



RESISTING

FATE

MALLORY FUNK

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Dedication

To whoever took a chance and read the first book of the series.
Thank you. Readers, this one is for you.

Prologue

Isaac

Life for me hasn't really been easy. I wasn't allowed to live a life of my choosing. I have to put on this fake mask and hang out with people I don't really care about. I also had to reject my fated mate like she was nothing to me. I had always watched her from afar because there was always this pull I felt towards her. When she hung out with Max and Ryker, I felt an insane amount of jealousy. I wanted to be the one she laughed with. When she looked at Max with starry eyes, I yearned for that look to be directed at me.

I knew why it couldn't be me. My fucked-up family forbid me to be the one for her.

If only I had one choice in my life, she would be my choice.

There is only one person who was stopping me.

I hate my father more than I have ever hated any person, and my mother would come in as a close second. My life was never mine. One day, I hope to find a way from under their thumb and live life for myself with who I want to. There has to be a way.

"You will behave tonight, and don't even think about going anywhere near that human," my father spits out at me just before we leave the house. His face is already red with anger.

I reluctantly nod my head. "Yes, sir," I say through clenched teeth.

When I turn my eyes to my mother, she is looking at me with a cold disinterest.

I have no idea why they are like this, and I may never know. They have been like this my whole life.

They had me just so that they could perform their "duty" to the pack. That's what they had always told me. Now, they only

wanted me to be with the alpha's daughter; my ex-girlfriend, Penelope.

She may be the only person who knows what my parents were really like.

I loved her, but I wasn't in love with her. I had only tried to make it work with her so that my parents would leave me alone. I kept her close because she was the only person to know, and see me for, who I really was.

I couldn't and wouldn't love anyone else but my fated mate.

Not many shifters are lucky to find their fated mate, but I was.

Hailey Weston.

She was human and was Ryker and Max's best friend. She followed those two around everywhere growing up.

She was one of the few humans who knew what we really were.

Shifters.

I treated her like shit growing up and acted as if she was beneath me because of what my father would do to me.

The couple times that he had caught me looking at her longingly, he had beaten me close to death. Then I was locked up until I was healed enough to be seen in public.

The truth was that I always knew that Hailey was too good for me. She's ten times better than I could ever hope to be.

I'm blessed that fate has chosen her for me.

Even if I will never get to be with her.

I watch her throughout the evening while she was talking and laughing with Ryker, Max, Penelope, and Calvin.

Fuck, why couldn't I have been the type to deserve my mate?

The attack on our pack comes unexpectedly. I don't think of anything else but making sure no harm comes to her.

She needs to be safe.

Hailey

I've had a thing for my best friend for years. Max was everything I wanted in a man. He was sweet, kind, good looking, and funny. He was always there for me.

He was a shifter though, and they had fated mates who they were able to discover after completing a test when they came of age.

All the kids spent their time around the pack, but they didn't find their place in the pack until completing the Rite of Passage ceremony.

I tried to learn everything I could about shifters when I first found out about them. I had accidentally stumbled on Max and our other best friend Ryker shifting. Honestly, I wasn't scared. They were the closest people in my life. I knew they would never hurt me.

Then I had learned about fated mates and I hoped Max would look at me and realise I was the one for him. I had stars in my eyes when it came to him.

The test lasted a whole month and, when I finally saw Max for the first time after that, I was devastated that he felt nothing when he looked at me. His shoulders slumped like he had been hoping that I was going to be his fated mate too.

I knew nothing would happen with us from there. Max had always said he wouldn't take on a relationship with someone else because he knew his fated mate was out there. There was no way he would put someone through the heartache of losing him.

I didn't know how strong the pull was until Ryker had fated Penelope.

Penelope was the alpha's daughter, and every guy wanted to be fated to her. Being her fated would move your place to the top of the pack.

To everyone's shock, Ryker and she were fated to one another. She rejected him at first, but it didn't take long for her to give

in to fate.

I always thought she would fate Isaac who was her on and off again boyfriend for years. I knew he had hoped he would be fated to her. He was self-centred and only made decisions that would benefit him.

I saw nothing good about Isaac, and I didn't know how he had managed to end up with the alpha's daughter in the first place.

I had seen him outside when I was running late for class. He was glaring at me with so much disgust that I had to wonder what I did.

He spit my name out like it left a bad taste in his mouth and said, "I can't believe fate thought I would mate someone like you."

His words hit me like a ton of bricks.

I didn't know why the words hurt so much. I have hated him my whole life. When he utters the words rejecting me, I want to crawl into a ball and cry. I felt a devastation that I never knew was possible.

Was this how Ryker felt?

I didn't go anywhere for the next week. I laid in bed and cried for the one man I hated.

When I finally pulled myself together, I felt nothing but numb as the days passed by.

I faked being happy with everyone, even though I felt nothing but empty inside. I couldn't explain this feeling to anyone.

Isaac still looked pissed at me every single time we saw each other.

The days passed until we all graduated from the local college and Ryker dragged me to the after party and dinner that the pack was hosting. Since I already knew about them, it wasn't a problem with the alpha for me to join them.

One minute we were all having a good time, at least I was pretending to, and the next we were under attack.

I was pushed into the middle of the room while everyone else was fighting shifters who had clearly come to kill.

I don't know who was protecting me. I had my head down in my hands to protect myself as I heard growls and snarls around the room.

I had never been more terrified in my life.

My eyes widened as a wolf came out of nowhere and swiped a claw at me. My vision went white as I felt instant pain. When I touched my side, blood started to pour out of me.

Teeth latched onto my leg as I screamed in agony. I hear my name being screamed.

I don't recognise the voice as a cold shiver runs over my body.

I never thought this would be how I died.

Isaac and Penelope are kneeling over me with tears running down their faces.

I'm too tired and too weak to move. I just need to close my eyes for a second.

Nothing could have prepared me for what happened next.

Chapter One

Isaac

My mate hates me. I only have myself to blame for that. I hate myself too. I never meant the things I had said to her. I was just trying to survive. I have scars on my body from the times I had dared to go against my mother and father.

The mating pull is strong. I tried to break it and mate someone else, but the thought of touching someone who isn't my mate makes me want to hurl.

To my shame, I tried with Ashley who used to be Penelope's best friend. The second I kissed her, I felt nothing but disgust for her.

Hers weren't the hands that were supposed to be touching me. Hers were not the lips meant to be kissing mine. My wolf knew it was all wrong.

I had to fight myself over and over again not to go to Hailey and beg for her to forgive me.

I've picked on her for as long as I can remember.

She was never someone that I was allowed to desire or want. Even if I did, everyone could tell she only had eyes for Max. That was one of the reasons she was always on my radar. I wanted her to look at me the way she always looked at him; like I hung the fucking moon.

I was never a good person though. There will never be a time where I will be good enough for her.

There are so many mistakes and regrets I have.

Rejecting my mate will always be one of them. Even if I was forced to.

It took my wolf to open my eyes. Now that my parents are dead, I feel like I can live and breathe for the first time in a long time.

Hailey is a gorgeous woman. She is also sweet and loyal.
What more could you ask for in a mate?

I found myself watching her whenever I had the chance. My wolf wanted control so he could claim her himself if I wasn't going to do it.

I never have lost control of my wolf like this badly before; we are constantly fighting. I feel like I'm being torn in two. He has wanted her from the very beginning and didn't agree with me rejecting our mate.

My wolf saw what I was ignoring.

Now I must pay for my actions.

I see the whole pack with new eyes.

Nothing is the way it should be.

Our alpha had betrayed us, and we would have been slaughtered if it wasn't for the Thompson family.

My parents sided with the old alpha and found themselves betrayed and killed. I can't say I'm sorry to see them go. My hope is that all the ugly from the pack was wiped away so we can start fresh under Ryker's leadership.

I think most of the pack stared in awe that night when we watched the Thompson family take down several wolves before anyone could blink.

After that, it became a no brainer that Ryker would take over the pack. Even if he was smaller than most of us (his whole family was), they knew how to fight better than the rest of us.

I knew I could trust him with my life when I saw him double shift.

Who knew you could do that?

Clearly, we underestimated them.

I pace the front porch of the Thompson's home.

My mate had been victim to a brutal attack.

She was clawed into on her side and was bleeding out right before my eyes.

I watched the light leave her eyes.

Everything inside of me broke.

All I could see was everything I lost.

The one-person fate had deemed my other half was gone; I would never know true happiness.

As soon as the light left her eyes, I howled out in pain, shifted, and took off.

It wasn't until I felt the presence of another wolf that I knew it had to be my mate. I ran back to the Thompson house as fast as I could.

As soon as I saw her eyes slightly open, I fell to my knees and broke into a sob.

I told her over and over again that I wasn't leaving.

The pain and cold look in her eyes when she told me to leave devastated me as I followed Ryker out of the room.

I need to find a way to get my mate back. My need for her is as strong as my need to breathe; though I never really had her in the first place. That thought breaks me up inside.

How could I let someone so important to me endure the fake disgust and hate I threw towards her for all these years?

My dad was the beta of the pack, and I can't say that I'm sorry he's gone. He was a terrible man and had always pushed me towards Penelope. He wanted our family to take over the pack. This was the only way to do it without causing a war.

Every time Penelope broke up with me, my dad found a new way to punish me. Like it was somehow my fault.

Both Penny and I didn't really feel any romantic feelings towards each other. I felt that desperate need to cling to her when she mated Ryker because the beatings from my dad were becoming unbearable. He always made sure to hit me brutally hard in places where it wouldn't show.

He was also able to get away with the abuse because, as wolves, we heal faster than humans. The first few hours before the healing fully activates can be brutal though.

As much as I would have loved to accept Hailey, I couldn't. To my father, humans were beneath us. They couldn't shift, and there was nothing special about them.

I hated to pretend that I was something I wasn't.

I could see how upset both Max and Hailey were when they didn't face one another. You could see the devastation they both felt. I was relieved. When I got closer to Hailey, I knew why.

How could I compete with someone like that?

I couldn't.

To her, Max was the perfect mate, and I was just the asshole who had always treated her like dirt.

The pack had a meeting last night, and I barely paid any attention to it. All I could think about was my mate and how much pain I had caused her.

If I go after her now, she will only think it's because she's changed that I will now want her.

That wouldn't be close to the truth.

I can only prove to her and everyone else that I'm not the man they all think I am.

