, but he seemed to understand just fine even though the speech wasn't perfect. He looked to Nelson next.

“It's good to finally meet you. You're both very special to Loretta.”

She didn't flush or correct her dad. What he said was true. He did know, then. She didn't even have to sit down and explain to him that things had changed, or when it had happened. He'd probably known last weekend, just by the look on her face. Being cared for and having someone special in return changed a person.

“We made you something!” She had her favorite quilted tote bag over her arm and at Orrin's excited exclamation, she passed it to him. He proudly dug out his card and passed it over. “Merry early Christmas.”

“Oh.” Her dad took it reverently. He opened the envelope, which took a few seconds as his hands shook, but he got there. When he saw the glittery star Orrin made, his eyes lit up. “This is lovely.” He read the message on the inside. “Thank you so much for thinking of me. I'll put this card up and I

won't take it down. Not even after Christmas. It's too pretty to be packed away."

"Dad made one too!"

"Maybe he'd like to take it out?" Lottie asked. She noticed how Nelson hung back, almost like he was shy.

"That's okay. You go ahead, bud."

Orrin passed over the other card. He opened the envelope this time and pulled it out just a little so her dad would have an easier time with it.

"Dad hand drew that. Like, with a pen. It's the woods behind our house. I didn't know he could draw. He says he can't, but I think that's pretty nice."

"It's very nice."

"I think so too," Lottie said. "We don't have any art up in the cabin, but I think a few of these would look lovely on the walls."

"Another one to display all year round. Thank you both for the lovely art."

"I made you one too!" She dug out her card. Instead of making it traditionally Christmassy, she'd gone for a rainbow and flowers and put a Christmas tree in the background. She was no great artist, but the watercolor paints looked nice enough.

“Thank you. That’s just what I needed in here. I don’t have enough art either.”

She knew when her dad was really moved. She knew that their cards would cheer him up.

“We’re doing something with our community for Christmas.” Orrin wasn’t shy at all. He sat down on the couch right beside her dad and started in on making conversation like they’d known each other for years. “We made decorations at the town hall for a few nights last week. And we decorated some of the outdoor trees with lights. I’m not sure what else, but there’s going to be more. Oh, and we had a pancake breakfast at the hall too and it was so good.”

“Maybe you’ll have a big potluck for Christmas. Or just a ham at home is good too. That was always my favorite.”

“I can cook a ham,” Lottie agreed. “No matter what we’re doing in Greenacre. It’s the first year the town has really done anything for Christmas in a while. There isn’t a set of traditions to follow.”

“That’s the best kind.”

She and Nelson finally took seats at the table, across from each other. He seemed more at ease when she shot him a look that said *I told you dad wasn’t going to tell you that you weren’t good enough for me, or try and give you the ‘you’d better treat my daughter right’ speech down beat down.*

“Dad’s gonna dress up as Santa,” Orrin blurted.

Everyone looked at each other. “Well, that’s not much of a surprise,” Nelson grumped, but he couldn’t hide his amusement. “Santa’s emissary. There’s a difference.”

“I know that’s not real, dad,” Orrin protested. He really did look far too grown up sitting there on the couch. “You don’t have to pretend for me. You never did before.” Orrin turned back to her dad. “We just did our own thing and dad buys me everything all year round whenever I need it. That was good enough. We never ate anything fancy, but it was always good. And when Loretta came, it was even better. Sorry, dad.”

Nelson chuckled. “There’s nothing wrong with being honest. I’m no match in the kitchen when it comes to Loretta. She doesn’t just cook. She bakes.”

“She bakes really good cookies,” Orrin agreed. “And the best cakes. Can we have one for Christmas? Maybe we can come here for Christmas too and bring you a cake.”

“Oh. Well, only if you have time and if you’re in the city anyway. The home here puts on a good Christmas for all of us. The staff dress up like deer and race around and let us all shoot them with plastic and foam bullets, if we can get hit them.”

Orrin burst out laughing. “Really?”

“Well, that’s what someone said happened last year. I hope this year is more of the same. And we do bingo once a month. Christmas bingo should be real good. I’ve heard the prizes are epic.”

“What’s bingo?”

Her dad took a few minutes to explain the concept.

“Can we play sometime?” Orrin asked his dad.

“I don’t see why not. We could have family bingo nights.”

“Or Greenacre bingo nights.”

“We could have our own Greenacre Christmas bingo,” Lottie offered. “And, if we’re not busy, we could come here as well. There’s a family night after the dinner, where everyone gets together, or we can come hang out in dad’s room again. If you’re up for it.”

“I’m up for it. And cherry cake with that whipped cream icing you make?”

“Goodness, yes. What else would you eat at Christmas?”

“I haven’t had that yet!” Orrin just about sprang off the couch. He controlled himself at the last second so it wouldn’t have a see-saw effect and launch her dad off the other end.

“Haven’t I made it?”

“Not cherry.”

“Right. I was on a lemon kick for a good long while and then we did chocolate and angel food, but I don’t think

I've ever made cherry. I can make it for Christmas and we'll do one for you, dad, as well."

"What else would you like to see happen for Christmas?" Nelson asked. "These are good ideas. I haven't been able to come up with much on my own, the kids at school came up with all the best ones."

Orrin got two creases on his forehead whenever he concentrated really hard. Usually, it was during math. Even though he was good at it, he went into a sort of zone and he'd keep that frown going for an entire lesson sometimes.

"Umm, plants?"

"Plants?" Lottie asked. She wasn't sure if Orrin really meant plants or not. Maybe he meant a tree. But no, he really did. He nodded. "What kind of plants?"

"Cactuses. Or roses. The mini ones you can have in the house with red flowers."

"Christmas cactus and poinsettia? I think that might be the ones you mean." She had no idea where he'd seen those.

"We could stop at a garden store on the way home. If you want a cactus, then we'll buy a cactus. Any one that you find and love."

"What if I love all of them?"

"Then we'll have to look into building a greenhouse in the spring."

Lottie was cautious about what she said about Greenacre and how she worded things. She didn't want her dad to think she was living in a commune and there was no way to tell him about a town where people were really bears and so they all had to pull together and help each other out and they did most things for themselves.

“Greencare probably has some gardening going on in the spring. Probably a community spot.” They'd grown a small garden at the farm, and she remembered now how much Orrin loved it. He liked the planting and the tending and the things most people hated like weeding and watering more than he even liked harvest. He just loved the process.

He was so excited that Lottie made a note to add more gardening books to his lessons. And then she remembered that she wasn't doing his lessons anymore and she was momentarily so heartbroken that she hoped no one was watching her face. When she reminded herself how happy Orrin was at school and how fast he was making new friends and adapting to the community, she couldn't be sad.

It was just another kick in the pants to get her motivated to talk to Connor and Stephanie at the school, or maybe Sam if he was the one who did the hiring and managed that part of the clan as well. If she couldn't find a position teaching in Greenacre, maybe she could apply for a job online. It wouldn't be her favorite thing, but it would still be doing what she loved and she'd be able to do it right from Greenacre.

“Next time you come, you'll have to tell me all about your cactus.” Her dad was so good at talking with anyone.

“If you want I can draw you a picture of one for next time too. For your wall.” Orrin promised.

Her dad never mentioned wanting any art for his room, but why hadn't she thought about bringing something for him before?

“You'll have to tell me all about what your town does for Christmas too. I'm sure whatever it is, it's going to be very special. It sounds like a wonderful place. Why don't you tell me about your new school and your friends?”

Orrin eagerly launched into a long description about everything he'd learned. He'd been raised by Nelson to act with caution at all times, especially when he was in the world, and so he never mentioned a thing about the other half of life spent at Greencare, as bears. He didn't talk about working on shifting at school or how he'd come well prepared for it.

While he was talking, her dad's attention remained fixed entirely on Orrin.

He'd greeted Nelson and looked at him when they spoke, but he didn't stare at the scars unlike some of the residents at the facility. No wonder Nelson hated coming to the city. It was doubly awful for him when people just gaped. Though Lottie also realized a lot of the time it was his sheer size that drew people's attention, not his scars. Men just weren't built like with all those muscles, height, and power—not to the extent he was.

When Orrin was done, her dad looked at Nelson and she could feel some of both their fatherly pride, looking between them. “You've raised a very nice young man, Nelson.” Then, addressing Orrin again. “You're very well spoken. I can tell how kind you are. You're passionate about so many things. There are people out there in the world, even young people, who aren't as keen for living life, so it's good

for me to hear how excited you get. Keep that wonder for life. Keep appreciating all the people who love you. Keep searching until you find what makes your heart happy, although, I hope it's many things."