Only one person has seen the real me and, even now, I'm just learning who I really am now that I am allowed to be him.

Now that most of the older generation had been killed, I know things are definitely going to change around here.

I back Ryker up as the new alpha, which I can tell is a shock to everyone.

I have a feeling he's going to do a lot of good for this pack.

He's exactly what we need.

"You should leave now, son. Get some rest. She will be fine," Scott says. I turn around and face him.

"I can't," I whisper.

He nods his head in understanding. "I won't pretend to understand what you are going through. You two need to work

through this on your own. It's up to her if she's going to forgive you or not. You can't force it."

"I know. I'm not going to, but I don't think I could physically leave. My wolf won't let me. I'll stay out here. Don't worry. I won't pressure her into anything. I just can't leave yet," I say.

He nods his head without say anything and walks inside.

I decide to shift so that I would be more comfortable.

I take off my clothes and fold them on the chair beside me.

I let the change take over me and let my wolf pace the porch for a few minutes. When he realises our mate isn't coming out to see us, he lays his head down and faces the window to where we know she is.

We stare for hours. Sleep never comes.

Hailey

I peeked out the window and saw Isaac change into his wolf and pace. I move so that I'm not in view of him, but I can still see him.

I hate how my wolf seems to calm down now that she has him in her sights.

She whimpers inside of me when I refuse to head towards our mate.

He doesn't want us. Not really.

I was nothing but a pathetic human.

The words he spit at me when he found out I was his mate repeat over and over again in my head.

His wolf may want me, but he doesn't. Almost losing me is probably what pushed all this guilt forward.

Now that I'm changed, it appears I'm now considered by him to be good enough to be his mate.

He has another thing coming if he thinks I'm just going to swoon and jump into his arms.

Why does my mate have to be both ridiculously gorgeous and an asshole?

I don't have a good memory of him growing up. I always knew who he was and could never see what Penelope saw in him.

Fate seems to be a real asshole.

Why would fate pair people who are completely opposite from each other? It honestly makes no sense. Sure, in the end it worked out for Ryker and Penelope, but that doesn't mean it's going to work for everyone else.

I stare at the wolf that fate would deem as mine and I hate the pull I feel towards him. The anger is burning up inside of me that this is what's in store for me. My life had completely changed in the blink of an eye; heck, I can't even see my parents right away which is just icing on top of the cake.

I would love to have my parents wrap me up in their arms and tell me everything is going to be okay.

How can I hate someone so much? My wolf doesn't want to live without him, but I would be perfectly fine if I never saw him again.

I won't take Isaac Kingston as my mate. Ever.

Chapter Two

Hailey

Eight weeks later...

The days and then weeks blur together. It has become very easy to shift forms but, let's face it, I'm not Ryker. He can do it instantly. I am very slow compared to him.

I don't see Ryker very much, even though I'm still staying with his parents. Penelope and Ryker live in their own house now.

I let the change take over me. The feel of my bones breaking and rearranging themselves, and fur replacing my skin is something I have gotten used to over the weeks while I have been training. I have good control over my wolf, and I have Scott to thank for that.

Penelope had told me how he made her do the exact training when she mated Ryker. It's completely exhausting, but I couldn't imagine having a wolf most of my life and then having to learn this so much later.

We all had seen how fast the Thompson family can shift, and that seems to be everyone's main goal to reach. Now, every shifter is taking lessons from Scott on how to improve. Once you nail that down, they start to teach you how to fight.

My goal is to fight like Ryker. I want to be able to shift in the blink of an eye and still kick ass. He is the one we all need to look up to. I don't know what life was like personally with the old alpha, only what I could see as an outsider, but I did not like how he treated my friends and anyone he deemed lesser than him.

Isaac has not left my side. More often than not, he is in his wolf form. I prefer that he stay that way. I don't shift to my wolf around him so we can communicate. It's easier than having to hear some bullshit excuse on how he wants to be my mate now.

Penelope had started to come over to see me on most days. It was shocking at first since she wasn't someone that I had been close to. Then, she ended up saving my life and I saw a different side to her than the girl everyone knew growing up.

We had become closer in the last few weeks. I know she feels responsible for me because of her somehow being responsible for changing me and saving my life.

Understanding the new wolf side of me, I can now see how instinct took over and her wolf did what she thought was right.

I walk outside to sit in the cool morning air and, no surprise, Isaac is there.

His wolf gets as close to me as he can when I take a seat and I find myself putting a hand around him.

I think about my life and everything that has happened. Before I know it, hours have passed.

There is a celebration for Ryker becoming the new alpha now that everything has settled down.

Everyone needed time after some members of the pack betrayed us.

I get up to go get ready when a deep voice stops me.

"Hailey, please," he rasps out.

I close my eyes and ignore the affect his voice has on me.

"You made your choice and this one is mine," I say taking a step closer to the door.

He grabs my hand as I pull away and quickly turn around to face him.

"Don't," I hiss out.

"I was wrong, I'm sorry. Please. How many more times do I need to say that?" he asks, sounding exhausted with me.

"You can say it until your voice is hoarse and throat is dry. All I know about you is how much your words hurt. They have done nothing but cause me pain growing up. You think you can just stalk me for days, weeks, months, and I'm going to

forget that I'm pathetic, just a human, trash, and lower than dirt?" I ask while my breathing gets heavier and tears well in my eyes. I look at Isaac who wears a look of shame and regret.

I angrily swipe away the tears. "Do you know how many times I went home to cry and wonder what was wrong with me? How many times I just wanted it all to stop and get far away from this place? No matter how many times I tried to ignore the hateful bullying you did, it hit me deep in my core and nothing can erase that. I may one day be able to forgive you but, believe me, I won't forget. Just because I have a wolf now, you feel like I'm good enough for you to waste your time on; but listen here Isaac, you aren't good enough for me. You never will be."

I rush inside and slam the door. I run up to the room I'm staying in before collapsing into sobs.

Why do I feel like I just broke my own heart?

Isaac

If she had ripped out of my heart, it would have felt better than the words she just spoke. My heart breaks even further as I hear the gut wrenching sobs all the way from her room, thanks to my shifter hearing.

I did that.

I caused my mate so much pain that she can barely look at me without remembering all the horrible things I said.

There's nothing I can do to take back the past. I have no one to blame but myself.

I'm not the same person I was a year ago.

So much has changed within the pack and within me since Penelope and Ryker found out they were mates.

I always thought that I was above it all. I was made to think that I was better than anyone else who wasn't at the top of the pack.

Seeing Hailey die changed me.

Watching the life drain out of my mate, and thinking I would never get a chance to redeem myself to her, really scared me.

Fate doesn't get it wrong.

A lot of people would love a chance at meeting their mate, and here I was throwing it away.

I have to find a way to my mate's heart.

There is no way I could live without her.

I just need to find a way to show her that.

~

I reluctantly head home to change into clothes for the celebration. Honestly, it feels weird to be in human form after spending all that time as my wolf so that I could remain close to Hailey. When I arrive at the party, everyone is just starting to show up. Laughter is heard all around. The pack is definitely more peaceful than it used to be, and the energy is more relaxed when we all gather together.

I look around until my eyes land on my mate. She is fake smiling with Ryker, and I know he can tell since he keeps looking at her concerned. Whatever he said to her causes her to shaker her head.

Ashley stops in front of me before I can step any closer to my mate.

She runs a hand down my chest, and I grab it and push it away before she can go any further.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?" I snap angrily.

"Oh, come on. You know you miss me," she says, trying to sound seductive. Whatever she is trying to do does nothing for me.

"I don't. You were a mistake. Don't touch me again," I growl out before pulling away.

"Oh please, like that newbie wolf is good enough for you," she shouts.

The room quiets down at her words, and I still and turn around.

“That’s where you are wrong. I’m not good enough for her, but I won’t stop trying to be worth anything she is willing to give me. You aren’t anything special. Something most of the pack can agree on. Get off your high horse. You think you are above everyone, but you are not. You are just another wolf and pack member like the rest of us,” I spit out angrily.

“You used to think you were better than everyone too,” she says, smirking at me like she’s digging me into a hole.

I nod my head in agreement. “Yeah, I did, and you know what I learned? Every single one of the higher wolves were complete scum. There was never anything special about them. All they wanted was status, power, and ranking. Where did that get them? They betrayed the pack. Those lesser wolves we were always taught were weaker than us saved our lives. We only have a pack today because of them. Things are changing, Ash. You either learn to grow with it or get out. No one is better than anyone else. We are all a pack, and we are all equal.”

She doesn’t reply to my words. Instead, she just stomps out of the room in a huff.

Ryker claps me on the back, looking proud.

“You did good,” he says, grinning.

“Hopefully my mate agrees with you,” I murmur, causing him to chuckle.

Chapter Three

Hailey

I can't get Isaac's words out of my mind. Has he really changed? Does he mean all those things he said?

He stays close to me throughout the evening, and I can barely concentrate on anything else. My wolf wants him, but I don't. There is this constant war going on in my head that's draining me of all my energy.

I feel like I can barely breathe with him so close.

When Penelope's mom and her fated mate come to talk to everyone, I take that as my cue to sneak out and get some air. I know I won't be alone for long since I'm rarely left alone these days.

I head outside and lean against the siding. I take deep breaths as I look up at the sky.

"You think you are something special, don't you?" a voice says in a sneer.

I roll my eyes and turn to face the woman who thinks she's too good for everyone in the pack.

"I don't think that-" I start, but she cuts me off with an ugly laugh.

"You were nothing your whole life. Just because you were able to get a wolf still doesn't make you anything now. Everyone will see what a pathetic person you still are," she spits out angrily.

"What do you want?" I ask, trying to sound bored; but my wolf has become alert. Her hackles are raised, sensing this woman is a threat.

"You can't have Isaac; he's mine. He was supposed to be mine. The day Penelope mated to that runt Ryker was the day I was supposed to get everything. Then you come along and try

to take what's mine? I don't think so," she says before I see the change start to take over her.

I don't think about anything else and let my wolf push through as I change and growl at Ashley.

She runs towards me and leaps forward, but I manage to dodge her in time. She slams into the ground on the other side of me.

I spend the next twenty minutes trying to dodge her while she continues trying to get the upper hand. Honestly, I'm surprised no one has come out to check on me. Just when the thought occurs, the door opens. I look at it for a second and that is all the time that Ashley needs to catch me off guard. She leaps at me with her teeth bared.