Orrin nodded, taking that advice seriously. "Yes, sir, I will."

"I always told Loretta to do the same. Keep searching and keep trying, keep finding out what makes your heart sing. I'm very glad that she has you both in her life. I can tell that you make her heart sing. That you've made her heart happy since she met you."

"Dad too?"

"Yes, definitely your dad too."

"Lottie makes us happy as well. Both of us. Dad only said so lately, but I could tell."

Lottie decided right there that Nelson looked adorable when he blushed. But, like her earlier, he wasn't going to protest at all.

"She makes me very happy too. She's one of the best people I know, I might be biased because she's my daughter, but she's one in a million. Whatever you three do for Christmas together, or with your community, I know it will be a very special time because you're doing it as the three of you."

Nelson took her hand, right there on top of the table. He set his over hers. He looked at her like any time they spent

together would always be the most special time for him and for Orrin. She'd never had anyone look at her that way before, and there it was, unguarded, just for her to see.

“That’s right, dad.” She wasn’t going to burst into tears, even happy ones. She could hold them back. “But it’s also extra special for us to be here with you.”

“Tell me more about other games,” Orrin said after a pause of silence where everyone tried to collect themselves. “What are other fun ones? What do you like to play best? I know how to play cribbage and lots of card games, but what else is there like bingo?”

“I don’t know if there’s anything quiet like bingo, but if you get that deck of cards over there off the bookshelf, Loretta and I can teach you some more games. While we’re doing that, I’ll try and think of other board games we loved. There are so many now. Lots of strategy games and role-playing games. So many with decks of cards that aren’t playing cards.”

“Now we’ve done it. We might have to stop at a game store on the way home as well.” Lottie didn’t mind at all. She loved games and it would be a good family activity for the long winter evenings.

Her dad’s expression, when she caught his eye as she got up to get the playing cards, said that he was perfectly happy because for the first time in her life, she was absolutely that way as well. He saw. He knew her heart. And he was so happy for her. Not afraid. Not concerned. Not cautionary. He knew that happiness didn’t have to be perfect. It didn’t have to be created in a perfect world between perfect people. If it did, then it would never exist. She was the kind of happy that was the best kind.

Just plain happy.

And he was just plain happy with her.

Maybe that was the best Christmas gift she could ever wish for, the best gift she could give him, and the best gift that she could share with Nelson and Orrin.

Epilogue

Christmas Day

Loretta

In the days leading up to Christmas, there hadn't been any countdowns. No wild shopping trips, battling it out with others in crazy lines. No last minute wrapping. No terrible traffic, no grouchiness to contend with. On the farm the year before, things were quiet. In Greencare, it wasn't quiet, but it wasn't the same kind of rush that the outside world liked to bombard people with and call it normal.

Lottie very much liked her new normal.

She loved waking up beside Nelson. She loved his bedhead, his pink-cheeked, fresh from sleep expression when he just woke up. She loved walking Orrin to school. She treasured those moments after, when she'd sip a coffee or a cup of tea with Nelson in the kitchen. When maybe they didn't just sip coffee and tea in the kitchen.

The days weren't long when she spent them with Nelson, and when Orrin was off school, they read or learned new board games or card games. They baked. They cooked. They played endless bingo. They went to the hall and did crafts with the other kids on weekends in the run up to Christmas. People always brought snacks, there was coffee, tea, milk, and juice. The kids ran around for the better part of the mornings and then in the afternoon, Lily taught Christmas dances. She used to teach dance at the school and she would be doing it again, she said, after her son Knight was a little bit older.

Sam was so worried about making Christmas perfect, but it didn't need to be perfect. It just needed to be kids having a great time, people coming together, and community spirit. That was worth more than any lights, any wreaths, any decorations, or any man in a red suit. Though maybe the red suit was well worth it. It had taken some persuasion, but when Nelson had been given the option between being a Christmas elf or Santa, then Santa was the only logical choice—plus she couldn't find any elf suits online in size XXXL.

Planning went from being stressful to stress free when they stopped focusing on what Christmas should be, to just having a good time.

In the end, it was decided that they should just do what they'd done the morning of the pancake breakfast. A gathering at the community hall with a potluck, maybe some music and dancing later because a few shifters played the guitar, lots of kids screaming and yelling, tables set up with board games that Loretta and Nelson would supply because they'd bought so many in their trips to Seattle, followed up at the end with a make your own dessert bar.

So, that's what happened.

Instead of a gift exchange Greenacre did it Greenacre style, and everyone, young and old had written vouchers for services—be it for a car wash, a cooked meal, a night of child minding, help with chores or even just a silly dance to cheer someone up—which had been put into Santa's sack. There was obviously a bit of negotiation going on as people who didn't have kids swapped babysitting vouchers for art lessons or a haircut, but that was all part of the fun as well. Lottie thought the idea was absolutely perfect, it was almost how Greenacre worked anyway, and she was hanging onto her voucher for one evening of childminding that she'd gotten from Sam's brother

Aeron. In the new year, once the election for the beta position was over, she planned to take Nelson on their first proper date.

After a huge dinner, the kids got up and ran wild around the hall, the cleanup got underway, and as tables were emptied, spontaneous board games popped up all over the place. Everything was basically chaos and not organized chaos, but it was good. It was good to hear people laughing and to see them smiling. Almost all of Greenacre seemed to be there, even the shifters who usually hung back or liked to keep to themselves. The shifters who had been freed from that awful lab were there, shy and hanging back at first, but as the evening wore on, Lottie saw the little girls interacting with the other kids and she noticed that the two adults—a man and a woman—were eventually drawn into a board game with Trace and Josephine.

Josephine kept looking towards the triplets, but Sam's brother had it handled, and the other kids were all taking turns, absolutely doting on the babies. Even Knight, Sam and Lily's youngest, got in on all the fun.

Lottie almost recognized everyone now, even if she still hadn't put everyone's name to everyone's face. She knew that Landon wasn't there, and she saw a flicker of disappointment wash across Sam's face as he realized it too, but then it passed.

The beta position had been voted on. It passed.

Who would run for it was still up for debate, but Nelson's name was already put forward. The other candidates, if there were any, would make themselves known at yet another clan meeting in the new year.

“Loretta?” She turned at the sound of Nelson's deep voice. He stepped through the kitchen doorway. He was still wearing the

red Santa jacket, but it was now open revealing his less than festive black t-shirt and jeans.

“What is it?” Her hands dripped soapy water from the dishes. They didn’t have throw away cups and plates in Greenacre and there was a big assembly going on to clean up after the meal. The great thing about a potluck was that everyone could reclaim their casserole dishes, crock pots, roasters, bowls, and other dishes later, but there was still plenty to wash up in the meantime.

“I was just wondering if you needed help in here?”

Lily was in the kitchen, January, Taylee, Stephanie, Elowen, and the kids continuously tripped in and out. “No. It’s not that we’re having a women’s only party in here, but we’re kind of having a women’s only party. Don’t worry. We didn’t get stuck with this job. We wanted it because it’s another way to get together.”

“It doesn’t look bad? That there aren’t any...” he paused and looked around nervously. “Any men in here? Because I’m more than willing to help. I believe that men can wash dishes and clean and cook and that they should. And I can go round up more help if you’d like?”

“I know. We know. We won’t be that much longer, and truly, we’re having a great time in here.”

He still didn’t look certain.

“We’re okay,” Taylee said. She was Clay’s sister, and she was absolutely lovely.

“We don’t have much time to get together like this, where it’s just us girls,” January said. “But maybe we should. Maybe we should start a book club or something, or at least call it a book club, but what we really do is just laugh and be silly and talk about nothing at all and drink wine.”

Stephanie was drying dishes and she perked up at the mention of books. “Ooh, I’d like that.”

“I make art,” Taylee said. “I was teaching it in the summer, but we could also do an art meeting.”

“Or just get together to play board games.”

“I think we should make that a thing, once a week here. An evening where everyone can get together. Not just for Christmas, but all the time.” That suggestion came from Elowen, who was Clay’s mate. “With everyone. We’ll make time whenever anyone who wants to come has time. And we’ll make sure that word spreads so that anyone who wants to join us from Pinefall also can.”

“Aww.” Taylee held her hand over her heart. “Thank you. That means so much. They probably won’t come because they’re leery about going off their own land, but I’ll still extend the invitation.”

Lottie plunged her hands back into the soapy dishwater. She only had a few more stacks of plates to go. All the utensils and cups were already washed, dried, and put away. The dishes were sorted out and any leftovers were safely tucked away in the refrigerator.