Her teeth latch onto my leg, and I try to shake her off me as best as I can. I hear a bone snap before she's tossed off me with another wolf's teeth on her throat.

I don't shift, but a bunch of people run out of the hall and see the scene before them.

I look over at Ashley and see that it was Isaac that is still holding her throat in his mouth.

Ryker comes over to us looking pissed but, when he sees me with blood pooling around my leg, he pales for a second before running to check on me.

"It's broken. I'm going to have to reset it before it heals wrong," he says, looking me in the eyes. I know what he's trying to tell me; that this is going to be painful.

I nod my head and brace myself as the pain takes over.

At some point, I find myself in my mate's, no Isaac's, arms. I can't think of him that way.

Get out of that line of thinking, I tell myself.

"What the fuck was she thinking, attacking you?" Isaac growls.

I don't say anything since I haven't changed back yet, but a couple enforcers take Ashley to the cells.

I have only heard about the cells. They are just off the new alpha house that Ryker and Penelope live in. They had found a building in the back that was perfect in case they had to discipline any wolves or had feral animals that they couldn't control. They spent days and weeks fixing it up and putting the appropriate bars and walls in so that no shifter could try to escape when they were being punished.

I think Ryker was more worried about feral animals, which makes sense since we live really close to the forcefield where they are being held. I don't think he saw a need for using it for wolves to be punished. No one predicted that Ashley was going to go crazy and attack me.

I'm being lifted into Isaac's arms. He starts walking, but I don't see where he is taking me because I pass out before we've even made it a few steps.

~

Hours later, I wake up with a dull ache in my leg. When I glance over at it, I can tell that it's healing pretty quickly. I don't think that is something I will ever get used to.

Slowly, I adjust my eyes and notice that the room is dark with a dim light shining from a lamp.

I don't recognise the room I'm in. I lift my head up to look around and still when I see a figure on the chair facing me. It takes a second for me to realise it's Isaac, and I relax.

I shift back into my human form. I stretch out as best as I can and grab the sheet with me so I can cover up.

The movement seems to waken Isaac as his eyes pop open wide until he takes me in standing there in a sheet.

"Where am I?" I ask before clearing my throat since it's raspy and thick from sleep.

"At my home," he says softly.

I look at him with wide eyes. "Why am I in your home?" I snap the words more harshly than I need to, but I don't take it back.

“You were hurt. I couldn’t let you out of my sight. I knew Scott wouldn’t let me in his house, and I wanted you to be comfortable,” he explains.

“Well, it was pretty much your fault I was hurt,” I hiss at him.

He stills at my words. “Why is it my fault?”

“Well Ashley seems to think she’s the perfect mate for you and wanted to take me out of the equation,” I say dryly.

He clenches his jaw and lets out a curse.

“No one is more perfect for me than you,” he states.

I can’t help but roll my eyes at his words. “Right, how could I forget.”

He narrows his eyes at my words. “You may not believe me now, but I will prove it to you. I may have been stupid to question fate once, but I’m not going to do that again. I’ll find a way to make up for my mistakes,” he says before getting up and walking out of the room.

I sit down on his bed and slump in defeat. This feels like a never ending dance with us.

I let out a sigh and walk over to his dresser to pick out a shirt and pants. I ignore the possessive thoughts that run through me at the fact that I’m wearing my mate’s clothes and that he let me sleep in his bed.

I still at my thoughts. He had me in his bed so I would be comfortable, while he slept on the chair.

He didn’t want to let me leave his sight tonight, but he didn’t just lay next to me. That would have been a disaster. I’m glad he didn’t assume I would want him there.

I can’t let myself get lost in thinking how sweet that was of him to take my feelings and thoughts into consideration.

I walk out into the hallway and make my way to the washroom to do my business and brush my teeth with a spare toothbrush in its packaging that was placed by the sink.

When I walk around, I find stairs which I’m assuming leads to the kitchen and living room, or at least I hope they do.

Why does he need such a big house?

As far as I know, he's alone.

Once I finally make it downstairs, I follow my nose to the smells in the kitchen. My stomach lets out a loud grumble.

Isaac is standing at the stove cooking up breakfast. His shoulders tense when I walk into the room, but I choose to ignore that and head straight to the coffeemaker.

"Smells delicious," I say as my mouth starts to water.

"I figured you would be hungry," he says without looking at me. That bothers me more than I care to admit.

I look out the window and notice the sun has barely started to rise.

When I glance at the clock above the stove, I see that it's four in the morning.

"Wow, I didn't realise it was so early," I say softly.

"It's nice. I love the mornings when no one else is awake but the wolves who are on patrol. The fresh morning air mixed with the ground is still slightly damp from the night, the birds are chirping, and the breeze is light. There's nothing quite like it," he says. I walk over to the patio doors as he speaks, but I turn to look at him and notice that, as he's talking, he has a peaceful look on his face.

"I never heard someone explain it like that," I say softly.

His face loses its peacefulness, and he looks back down at the food. I hate that I took away that look from his face. I have never seen him look or speak that way before.

I take a couple steps outside taking in the morning just like he suggested. I close my eyes.

He's right. I hate that he's right, but this is perfect.

How had I never noticed that before?

I sit down on the steps, sip my coffee, and look over at the small lake behind his house.

This is truly a beautiful sight.

“Breakfast is ready,” he says minutes later, breaking the silence.

I start to get up but, when I turn to look back at him, he’s holding both plates in his hands and passes one to me. He goes back in for a moment to grab his coffee and sits beside me as we eat in silence.

“Do you want me to take you back to Scott’s?” he asks after we are done eating, and we head inside to grab another cup of coffee.

“It’s early. I don’t want to wake them,” I tell him honestly.

“You could stay here until you are ready to leave. There’s no rush. I can give you a tour,” he says, sounding unsure.

“Sure, why do you have such a big house anyways?” I ask as we walk towards the hallway on the main floor. I can do this; I can make small talk with him.

“Well, I had the house I lived in with my parents torn down. They had enough money in their bank accounts that I could afford a new home. I had always loved this place. When you are training during the day, I fix it up or decorate it. I guess I hope to have a big family one day and fill it with the love that I never had. My parents were abusive and cold. That’s not an environment I want any of my pups to grow up in,” he tells me with sadness in his tone.

My heart breaks at his words. “Wow, I didn’t know life was like that for you.”

He nods his head in understanding. “Yeah, no one knew but Penelope. That’s why I tried to hold onto what we had for so long.”

“I get it. Well not completely because my parents weren’t assholes, but I could see why you would want to hold onto the only good thing you have,” I admit.

He doesn’t respond to my words, but we walk into a room that is used as an office. The books that are on the bookshelf look quite old, which seems out of character for him to have.

The next room is a theatre of sorts. There is a bunch of huge recliners in there with a big screen that practically takes up the whole wall. Behind the chairs is a booth that holds a ton of junk food that I immediately want to eat up.

I reluctantly leave the room with Isaac chuckling behind me. “We can watch a movie after the tour.”

“Yes, please,” I say with a sigh.

This house is bigger than I thought. He even has an indoor pool and sauna. The basement has a gym. When I tell him that it looks like Scott’s, he admits to getting Scott to help design and organise the basement so he can train down here.

That brought a smile to my face. The pack is taking Scott more seriously now, which is something I had always hoped for.

Upstairs held a bunch of rooms, but the only one that was furnished was the master which was where we had slept.

There is still a lot that needs to be done with this house, but it really had the potential to become something special.

After I see the rest of the house, I practically skip back to the theatre room. Isaac chuckles at my enthusiasm.

“What do you want to watch?” he asks while getting the remotes and some blankets and pillows out.

“Anything with suspense,” I say, and walk straight to the junk food.

Seriously, this is heaven.

I want to live in this room.

I grab a bunch of treats, chips, popcorn, and pop before sitting down on the couch before Isaac reclines it. I pretend not to notice as he sits beside me, and we share the snacks between us.

I have no idea what movie he put on, but my smile won’t leave my face.

This is my perfect way to spend the day.

Isaac

My mate was smiling the whole time. I didn't miss the way her eyes lit up when I showed her the theatre room the first time.

I was glad she didn't want to leave as soon as she woke up.

Heck, if it were up to me, I would have her here all the time. I know that I have to take things one step at a time, but this was a perfect way to spend time with her. Especially after weeks of staying on the porch of Scott's house.

Now, I actually feel like we are getting somewhere.

Right now, she's falling asleep while letting me sit next to her. Slowly, her body falls sideways into me. I lift up my arm and pull her into me.

Fuck, it feels so good to finally have her in my arms. That's not something I thought I would ever have.

This small thing is something I will cherish, even if this is all she will give me.

I pull her into me more and lay back.

I don't bother pretending to watch the movie anymore, and I stare down at my mate as my fingers run through her hair.

Seeing Ashley attacking her, the blood around her leg, and the sounds of her pained cries was devastating yet again.

She has been injured two times too many.

Each time, it guts me to see my mate severely hurt.

I'll never forget her screams of pain when Ryker reset the bone.

I hold her just a little bit tighter as I fall asleep peacefully. The first time in a long time.

Chapter Four

Hailey

I wake up feeling safe and content. I honestly don't remember the last time I felt this way.

The body beneath me is warm and holding me tight, like he's afraid if he would let me go just a bit, I would disappear.

I hate how right this feels.

I feel my walls wanting to break, but I try hard to keep them up.

I have to remember that he's the guy who bullied me most of my life.

Twenty-four hours alone with him doesn't change that.

I remind myself of that and slowly get up so that I don't wake him. We need distance. My heart is weakening, and that's not something I can let happen.

I let out a breath as I make my way upstairs to look for my clothes. When I see them, I find my phone ringing and smile when I see it's my mom.

"Mom," I say with a smile.

"How's my girl?" she asks.

I look around the room and do my best to lie as best as I can.

"I'm great mom, never better."

"Have you seen anything exciting on the road? A giant Pac Man or something?" she asks excitedly.

I laugh at her words. "No, mom I haven't. Where would I even see such a thing?" I ask.

"I'm not sure, but there has to be one out there somewhere! If there isn't, we should put one in our town," she says.

"Yeah, let's do that," I say with a chuckle.

“Have you met anyone on the road,” she asks.

I hesitate. “No, mom, I haven’t met anyone new.” It’s not a lie but not the truth either.

“Talk to me, honey,” she says softly.

“It’s complicated,” I tell her.

“I’m good with complicated. Trust me,” she says with a laugh.

“I spent my life hating this man, thinking he was a different person; heck, maybe he was. How can I look at him so differently? Can people really change?” I ask.

She lets out a sigh. “Yeah, people can change. You need to trust your gut. Sometimes people change for the better; sometimes it’s for the worse. You have good instincts. They’ve never led you wrong before.”

I make a noise of agreement and change the subject.

We make small talk before hanging up the phone.

I dial Max’s number before I decide to leave. It has been a while since I have talked with my other best friend.

“Hey, how’s my best friend?” he answers.

“I’m getting there,” I tell him.

“Well, I’m on my way home. Should be there sometime tomorrow,” he says.

I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. “That’s great news. I can’t wait to see you!”

“Yeah, maybe you can tell me what has been going on with you and Isaac,” he says, his tone is anything but friendly when he says Isaac’s name.

“Not much. I’m still getting used to this whole wolf thing, let alone the mate thing. It’s a lot to take in,” I tell him with a sigh.

“Right, well I will pretend I believe you think everything is okay,” he says

I change the subject, and our conversation doesn't last much longer since I don't really want to talk about Isaac. Everything is too fresh.

I hang up feeling better that Max is on his way home. I missed him a lot.

I'm grinning when I turn around, but I jump when I see Isaac right behind me.

"Who was that?" he asks, but I don't know what to make of his tone.

"Oh, that was Max. He's on his way home," I say before walking closer to him. The grin spreads across my face.

"Do you always smile like that for him?" he asks, his voice taking on a growl. A possessive look crosses his face.

"He's my best friend," I say with a shrug, ignoring how the way he's acting is making me feel.

He steps closer, and we are almost touching.

He dips down and runs his lips along my cheek towards my ear. "Does he know you are mine?" he whispers.

A shiver races across my spine. I swallow hard.

"I'm not yours," I whisper, but my voice cracks at the end. Even I don't believe my words.

He lets out a growl. "You are mine; Max can't have you."

"You don't get to make that decision," I rasp out as he bites down on my earlobe.

"Has he touched you already?" he hisses out.

His lips move along my ear towards my neck and shoulder.

My body is trembling and my eyes close at the sensation of his lips on my skin.

"That's none of your business," I say with a gasp when he bites down on my shoulder. Not hard enough to claim me, but enough to know he doesn't like my response.

He bends down a bit to grab the back of my thighs and tosses me on the bed, following me so he's on top of me. My legs

open and he slides himself in between them and presses his body down to mine. “Everything about you is my business,” he growls before kissing me hard.

I resist for a second before I am kissing him back.

His tongue slides into my mouth and I get lost in the taste of him.

I grip his shoulders and, as much as I want to push him away, I find myself pulling him closer and pushing my hips up to him. I feel his hard cock through our sweatpants.

I get lost in the desire; my wolf is urging me to claim our mate.

I pull back, breathing hard, and look into his eyes. His wolf eyes flash for a moment before returning to normal.

“I’m not yours. I’m not claiming you,” I say sternly, trying to convince us both.

His eyes flash before he slams his mouth into mine and everything becomes a blur.

We rush to remove our clothes, otherwise I’m sure they would get torn up in the process.

The feel of my mate’s skin against mine is amazing, and I feel like I can’t get enough. Is this the pull everyone tells me about?

If it is, I can see understand why it’s so powerful as I want nothing more than to be consumed by him.

I don’t analyse my thoughts for long as I notice his cock against my thigh, and I let out a moan when his hand trails down to my clit. I pull away with a gasp and throw my head back as he slides his finger inside of me, feeling how wet I am for him.

I have never been this turned on in my life.

“Fuck,” he curses against my neck. I can feel his teeth on my skin and the wolf inside me wants to let him mark her and claim her, but I have enough will to refuse it.

I can feel my own teeth lengthen as my wolf wants to claim her mate, but I turn my head so I can't reach his skin.

He removes his fingers from inside of me and replaces them with his cock.

I tense for a second. He must have felt it because he rubs his cock against my entrance, almost teasing me, and it causes me to relax enough for him to slide himself inside of me.

He thrusts in, and I bite my lip to hide the cry of pain that comes over me. With his head buried in my neck, he can't see my eyes squeeze shut as he thrusts in and out of me.

"Fuck, you are mine, Hailey," he grits out.

I shake my head but don't offer him any words.

He pulls back to look down at me as he thrusts. "Your wolf knows you are mine. She wants to claim me just as bad as my wolf wants to claim you. Your body knows it's mine," he says with a thrust and moves one hand to pinch my nipple.

"I'll never be yours," I say, fighting my wolf.

"One day, you will see what I see. We were made for each other," he says, and fucks me hard.

He moves his hand back to my clit and flicks it in time with his thrusts.

I feel myself falling closer and closer over the edge.

When he moves back down and flicks my nipple with his tongue before sucking it into his mouth, I let out a cry as I fall.

Isaac follows me when he feels me tighten around him and I feel him release inside of me.

He falls on top of me. Both of us are breathing heavily as I realise what I just did.

Tears well in my eyes.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," I choke out.

"I didn't plan for that to happen," he says, lifting up his head. His face falls when he sees the tears fall from my eyes.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt you?" he asks, sounding concerned.

I push him so he has no choice but to pull out of me. When he looks down, his face loses all colour.

“Oh fuck,” he whispers.

“This was a mistake. You were a mistake,” I cry out as I dig through his drawers for more clothes to put on quickly.

He doesn't say anything but looks at me in horror.

“This isn't how my first time was supposed to go. It wasn't supposed to be you,” I hiss out as anger overtakes me.

“Hailey,” he chokes out.

I put my hand up to stop him.

“No, I can't be near you right now. I don't even want to look at you,” I rasp.

I ignore the tears that well in his eyes as he watches me dress. I run downstairs, put on my shoes, and open the door.

I practically run out of the house and down the street.

Thankfully, he doesn't live too far from the rest of the pack.

I run straight to my best friend's house. I'm practically out of breath by the time I'm knocking on his door.

Ryker opens the door and ushers me inside when he sees the state I am in.

Penelope gets up from the couch when she sees it's me.

“What's wrong? What happened?” they both ask.

“I fucked him. Oh shit, that wasn't supposed to happen,” I shout as I grip my hair in my hands and start pacing the room.

“Fucked who?” Ryker asks. At the same time, Penelope's mouth drops open in realisation.

“How come you didn't tell me how hard it was to fight this pull? I don't want it; I don't want him,” I say as a sob escapes me and I fall to my knees.

They both wrap their arms around me and offer me comfort.

How could I have given in so easily?

Chapter Five

Isaac

I watch my mate leave as fast as her legs can take her. I feel like complete shit.

I wasn't planning on moving so fast. I wanted to give us time to get to know one another, but then I caught the smile she had when she talked to Max, and jealousy invoked a passion I had never felt before. Once I had a taste of her, I couldn't seem to stop myself.

The possessive part of me took over. My wolf did not like her smiling for another man.

I know Hailey has always wanted Max. She always hoped that she was his mate and, when it turned out that wasn't true and it was me, she was completely disappointed and hurt.

I didn't help much with my initial rejection of her.

The plan was to gain her trust in me and show her I wasn't the person she thought I was.

Everything got fucked up, and I take full responsibility.

I look down at myself in disgust when I see the blood on my cock.

Fuck, she was a virgin. How could I just fuck her that way when she has never had sex before?

I let out a scream of frustration before putting on some clothes, heading downstairs to the gym, and hitting the punching bag to release all my anger.

Sweat is dripping from me as I hit the bag harder and harder.

I jump at the sound of someone shouting my name and turn around to see Ryker, Calvin, and Jet standing there looking at me with wide eyes.

"What?" I snap before looking down at myself to see that my hands are covered in blood, since I never bothered to put

gloves on.

“It’ll heal,” I say with a shrug.

“Do you want to tell us what happened?” Calvin asks, slowly walking closer as if he’s approaching a wild animal.

“I fucked up. I keep fucking up,” I roar in defeat.

“Right, we got that. Hailey is with Penny. I left after she stopped crying,” Ryker says, anger coating his words.

I let out a sigh and drop down onto the floor. All three guys follow me and wait for me to speak.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen like that. We were getting along great, and I knew we needed to take things slow if I wanted it to work and then, fuck, she was talking to Max on the phone, and I couldn’t help but get jealous that I never have seen her smile like that for anyone but him. I couldn’t stand the thought of anyone but me making her smile like that, or touching her, and all sense was lost. Fuck. I never would have wanted her first time to be like that. I should have taken my time and shown her how much she means to me, but instead I took her like a wild animal,” I tell them.

“Wow,” Calvin says surprised.

I look up at Ryker; he’s her best friend and his opinion means the most.

“The mate pull is stronger than anyone thinks it is. I had never even kissed Penelope before we decided to mate,” Ryker says softly.

I let out a sigh. “What am I supposed to do now? I doubt she will want to be near me ever again. Meanwhile, my wolf is practically clawing at my insides just to get closer to her.”

Ryker looks me in the eye with a serious look on his face. “I think you both need to talk to each other and have a serious discussion. You guys have been in limbo since she changed, and I think it’s about time you guys stop leaving it all up in the air. Either you are mated, or you aren’t. It can’t continue like this.”

I nod my head in understanding. My alpha pretty much just put his foot down, and I think it's about time Hailey and I have a conversation.

It won't be easy though. I need her to come to me. I can't keep stalking her like I have been.

I think that it's time to give her the space she has been wanting.

Hailey

Ryker left and I know he went to talk to Isaac. After I stopped crying, Penelope offered me a drink of water and let me sit in silence until I was ready to talk.

"This is weird," I mumble.

"Why?" Penelope asks, tilting her head to the side.

"Well, I had sex with my mate who is also your ex-boyfriend and you guys have had sex. What if he was comparing us?" I say, panic starting to set in.

Penelope gives me a soft smile, but I can see amusement in her eyes. "I can guarantee that he wasn't."

I look over at her in disbelief. "What makes you say that? You don't know what was going through his mind."

She lets out a chuckle. "Well, I know because I never thought about him like that since I mated Ryker. When you are with your true mate, it all narrows down to them. Nothing else matters; no one else matters. I couldn't even tell you what I remember about having sex with Isaac because it honestly feels like a different life. I was a different person back then. Being with Ryker is like I have a new beginning."