Nelson still hovered by the doorway. She laughed. “Really. I’ll be out there in twenty minutes. I’m happy. Christmas is

wonderful. Everyone is having such a great time. I'm so happy to be here, and I don't mind one bit that cleanup is part of that. It's important that you're out there. No one likes reading the rules on boardgames. They need someone to instruct them, and you and Orrin are the only ones who know how to play most of them."

He gave her a sheepish smile. "Alright, I'm going. I can tell when I'm being kicked out."

"That's right," Stephanie said, shooing her tea towel in a swatting motion. "You get out there and hold down the fort until we're back."

"Luckily Josephine and Lily are out there doing that already," Elowen said as Nelson retreated out and Lottie grabbed another stack of dishes to fill the sink. She'd given them a few minutes to soak before starting to scrub them. "Mothers of five, but really, they're mothers of all of Greenacre. All our children are in Sam and Lily's care, and if anything ever happens to them, Josephine is there to make it alright."

Taylee moved around the kitchen, flowing like waves against a shore. Lottie knew a little of the small woman's story, she'd been in a tragic accident just over a year and a half ago and lost her memories. They had never returned but she was so positive and upbeat and was a joy to be around. Steph watched her as she danced around the kitchen putting things away. "Are you doing Christmas at Pinefall later? Although, it's already getting late. Or did you do one this morning?"

"Tomorrow," Taylee responded. "I never thought I'd leave my clan, and it's hard to believe that now I'm planning two Christmases, but no one minds. My family is easy going and it's not like we go big for Christmas anyway, it's more an excuse to eat. My mom didn't mind moving things to

tomorrow. She said last night, but I was so busy baking and planning for today that I thought it would be too much.”

A loud crash came from the meeting hall. January’s face froze. “Oh my gosh. I’ll go check and see what that was. No one’s crying, so it’s probably fine, but it sounded like the place was going to come down.” She raced out to see what had happened.

They all paused for a minute, but it was pretty quiet on the other side of the wall, or at least there were no screams of pain or any wailing going on. The regular screams, laughter, and buzz of activity still went on.

“We’re going to see my dad tomorrow too,” Lottie volunteered, breaking the silence. She was so worried about him not seeing her on Christmas day, but he understood. They’d have all day tomorrow to visit, and she’d be bringing Nelson and Orrin, and a selection of their new favorite games. They’d both worked hard on drawings for her dad which had been framed. She wondered if Taylee needed anyone to help out at her art classes. It might take some convincing, but maybe she could get Nelson involved. He wasn’t just good at art. He was great, a natural talent.

“My mom was in a fit that I didn’t come back to Ohio for Christmas.” Steph leaned with her back against the wooden island in the middle of the kitchen. “I mean, seriously, Ohio? She doesn’t understand why we can’t all just fly. Four kids and an adult ticket? That’s a lot. She wants to meet Sebastian and I can’t exactly explain why flying isn’t the best idea. He was willing to do it, but I do know that if something went wrong, it would go seriously south. I think a trip this summer would be so much better. We could hire an RV and drive, make a road trip of it. I grew up in Tinville and spent nearly my whole life there. I have so much family and so many friends. They miss

me and I miss them, so I'd want to go for more than just the shortest time."

Elowen set her hand on her best friend's arm. "I think that sounds awesome. It's tough, not being able to share the secret with family, otherwise they could come and stay here and find out for themselves how amazing this place is."

"True," Steph added. "I've got to tone things down because sometimes if I described the town as it is then my folks would think I was living in some commune."

The women all laughed.

"Yep," Lottie agreed. "I'm lucky that my dad gets to know Nelson and Orrin and that we're only an hour away, but he'll never know that part of them."

"It's extra hard when you have children here, but somehow, everyone makes it work." Elowen suddenly looked a little bit dreamy. "I guess now is a good time to tell you all. Clay and I are going to have a baby."

"Oh my god!" Taylee shrieked and had to tone it down before half the hall came rushing through the kitchen door. "Ell! Yay! I'm so happy, I'm going to be an auntie again!"

Stephanie threw her arms around Elowen. "I'm also so happy!"

"That's amazing," Lottie whispered. "Congratulations."

When the rounds of questions and excited comments died down, Stephanie unexpectedly turned to her. “You’re going to be starting at the school in January and we’re so excited to have you. We need all the help we can get, especially with the school expanding. Are you—this is so nosy and you don’t have to answer, but are you and Nelson planning on having any children?”