I take in her words and think about how it makes sense. “Do you think Isaac is a different person?” I ask, looking over at her.

She lets out a laugh like that was the funniest thing I have ever said. “Well, he is and he isn’t. He has always been like this, but he had to hide his true self,” she admits with a sad smile. “I think that had to do with his home life. We were both just trying to survive. We weren’t ever given a chance to be who we really were.”

“Was it really that bad?” I ask, not sure if I really want to hear the answer.

She nods her head with zero hesitation. “It was terrible. Our parents cared more about power and status than anything else. That’s why they were forcing us to be together. We never really cared about each other the way couples should. We were just clinging to each other because of the life we had. I think once he was out from under them, it made him feel freer. I know I do now that Hal is dead.”

“I don’t know where to go from here,” I say softly.

“There is only one question you need to answer,” she says, looking at me with a serious expression.

“What’s that?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at her.

“Do you want to be with him? Is there some part of you, that isn’t your wolf, that wants to give this a shot? If you walked away tomorrow, would you regret it for the rest of your life if you never gave it a chance? If he found a choice mate and gave her pups, would it bother you?” she asks softly.

“That was more than one question,” I say with a nervous chuckle.

“Maybe so, but they all should result in one answer. If you can honestly say that you can walk away right now with no regrets, I will believe and support you; but, if there is a chance you can’t, then you need to have a serious talk with your mate,” she states in a no bullshit tone. I like that she’s not trying to give me an easy way out and instead trying to make me see the bigger picture.

I blow out a breath and go over her words in my head. The thought of him finding someone else and having pups with them makes me feel like my heart is going to break out of my chest. Could I really watch that? I imagine him kissing another woman or having a life without me. Tears well in my eyes at the thought of not being the one to have that with him. Why have my feelings completely taken a turn? If you asked me a few months ago if I would ever consider being with Isaac, I would tell you that there was no way and that I'm better off without him; but now I can see how much he's different than the man I thought he was. Having his parents gone has made everyone see a different side of him.

The hard part is, I know he's trying. I can see it plain as day.

She doesn't push for conversation after that, which I am thankful for.

The real question is, would I regret it if I just walked away?

If I am being completely honest with myself, I would.

I know what fated mates mean. Your fated mate is your other half. They are your one chance for true happiness. My best friends explained it so many times over the years, dreaming of finding their own fated mates.

I don't think I could give up that shot.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't hear anyone else enter the room.

"Hailey!" is shouted. I jump up, looking over to where the sound came from.

Max is standing there looking at me concerned.

"Sorry, I was thinking. I didn't hear you come in," I say with a fake smile.

"I was shouting your name; you didn't hear me for the last five minutes?" he asks in frustration.

"Well, now I see you. What is it?" I snap, instantly irritated with him.

He puts his hands in the air in a surrender motion. “Whoa, I just got back and wanted to see how you were doing.”

I let my shoulders drop and let out a sigh. “Well, I’ve been better; but I’ve also been a lot worse,” I tell him with a weak smile.

“Talk to me,” he says, walking over to me with a sigh and sitting next to me.

“This whole mate thing is a lot more complicated than you guys let on,” I mumble. Part of me feels weird for having this conversation with him.

He chuckles at my words, but it sounds pained. “Yeah, it all sounds magical and wonderful growing up, but it looks like it’s more of a cluster fuck than we ever realised.”

I nod my head in agreement and let out a snort. “You’ve got that right.”

“How are things with... your mate,” he asks, his voice cracking.

I look over at him and see the pain in his eyes; he looks sad at the words.

“Okay, I guess. Confusing, but Pen is right. I need to talk to him. I can see why they call it “the pull” because it is pulling me towards him, no matter what I do,” I admit softly.

“If you want to get away from him, fight the pull, I will help you; but I don’t know of anyone who has not claimed their fated mate. The gift is too precious,” he says, looking at me like he really would do anything I would ask of him.

Penelope said something along the lines of the same thing. It’s good to know I have great friends in my corner.

“Even if I could get away from him, I wouldn’t. I think my wolf would rebel at the idea anyways and force me to shift and return to him,” I say with a laugh.

“Are you still have trouble controlling her?” he asks, looking concerned at my words.

I shake my head. “The only time I am not in complete control of her is when Isaac is near, and we know why that is. I’ve gotten pretty good at shifting. It’s starting to feel normal instead of feeling like a million ants are under my skin,” I say with a laugh.

“I’ve never heard someone describe it that way,” he says laughing.

“I think that’s because you are all born with it. It’s different when you are changed, from what I can tell. Getting used to another being in my head is a lot too, but it’s also comforting. It’s like I have been missing something my whole life and it was finally clear what it was,” I tell him.

“That makes sense,” he says, nodding his head at my words.

Penelope comes back in the room. I honestly didn’t even notice that she left. We all talk about everything, except the new pack members that Max brought home.

I know they are waiting for Ryker to get home to discuss it.

It’s pretty late when Ryker walks in. His hands are full of food. I’m guessing Pen told him we were there, so he picked up enough for all of us.

I didn’t realise how hungry I was until I smelled the food he brought. One thing that is definitely noticeable about my change is my increased appetite. The shifter metabolism is quite fast.

We sit and eat before Max tells us about the new pack members.

All of the women and children had decided to come. The pack houses they all lived in were shut down. Max suggests tearing them down since they hold nothing but bad memories. Maybe then we can sell the land or decide to do something else with it in the future.

Ryker agrees, and they start making the plan to get all the houses demolished. He wants to hold a pack meeting to vote on what to do with the land. That’s one thing about Ryker; he wants everyone’s opinion instead of just doing what he wants.

He doesn't consider something like this to be only his decision.

"I don't see why we would need to keep it though. It's too far for us to expand on. I can't see anyone wanting to live that far away, but we can hold onto it until the vote," Ryker says.

"I can't see anyone wanting to keep it. The money can be put to use for the pack as well," Max says with a nod.

"So, how's Isaac?" Penelope asks. I look at her to find her staring back at me.

She must have known I was itching to ask but didn't want my friends to see how desperate I was to know.

"He's hanging in there, but I do think you guys need to talk. Sooner rather than later," Ryker says looking directly at me, and in a tone that I couldn't argue with, even if I tried. Wow, that must be that alpha voice I have heard so much about. The voice itself makes it hard not to follow his command.

"I talked to Penelope, and I planned on talking to Isaac. I'm just working on what I want to say," I tell him.

"Good. He was looking pretty dejected when I left him," Ryker admits. When I look up at him, I can see what he isn't saying. Isaac is taking my leaving worse than what Ryker is willing to express. I will need to see for myself.

I let out a sigh and nod my head before getting up to leave.

"I need to leave," I say softly. I can't bear to think about Isaac in pain, so I make my way over to his place.

Chapter Six

Isaac

I flop down on my bed and fight the urge to go after Hailey. Staying away from her is going to be harder than I thought it would be.

My hands shift back and forth, and I swear I see fur come and go on my arms and legs.

My wolf is just at the surface, and I know what he wants to do. Go to our mate.

I hear a knock at the door, but I don't answer because I have to concentrate on fighting the shift.

I'm about to lose when a figure stands in my bedroom door. I look up to see my mate standing there looking at me with wide eyes.

"Isaac? What's going on? Your arms..." she says with a gasp when the change stops and my wolf retreats.

I'm still breathing hard when I look up at my mate.

"He wanted to go to you, but I wanted to give you space. I didn't want to force you to look at me just because my wolf wanted to be near you," I say with a tired voice.

Hailey swallows hard before sitting down on the bed.

"I think we need to talk," she says softly.

I nod my head in agreement. "I think so too. My alpha pretty much demanded it," I say with a chuckle.

"Yeah, Ryker pretty much demanded me to as well," she says with a chuckle of her own.

"Do you want... are you... fuck, I'm not sure how to word this," I mumble nervously.

"I was so sure what I wanted. I didn't want to be your mate. I couldn't picture a life with us together for the first few weeks,

but then Penelope asked me some hard questions. I think if we don't give this a shot, I will come to regret it. A part of me wants you, and it's not just my wolf. I just don't know how to move on from seeing you as the guy you used to be instead of who you are now," she admits softly.

"I'll try for the rest of my life to show you that guy is gone," I tell her.

I mean it. If I could take back those days, I would.

"Maybe if we take things slow," I add hesitantly.

"That would probably be best, though I think we need to share a bed but not have sex. My wolf is not wanting to be away from you right now," she says with a blush coating her cheeks.

"We won't be separated. I'm afraid that if you walk out this door, my wolf is going to shift and follow you anyways. I'd rather sleep in a bed instead of a porch," I say with a sheepish grin. Hailey laughs at my words.

"Then let's just get to know each other. We have a couple days before the official meeting where we meet the new pack members. Ryker says we have until Monday, so let's hop into our bubble and try to find a way to make this work," Hailey says.

Hopping into a bubble with Hailey sounds perfect. I'll do whatever I can to not mess it up this time.

During the afternoon, we decide to let our wolves out for a run since they both seem to be on edge.

My wolf was over the moon that he gets to spend time with his mate.

We head outside. I'm glad I have a large property where we can run uninterrupted.

I keep my eyes averted so I don't make Hailey uncomfortable while we undress for the shift.

I really hope that I don't fuck this up. I can't fuck this up.

Hailey means more to me than she thinks she does. It happened so fast that I couldn't change it if I wanted to.

I let the shift take over me and feel my wolf come over me.

When I turn around, Hailey has already shifted. Her wolf nuzzles mine.

I let him take over, and their instincts come together as they nuzzle for a good twenty minutes before Hailey's wolf becomes playful. She nips at me before backing away and doing it again before my wolf gets the hint and joins in on the fun.

It feels so good to be free and let the drama go, even if it's just for a short time.

I playfully nip at Hailey and take off in a run. She lets out a small growl and comes running after me.

I run through the trees for a few minutes until I don't hear her footsteps anymore.

That doesn't seem right. I pause and look behind me, and I can't see her. I turn around in a full circle.

Where the fuck did she go?

My wolf lets out a soft whine when we can't see her, and we start making our way back towards the house.

"Hailey? Where did you go?" I try to reach her in my mind.

There's no sound on the other end. Did she block me? Or had something happened to her?

I finally make it back to the clearing. The next thing I know, I'm being side swiped and rolled to the ground. It takes me a second to realise that it's Hailey.

When we finally stop moving, I look up at Hailey. I swear, if wolves could smile in this form that's what she would be doing right now. She does look pretty pleased with herself.

"You tricked me!" I say in disbelief.

"I won, fair and square," she says with a giggle.

We spend the next couple hours playing with each other before our wolves run out of energy and we head back to my house.

I order some food while Hailey heads to my room to grab something warm.

I already put on sweats at the back door since I like to keep a few pairs there for when I go on a run. I head to the laundry room to grab a shirt and, when I'm walking back, Hailey is in her leggings and one of my hoodies with her hair in a messy bun on the top of her head.

She looks completely comfortable and sexy, fuck. I wish I had the confidence to touch her.

I need to remind myself to take this at her pace. I can't rush it.

We sit down in the living room once the food comes and just make small talk.

This all feels so natural and perfect. This is how it should be between mates.

"Can you tell me something no one knows about you?" she asks, sounding uncertain.

I blow out a breath. That's an easy one.

There is one thing I have never told anyone.

That is what happened to me in the forbidden forest.

I blow out a breath.

"I'll tell you what happened during the time in the forbidden forest. Everyone knows what happened to Ryker and Pen, but I never told a soul what happened to me in there. It's something that I don't think I will ever forget," I tell her while looking straight into her eyes.

She nods her head and gives me her full attention.

"I'm listening," she says softly.

"When I was in the forest, I had gotten into a fight with a shifter, or I guess a feral. You know what they are by now. A shifter who lost someone they loved and gave into their beast. I keep going over it in my head. She attacked me. It didn't seem like it was a "you are in my territory" kind of attack, nor did it seem like she had felt threatened. The wolf didn't approach me until I shifted back to my human. I thought that if

she saw that I was human and not feral, she might not attack me. I was wrong. That made her pause for a quick second before she mauled me. That could be the only way to describe it. I barely had time to react to defend myself. It was like she saw who I was and was angry at me, though I have no clue who she was. Why would she attack me like that? I just don't understand," I tell Hailey.

She looks at me curiously. "Did she try to communicate with you when you were in your wolf form at first?"

I shake my head. "Nothing, it was like she had me blocked from hearing her words and I couldn't get through to her."

"That's so sad. I wonder why she attacked you like that. Are all feral shifters like that?" she asks.

"No, this felt like revenge. She didn't bother to attack until she saw my human form. I just wish I knew why. As far as I know, my family didn't have anyone feral in the family; but my father probably had many enemies. He was just as bad as Hal. She could have been mad at me for any reason. The only thing I could think of was that I look like my father. Who knows what my father could have been hiding. I may never know now that he's dead. There's no one left in my family to answer that question," I say with a sigh.

"Hopefully one day you will figure it out," Hailey says, trying to reassure me.

"Maybe, but I doubt it. I had the house I grew up in torn down, and I don't think anything was found. I have no idea where else my father would have hidden something; if he was hiding something," I tell her.

"Thank you for telling me. I'll do what I can to help you figure out why that happened and who she is. If you feel like it's something important to know then I'll help in any way I can," she says.

"Have you decided if you were going to tell your parents about what happened to you?" I ask.

She shrugs and looks sad thinking about the question. "Well, it would be nice to, but I don't know how I would begin to tell

them I turned into a wolf. Then I would have to explain to them that the whole town is full of them. I would probably sound crazy. I wouldn't know what to do if they thought of me differently and then I never saw them again. It would break me."

"I'll help you in any way I can, whatever you choose, to tell them or not tell them. I'll support whatever you want, though if you ever have pups then it would be hard to hide that they were shifters, especially if we mated. Kids don't control the shift as well as we can. They would most definitely out us as shifters. Which is why we go to a small school of only shifters until high school and college. We are able to handle our wolves better at that age," I say.

Hailey nods her head to my words. "I don't think I could keep that big of a secret from them anyways. I just need to find the right time to tell them."

"Whatever you decide, I'm right here," I tell her, hoping she sees how genuine I am.

Through the next few hours, we move onto lighter subjects such as what our favorite things are. I find out that she hates being cold, so she lives in sweats and hoodies. She also has a huge collection of slippers that she usually keeps in every room of the house in case her feet get cold.

I tell her how I was never really allowed "silly hobbies" as my father would call them, so there is nothing I really do with my time. Stalking her really has become the only thing that takes up my time now that school is over.

She tells me that we will find a hobby for me with a soft smile on her face.

I feel the connection between us growing.

That night, she falls asleep in my arms. I hold her close to me and let her comforting scent, and the relaxed sound of her breathing, pull me to sleep.

Chapter Seven

Hailey

When I wake up, I feel Isaac's warm body beneath me. We are snuggled up in his bed, and I can't deny that sleeping in his arms has given me the best night sleep I've had in a long time. I can't help but notice how content I feel in Isaac's arms.

Why does this feel so right?

I decide to ignore that feeling and get up to make some coffee and breakfast. I had been eyeing that kitchen. I can't wait to cook in there.

I turn on some music on my phone and look in the fridge for something to eat. There's lots of choices here, so I grab some bacon, eggs, and look around the pantry to find potatoes and bread to make hashbrowns and toast.

One of the things I love is a good, filling breakfast.

I drink my first cup of coffee while I cook and feel a sense of peace come over me.

When everything is close to being done, I feel Isaac as he walks into the room. He looks dishevelled. His hair is all over the place and his eyes are half open with sleep.

"Morning baby," he rasps, his voice thick with sleep.

A shiver runs through my body. Judging by the small smile he gives me; I can tell he noticed.

"I decided to cook for you today, since you did for me yesterday," I tell him.

"You didn't need to do that. I don't mind cooking for you," he says.

I shake my head with a smile on my face. "I don't mind. I love to cook."

We take a seat at the island in the kitchen, and the silence isn't awkward as we eat.

"Is there anything you want to do while we are in our bubble?" Isaac asks after he finishes eating.

"Well, the whole point is to get to know each other, so I think we should just spend time together. Besides stalking me, what else do you do?" I tease.

"Other than fixing up my house, there isn't much I do. As I told you, I don't really have any hobbies," he says.

"Well let's find some hobbies then," I say with a smile.

Earlier, Isaac had showed me what was inside his closet in the master bedroom. To my surprise, there were some clothes there for me. I smile thinking about the blush that came over him. He had bought clothes and toiletries for me. They were my size and the types of products I used. When I gave him a questioning look, he admitted to asking Penelope and Ryker for help.

I can admit that was very sweet of him to do. I never had someone care enough to bring me what I needed or pay attention to small details that bring me joy.

There were a couple of bikinis in the closet for me. I was nervous to show skin since I had never been comfortable wearing one; I usually wore a top and shorts when I went swimming.

Isaac wasn't having any of that. He said it was only going to be us, so the only one to see me like that would be him.

Didn't he see that made me more nervous?

He had made negative comments about my body in the past, and although he told me that wasn't what he really thought, being that bare in front of him still made me feel self-conscious.

I told Isaac that I would meet him at the pool after I got ready.

I take one last look at myself in the mirror, taking in the bright red and white polka dot bikini.

I didn't look that bad in it. My breasts were definitely looking huge in it, but I had always had big breasts. My ass was also a decent size; it didn't look half bad in it. I looked at my stomach and cringed. I was a little bit bigger than other women. My stomach was soft, and I had a bit of a belly. It was one of the things I hated about myself, but I needed to do this. I had to know what he really thought. I had to know if he really did care about the extra weight I carried.

I wrap a huge towel around myself and take a deep breath before leaving the bathroom. I make my way through the house with my nervousness increasing the closer I get to the patio doors that lead to the pool.

I stop in the doorway and swallow hard.

Isaac is standing there with bright blue swimming trunks on. The abs and muscle definition on him are something else. Seriously, does he have to look this good?

I feel like I can't even compare when I take him in.

He smiles when he sees me, and my breath catches in my throat at the happiness in his eyes just from seeing me.

Haven't I always longed for someone to look at me that way?

"Come on, baby; the water's perfect," he says, holding his hand out for me.

"O-okay," I stutter out.

I nervously let the towel drop and look away from him. I hear him come closer, and I can feel the heat of his body when he stands so close to me.

When I still don't look at him, he grabs my chin and tilts up my face to meet his eyes.

I swallow hard at the lust and desire burning in his eyes.

"You are perfect and absolutely gorgeous, my mate," he says in a husky voice.

“I know my body isn’t skinny like most of the women we know...” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Their bodies aren’t something I ever desired. Looking at you has me fighting so hard against myself to not take you immediately and fuck you so hard that you will never doubt again that I find your body intoxicating. I could spend hours worshiping this body and never get enough,” he rasps.

When I look into his eyes, I can see he means every single word he is saying.

Before I can say anything, he kisses me softly before jumping into the pool and splashing me, causing me to shriek.

I let out a laugh before jumping in myself.

We spend the next couple of hours splashing around and having fun with each other in the pool. I don’t remember ever smiling so much before in my life.

Isaac

This is one of the best days of my fucking life and it’s not even over yet. When it’s time for lunch, we get out of the pool. I stare at my mate when she gets out, water dropping from her body and her wet bikini clinging to her.

Fuck. She’s stunning.

I can see the way her eyes devour me. She loves the way I look too.

I fight the urge to fuck her like I want to. I promised her we would spend time getting to know each other.

I make us a quick lunch of sandwiches and chips as we sit outside and enjoy the warm sun.

Climbing into this bubble with her is one of the best ideas ever.

“Can you tell me more about your past?” she asks me hesitantly.

I clear my throat and think of one of the most brutal beatings I had gotten.

My mind drifts to the memory.

I just picked Penelope up for dinner. We had a few weeks until the Rite of Passage ceremony and it was something I was dreading. I had this sinking feeling in my gut that something was going to happen. I just wasn't sure what.

She is pretty quiet this evening, but I try to make small talk with her anyway.

“I don't think I can do this anymore,” she says when we leave the restaurant and sit in my car. I haven't had a chance to start it up yet, so I turn my head to look at her.

“What? You don't mean that, baby,” I plead with her. This isn't going to be good. My father isn't going to like this.

“We know that this doesn't really work for us. I can't be with you when we just don't feel that way about each other,” she says with tears welling in her eyes.

I shake my head and look out the window. I don't want her to see the fear in my eyes.