“Oh.” She hoped that her red cheeks could be blamed on the hot dishwater. Except that she’d taken her hands out ages ago and was standing with her back to the sink. These women thought that she and Nelson had been real mates for a year or even longer. No one was really sure what their timeline was. “Um, I’m not- I don’t know.”

“I’m so sorry. I don’t even know why I asked that. It’s just that, Sebastian and I said that we wouldn’t, mostly because he never needed to have his own children, but...”

Elowen’s eyes shot wide, and Taylee gasped and covered her mouth so she wouldn’t shriek again. “Are you for real? We’re going to have babies at the same time?”

“I’m for real. It wasn’t planned, but... we’re still very happy. I’m almost four months along.”

“Stop it!” Elowen clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Stop! I’m almost four months along. We seriously got pregnant right around the same time without even trying?”

Taylee waved her hands in front of her eyes. “Oh my gosh, you guys are too much. I’m going to cry.”

Thankfully, the attention had been diverted from her. She would have been perfectly fine saying that she and Nelson

weren't planning any additions to their family. Strangely enough, she'd talked herself out of being a mom for so many years, but seeing the joy on Elowen's and Steph's faces made her wonder if it could be a possibility in her future. She'd made Nelson a promise, that nothing would ever happen to her, and taking a risk like that—it might truly do deep and lasting harm to him after what he'd already been through with Kara. She couldn't bear the thought of the man she loved hurting like that again.

Yes, she loved him.

She still hadn't told him. She'd been dying to, waiting for that right moment. It seemed so monumental because she'd never told anyone in her entire life that she loved them. At least not that kind of love. She felt silly thinking about telling him when they were home and Orrin was in bed. It would seem like some token Christmas thing, *oh, by the way, I love you and that's your gift, Merry Christmas*. Or would it?

She listened to all the plans that Steph and Elowen were making, and her heart was full. It washed that sadness and maybe even that little bit of jealousy away, seeing how excited they were.

"That's why I was asking," Steph said, turning back to her. "Because I'll need to take some time off, and that would just absolutely leave Connor in a real pinch."

"Nelson and I- it still feels very new when we're together. We'd like to take some time where it's just us, and just Orrin." Was that a polite enough way to answer that? Was it too polite?

Steph didn't think so because she walked across the kitchen and flung her arms around her. Lottie hadn't been hugged by

anyone in Greenacre yet. She knew that these women would be true friends to her, and she could be open with them when they knew each other better. They were part of the clan here. Part of Greenacre. They would help each other and care for each other. They'd help with each other's children and love them like they were their own. She'd never had a girlfriend like that in her life, but it appeared that at Greenacre, she'd have many friends. The same barriers that existed in the world fell away in a small community where everyone needed to help everyone else in order to survive and thrive.

“Not that you can't,” Steph rushed on. “Because if you did, and you wanted time off, Sam would find someone. They'd figure something out. Goodness. I'm being so rude. I'm sorry. I've just made a complete mess of this.”

“No.” Lottie assured her. “Don't worry. I'm so excited for both of you and I can't wait until I have two more babies to hold, and this entire place has two more babies to love. Children are always a gift, but they're extra special here.”

Steph burst into tears, but she waved everyone off, complaining about hormones and laughing at herself.

Lottie finished up the dishes, and soon they were dried and put away and the kitchen looked pretty much back to normal. Just in time for the dessert extravaganza they'd be busting out in a few hours. If Nelson wanted to wash the dishes then, and recruit some help, she'd gladly take him up on the offer.

She was just emerging from the kitchen with the other women when the first notes of acoustic guitar music filled up the hall. Lily rushed around, lining up eager and enthusiastic kids for dancing. It sounded like something country and not Christmas music, which made Loretta smile.

She spotted Orrin across the room. He leapt up and went to join Sam's older sons, who were helping the younger kids find their rhythm, a violinist had joined in, and they were playing some kind of Scottish jig.

She found Nelson at a table with Kier, Tavish, and Clay before they all rushed off to help with their kids. That left just the two of them and a boardgame that would probably pick up right where it left off once the dancing was done—or at least when most of the kids were exhausted or lost interest and went back to their wild games.

“I don't like telling you that you look lovely,” Nelson said, putting an arm around her as soon as she sat down and snuggling her against his side. “Because I think that if I say, you look lovely tonight, it means that I don't think so any other night and that would just be the falsest bit of information I ever spoke. But you look lovely tonight. You look lovely right now.” He kissed her cheek and took her hand.