“I told you I would do whatever you wanted to make you happy,” I say lowly.

I hear her sigh. “I know you did, but our Rite of Passage ceremony is coming up and we could find our fated mates. Don't you want that? To find the one person who is supposed to make you happy, and the other half of your soul?”

Of course, that is something I want. I want nothing more than to have someone who is meant for me and would love me for me instead of the person I am forced to show the world.

Hailey Weston comes to my mind, and I squeeze my eyes closed trying to shake her from my thoughts.

I would never be blessed with someone so perfect.

I let out a humourless laugh. "You think my father really cares about fate?" I spit out.

She lets out a deep breath. "One of these days, you need to stand up to him."

I shake my head. "It doesn't work that way."

I don't say anything else, and neither does she, as I drive her home. When I get on the road back to my house after dropping her off, my nerves take over and my palms get sweaty.

This isn't going to be good.

My only hope is that he's sleeping, but luck never turns my way because he's there in the living room when I walk in.

"Boy, how did the date go?" he asks as soon as he sees me.

"Pen broke up with me," I say barely above a whisper.

I know he heard it, shifter hearing and all.

"What the fuck did you do?" he asks. Rage takes over his face and he snarls at me.

I shake my head. "Nothing. She just wants to see if she finds her fated mate after the ceremony."

"She wouldn't even be thinking about fated mates if you had done your job correctly. She should be wrapped around your finger by now. How did I raise such a failure for a son?" he shouts.

His words hurt. Just like they always do. Weren't parents supposed to love their children?

"I can't force her to love me," I mumble out. Not that I want her to, but I know not to say that part out loud.

The first punch takes me by surprise, just like it always does.

He always hits me until I'm too weak, and then places a silver necklace on me. I already know the drill. He stops it to slow the healing so that I can feel the pain longer.

I've taught myself to block out the pain. The only person that comes to mind during this time, and has been since I can

remember, is Hailey Weston. I don't know why, but I picture her when the pain becomes too much. She's the only light in my darkness.

I jump when I feel a hand on my face. I look up to see Hailey's concerned eyes.

"You're okay. I'm here," she says softly.

She does the most unexpected thing and climbs into my lap. I don't hesitate to wrap my arms around her and breathe in her scent, letting her bring me more comfort than she would ever believe she could.

"I'm sorry you had to live that way," she whispers.

"He locked me in the cage he kept in the basement for days. When he finally allowed me to heal, I thought maybe he finally managed to break me that time," I admit.

"You held on and were stronger than you realised," she says in a soft whisper.

"You may not believe me but, with every single hit, I learned the only thing that could block it out was your sweet face. Maybe my wolf knew even then," I say softly.

"You will never have to feel that pain anymore," she tells me with determination in her voice.

We sit there in silence, but I feel like I have more to say to her.

"M-my wolf and I aren't as connected as shifters usually are," I say, blowing out a breath at the words.

"What do you mean?" she asks after pulling back to look up at me.

"Well, he doesn't feel like a part of me; I don't think he really ever has. I hear other people describe their connection with their wolves, and it doesn't feel like that. He's like this being inside of me that I constantly fight with. I've never been able to control my shift like other people can. Most of the time, it

feels like he's pushing his way out and forcing it. I can't just command it," I say.

She doesn't say anything for a long time.

"Maybe you just need to work on becoming one entity, instead of fighting with each other," she finally says.

I nod my head but don't say anything. Doesn't she realise that I have tried?

I don't think anyone understands this feeling I have. My wolf and I are completely unsettled.

I don't know if we will ever be one being.

That's what scares me the most.

Chapter Eight

Hailey

Another day passes in our bubble, and I have gotten to know Isaac more than I ever thought possible.

When I saw him get lost in the memory of one of the last times his father had beat him, my heart broke for him.

No one should have to live that way.

When I think about how much he has overcome since his parents were killed, I can finally see how much he has changed and is finally allowed to be himself.

He spent a crazy amount of time taking care of me and making sure I was okay, and he also spent time working on this house for us to live in; even though he thought I might never forgive him.

It's not hard to notice all the changes he has made. I believe that he truly is a different person.

When he needs to leave for the day for a meeting with Ryker, I decide to do something to show him that I'm starting to see a life together for us.

I head into town and look for things that will make the house feel more like a home.

I noticed that although his home was nice and had beautiful appliances, there wasn't anything around to indicate anyone lived there. It looked like a show home.

I had stop to get some throw pillows and blankets for the living room. While there, I had seen some very comfortable ones that would be perfect for the theatre room. I knew I had to get them because I could just picture Isaac and I snuggled up using them. The thought brings a smile to my face.

I find random knickknacks and pick those up as well.

I grab my phone and look at the photo Isaac had gotten us to take together. I decide to get it blown up and framed. I hesitate to blow up the one I took while he was sleeping but, in the end, decided to do that one too.

I hope he likes everything I get for the house. While I'm out, I decide to also get some groceries and then some takeout for supper, since I'm exhausted from shopping all day.

When I get back, I see Isaac isn't home yet. I had told Ryker to try and keep him busy a bit longer.

It may sound crazy, but I miss Isaac already. It has only been hours, but I like spending time with him.

I put the food in the oven, hoping that will keep it warm until I finish. I run around the house putting everything where it belongs.

I'm sweating by the time Isaac pulls up. He looks frustrated until he sees me, and a smile lights up his face.

"Baby, why are you so sweaty?" he asks with a laugh before wrapping his arms around me.

"I wanted to surprise you, so I had Ryker keep you busy," I mumble into his chest.

"I was getting frustrated with my alpha for keeping me from you for so long when I only expected to be gone for an hour or two," he says chuckling.

"Well, I wanted to do something to show you how much I'm starting to believe in us," I say shyly.

He smiles down at me and kisses me lightly on the lips. "I don't need you to do anything for me. Telling me is enough, and just having you in our home is enough."

Our home. Wow. It's crazy how right that feels.

I pull him into the house and enjoy watching his expression when he sees the changes I made to the living room. I had hung one of the pictures of us up in there too. He smiles softly when he sees it.

I walk him around the rest of the house. When we get to the theatre room, he sees the picture I took of us when he was sleeping.

I can't help but get shy, but the look on his face is something I will never forget.

Tears well in his eyes, but he looks so happy. "Thank you so much, baby. I never thought you would ever give me a chance, and this is more than I could have ever hoped for."

"I think we can do this. Us together. I'm starting to believe in us," I tell him.

He kisses me hard and slowly backs me up against the wall.

I gasp but I don't stop kissing him back. Suddenly, he pulls away and turns from me.

That's when I notice the hair on his arms and his hands clenching into claws. He starts bleeding as he cuts himself with them.

"Isaac?" I ask hesitantly.

"I'll be fine. I almost lost control for a second," he says. When he turns around to look at me, I watch his eyes change back to normal, the hair on his arms recedes, and his claws change back into hands.

"Let's go have supper. I put it in the oven to keep it warm," I say, hoping that maybe not touching each other for a while will help him keep his wolf under control.

"That sounds great. I'll be right there," he says, giving me a strained smile.

I nod my head but hesitate for a second before walking to the kitchen.

Could his wolf be more trouble than I thought?

How is that possible?

Isaac

My wolf is getting more and more impossible to ignore. I don't know how much longer I can go on like this.

The whole time I was gone, my wolf wanted nothing more than to run back home to our mate. Kissing her just now almost sent him over the edge as he tried to force me to claim her.

I take a couple minutes to breathe and make sure I'm in control before following my mate to the kitchen.

I don't want anything to fuck up the progress we made.

When I looked at everything she added to the house, I was in shock. I loved everything she had done. She added a splash of colour to each room.

Her actions today give me more hope that this could work.

Maybe I could actually have the relationship with her that I had envied my pack members for having with her while growing up. Maybe I could even have more of her than that.

Before going to bed, I place an online order for a surprise for her; something I hope she's going to like.

I spend most of the night just staring at her. I am absolutely in awe that she's actually giving me a chance.

I just hope that I don't fuck it up.

Chapter Nine

Hailey

Today is the day we are meeting the new pack members that were invited by Ryker to the pack.

I don't like what I see. It completely breaks my heart.

There are probably over forty women with twenty children who look like they had been starved to the brink of death.

They look exhausted. I know we have our work cut out for us.

Max looks at all of us with a grim face. I feel bad that he had to deal with this already for a while.

“We have property in the pack name; one of which is an empty apartment building. We made sure to have the apartments furnished and packed with food for you all. After all you have been through, it is the least we can do. Between the bank accounts from both alphas, we were able to make sure everyone in the pack is comfortable. I want you all to get settled. Once you all have been rested and feel well enough to join the pack, we can start finding you jobs to help you contribute. For now, you all need food and rest. My pack has taken care of the food. There is a big spread in the hall behind me. Feel free to grab seconds, or even thirds,” Ryker says, causing everyone from the pack to chuckle.

There is a ton of food. Everyone took the opportunity to cook something. I don't think I have ever seen so many dishes; I can't wait to try them myself, though Ryker made it clear that the newcomers would eat first. Looking at them, I know that he's completely right to make that call. They look absolutely famished.

I stand back with Isaac at my side. At some point, his fingers interlace with mine. His hand feels nice in mine and makes me relax and feel calm in a way I don't think I have felt before.

A small smile comes to my lips and, when I look up at Isaac, he seems to look proud that I'm letting him do something as small as holding my hand.

Everyone chats among themselves so as not to rush any of the newcomers in making their plates and getting drinks. We all wait to walk in, so they don't think we are watching them grab their plates.

As we walk into the hall, we see them all sitting in the corner of the room with their plates on the floor. Ryker frowns and walks over to them with Penelope and Max at his side.

He says something that I can't hear since it's very loud in here. I'm assuming that he's telling them to sit at the tables. There is more than enough room for everyone to sit down.

They quickly change their seating and look very grateful to Ryker for treating them with respect, instead of what they had been used to before coming here. Once they are all seated, the rest of us take turns in grabbing food. It feels oddly natural that Isaac holds the plates for both of us as I pile on food. After we have our food, we walk to the tables. I grab us a couple bottles of water and cans of soda before we sit down with Ryker, Penelope, Max, Jet, and Calvin. They are all staring at us like we are putting on some sort of show, except Pen has a small smirk on her face. I stick my tongue out at her, since my hands are full, and she just chuckles.