She'd moved her things into *their* room. Put her clothes in the extra dresser and tucked her suitcase under the bed that was now both of theirs together. The smallest things were always the most monumental.

Nelson wound a strand of her long hair over his finger. The copper shone a red gold under the hall's bright lights. There was no mood lightning in the place. “I wanted to tell you that I've decided something. Something about fear.”

“Okay.” She loved the way he toyed with that strand of hair, brushing his thumb and index finger over it.

“I wanted to say that I don't ever want to be unfair to you. I don't ever want to stop you from living your life to the fullest. I can't let fear make my decisions for me. I've stopped doing

my own dangerous work. I've got rid of my company in Seattle, sold it to someone else."

"I know." She covered his knee with her hand. "You worked so hard at getting it sold and all of that taken care of. I'm glad that the only thing tying us to Seattle right now is my dad. It's nice to have family, but I'm glad you're done with that business. It wasn't the right fit for you. It got you by and it helped provide for you, but it wasn't—"

"It wasn't how I needed to live," he finished for her.

"Yes." Her lungs were tight. Her heart fluttered at what he was saying.

"You're what I need. You and Orrin. Greenacre. The people here. Your dad and my brother. Family and friends." He raised his head a fraction. "I've changed my mind about Christmas. I think it's okay after all."

"Yes." She wasn't going to bug him about that. "This is wonderful. You had a part in planning it. You should be proud of everything you've accomplished here already."

"Accomplished? No. Everything I helped with, maybe. I don't feel like my life has to be a series of accomplishments now. Not in the same way as I felt like it did out there. Here, I can just be a regular man. I can be a shifter, a dad, and a mate."

"What about our future, how do you see things going?" As soon as the words came out, Lottie regretted them because it sounded like she was doubting that they had a future. That wasn't it at all, it was just that the earlier conversation in the kitchen with the woman had got her thinking.

“You mean babies? That kind of stuff?” Nelson said looking at her.

She nodded. “I’d come to term with the idea of not having my own children, truthfully it wasn’t something I ever really envisaged. When I first started working for you, and the arrival of Orrin in my life, it kind of awakened something in me—and he’s filled a need I never even knew I had. You both have, you’re my family.” She met his eyes, looking into their black depths. Not cold but warm. She traced her hand down the side of his face, feeling him, his scars. Everything he was and had been through made him the man he was right now and she couldn’t love him more.

“You asked me once if I would rather have the greatest love in my life, knowing I might lose it, or not have it at all. I think I can answer that now. I want you. I want to love you. I want to do that with an open and generous heart. I want you to find happiness and if that happiness means we have children, then I want that too. I want you to be able to live without fear. You’ve already done that. You took a chance on me. You took a job far out of your comfort zone. There is happiness. There is still life. Life might just be good. Life might be full of incredible blessings. And yes, it’s going to hurt as things change, but we can’t freeze time. I wish we could. I truly wish we could, even if it’s just for this moment right here, where we’re surrounded by laughter and children, by our friends, by our land, which is still wild and free and protected by us.”

“Oh, Nelson,” she breathed. Were there words for the happiness that was so good it threatened to explode the walls of her heart? She put her hand on his temple and leaned in. The noise of the laughter, the children’s joyful screams, the dancing and guitar music all faded into the background. “Who knows what the future will bring? Maybe we’ll have a child and maybe we won’t. But Greenacre seems to have the

magical quality of giving you what you need exactly when you need it, and I trust that whatever happens it's meant to be. I love you. I love you so much.”

He let out a breath, soft and quiet. His hand closed over hers, holding it to his face. His eyes closed and when he smiled, she was stunned at the peace on his face. He'd travelled on the earth for so many years, and he didn't look like he'd ever found it, until this moment.

“I love you, Loretta. Happy Greenacre Christmas. Happy rest of our lives.”

Thank you for reading!

If you have not read the first book in the **Bear Mates Over Forty** series, follow this link to read “[Midlife Bear Twins](#)”

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About the Author:

Aline is obsessed with space, adventures, and mighty alpha aliens that populate the constellation she came from (or so she likes to imagine).

In her positive thinking master classes, she encourages people to become optimistic, creative, to focus on positive emotions, and to live a meaningful life.

In her books, she aims to share this positive vibe too. Even when her heroes are stuck in the most awful situations, they kick and fight, fall in love against all the odds, and live happily ever after.

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