Isaac pulls out a chair for me before sitting down, and then he finally notices that all eyes are on us.

"What?" he says looking confused.

"That was very weird and couple like. Who are you, and what have you done with Isaac?" Jet asks, looking at Isaac with wide eyes.

Isaac looks down before speaking, and I grab his hand in show of support since I know this is hard for him. "I was never allowed to act like myself and, sometimes, I'm not sure I know who that really is. I kept friends with people I was told to, and treated people like trash because I was told to do so or would

have to face punishment. The Isaac you knew doesn't exist and I, for one, am glad."

The room seemed to have quieted a bunch while he was speaking. I look around and see that everyone heard him; not that he was speaking loudly, but shifter hearing makes it almost impossible not to hear a person when he is making an announcement, even if it is only meant for a few.

I have no doubt everyone is seeing him in a new light. It's probably something none of them have spent too much time thinking about.

Sometimes what may seem perfect from the outside is really just an illusion.

I can't even imagine what Isaac must have been through. He couldn't be himself or be friends with anyone he wanted? I could see how he was the way he was, and I'm glad that his parents are gone. If they were alive, I would kill them myself for everything they had put him through.

"Well, I can at least say for myself that I'm looking forward to getting to know the person you really are," Jet says right before everyone else voices their agreement.

Throughout dinner, Isaac is always somehow touching me, whether it is by his hand on my thigh, or his arm over my shoulder. This all feels so natural.

This feels how the pack hall should feel at times like this. There's talking, laughter, the occasional crying or screaming kid, and good food. I don't think the place had ever felt this welcoming before Ryker had taken over.

A little girl walks over to our table and hands Ryker a piece of paper. "I made this for you, Alpha," she says in a small voice. He grabs it, and a smile comes over his face. He shows everyone. It's a drawing of a bunch of wolves.

"This is perfect. It's going right on my wall in my office. Thank you," Ryker says, and the girl gives him a beaming smile before running back to where she was sitting.

"They will need time to adjust. Women were the bottom of the pack there; at least that's what it looks like. We need to show

them how everyone is equal here, and that's not how our pack runs," Ryker states.

Everyone nods in agreement.

Isaac

Today has been one of the best days of my life.

I haven't claimed my mate yet, but I am closer to it than I was a week ago.

Having our wolves run and play together, in addition to spending so much time talking, has really helped the bond between us form.

Hailey is actually letting me hold her hand and put my arm around her. Both are actions that only days ago would make her recoil.

Slow progress is better than no progress.

I did notice how everyone got quiet when I spoke about how my life used to be. I didn't go into detail, but everyone seems to understand now that my past life was not my choice.

Hopefully one day, they will look at me and see me for who I really am instead of who I was forced to be.

I need to work on my mate before I think of fixing the other wrongs in my life. I know I hurt a lot of people since I was a kid.

After the dinner, we help the newcomers to their new homes. I saw that so many of them have tears in their eyes as they take in their new furnished apartments with clothes, toiletries, and all sorts of food options included.

It broke my heart to know that they had never been treated with kindness in their lives. Something I took for granted was only given to these women when it was a reward for good behaviour.

I know that they are not the only people suffering. There are terrible packs out there, and hopefully, someday, they will all

be gone.

We all should be standing together.

I'm exhausted by the time I bring Hailey home.

She looks the same way.

She falls face first into the bed and I chuckle as I adjust her so she's under the covers.

I look down at her and she's already asleep. I would love to make her more comfortable by taking off her pants and bra, but I'm not sure how well she would take that; I'm not sure if we are there yet.

I head to the washroom to do my bedtime routine when my arms slightly shift. I look down to see my fur start to show, and I struggle to push my wolf back in.

My wolf and I haven't always had the best relationship. There was always distance between us, but ever since I had rejected Hailey, it has only gotten worse. Now, he's determined to claim her. No matter how much I try to tell my wolf that we can't claim her when she's dead asleep, and that she needs to have a say, he still tries to break out and do things his own way.

I barely push him back before I head back to the room. The only thing that seems to calm my wolf is pulling our mate into my arms.

I'm getting more worried by the day. I don't know what I would do if he took over and made the choice without me.

I know Hailey needs more time.

There is no way she would let us claim her yet.

Chapter Ten

Hailey

I wake up warm; too warm. I'm still wearing all the clothes I walked home in, and Isaac has his arm wrapped around me.

Well, he's practically on top of me; he's holding me so tight.

I manage to wiggle out so I can use the washroom but, as soon as I lay back down, he pulls me into his arms again.

I turn around as his lips are near my neck. When he takes a sniff of me, he lets out a low groan.

When I turn, I quickly find myself under him as he kisses along my neck. I feel his teeth slightly graze over a sensitive spot. I never knew something like that could feel so good.

"Isaac," I say with a whimper. A need builds inside of me, and I feel myself getting wet for him.

When he pulls back to look down at me, there is a look in his eyes that I can't explain.

All that gets forgotten in the moment once he thrusts his hardness against my center and I let out a gasp of surprise.

He leans down to kiss me, and I kiss him back hungrily, feeling like I can't get enough of his taste.

We both make quick work of taking off our clothes, and he looks down at me like he's never seen anything sexier.

It's such a rush to be looked at that way.

Isaac kisses down my body, taking a nipple into his mouth and biting down slightly.

Why did I not know those were sensitive?

He switches between pinching, biting, and sucking on my nipples until I'm moaning loudly. I'm desperate for him already.

I don't know what to expect when he kisses and licks his way down my body towards my pussy, but the feel of his tongue on my skin is something I don't think I will ever get sick of.

I think I need to get him to do this to me every day.

He sucks my clit into his mouth causing my hips to raise up, and he uses one arm to hold me down as he works his magic on my clit while his other hand moves so he can slide a finger inside of me.

He lets out a sexy groan when he feels how wet I am for him.

I feel my orgasm building and it doesn't take much before I am falling over the edge.

Isaac gets up onto his knees and moves over my body.

I grab him by the back of his neck and pull him down for a kiss.

He thrusts his cock inside me, and I moan out his name.

My nails dig into his back as he fucks me hard. Having his cock inside me feels differently than last time. I'm lost in pleasure instead of observing all the contrasting feelings that my first time brought with it.

I feel another orgasm building inside of me as he returns his mouth to my neck.

I arch my neck into his mouth on instinct, and I hear my wolf in my head.

Claim. Bite. Mate.

I feel the skin under my hands change slightly before I feel a piercing pain. My teeth ache with the urge to respond to the claim, but I turn my head away; refusing to let my wolf complete the claim.

It's not time. I need more time.

We had only just started getting to know one another. Tears well in my eyes from what just happened.

All these thoughts swirl through my head when I push Isaac back, and he pulls away looking down at me in horror.

“Hailey, baby... I... He... took over,” Isaac says in horror.

I move off the bed to grab clothes out of his dresser. I throw them on while tears continue falling from my eyes.

“You really expect me to believe that you didn’t encourage or nudge your wolf to claim me? You want to blame him because nothing is ever your fault, right?” I spit out angrily.

“I’m serious, he has been fighting to claim you from the moment he scented you. He tried to last night while you were sleeping, and I pushed him away,” he says in a pleading tone.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Well, there isn’t much we can do about it now. You obviously took the choice away from me.”

He takes a step closer, but I put my hand up and he stops in his tracks.

“I can’t look at you right now,” I whisper, and leave before he can stop me.

Part of me does want him to stop me. When I don’t hear his footsteps behind me, my heart breaks a little bit inside.

Isaac

“I can’t believe you fucked this up,” I snap out loud to my wolf.

Mate, claim, ours.

My skin keeps shifting back and forth, and I feel like my body is being ripped in two.

I touch my neck, but I already know there isn’t anything there. I feel my wolf realising it too. Hailey never claimed me back.

My wolf retreats, and my mind feels silent for the first time in a very long time.

I try shifting but nothing comes, which brings me to worry that I fucked more things up than just my relationship.

There is no going back from this, is there? This is one thing a wolf can't go through. Rejection is one thing, but half a claim is something else entirely.

I've only heard about this in stories. It's very rare, so no one really knows if the stories are really true.

I stare out my window and see the forbidden forest in the distance. The forcefield, which is only visible to shifters, gleams.

It looks more inviting than it ever has.

Maybe I would be better off there.

There is no way I could right all my wrongs.

I fucked things up with my mate. She doesn't want me.

Heck, most of my pack doesn't even like me.

I feel a calling inside of me that makes me want to move closer to the forest.

I shake my head to push the thoughts away.

"What the fuck is happening to me?" I whisper to myself.

I head downstairs to work out so that I can physically release some frustrations and try not to think about my missing wolf.

~

Hours later, I'm lying on the mat in my basement, full of sweat and panting, when I hear voices.

I can't make out what they are saying.

They will make their way down here eventually. I close my eyes and let out a sigh as I wait for them.

"Something is off," Ryker's voice rings out. I open my eyes and lift my head to look at him.

"What do you mean?" I ask, and look over at Calvin, Jet, and Max who are all standing around me, and staring at me with worried eyes.

"What's wrong with your wolf? I can barely feel him." Ryker asks, looking alarmed.

“What isn’t wrong with my wolf is the shorter answer,” I mutter.

“Have you always had problems with your wolf?” Calvin asks.

I nod my head. “Yeah, my whole life. I don’t think we ever had a normal shifter connection between us. It’s always felt like two opposing beings in one body. Both of us were always fighting against each other for control.”

“Why is he barely there now?” Jet asks while taking a set on the ground beside me.

I let out a groan and rub my hand over my face. “Well, it’s not a pretty story,” I say, raising my eyebrow at Max.

He lets out a sigh of his own and sits down. “Look, I know I haven’t been really supportive of you and Hailey; but she’s my best friend. If she makes you happy then I’m going to try to like you, for her sake.”

I chuckle at his words because I know that he has been really, really trying to come around to the idea of Hailey and me.

“So, we woke up and started doing...stuff...” I say, still eyeing Hailey’s best friends warily.

They both roll their eyes and gesture for me to continue.

“Well, my wolf has been getting worse. He has been trying to fight for control and force the shift on me. He wanted to claim her, and I knew I fucked up and now we had to wait longer. So, he took the option out of our hands and claimed her,” I say.

There is silence around the room.

“You claimed her without her permission?” Ryker asks, looking pissed.

“I couldn’t control him. It’s like he shoved me back, but then when she pushed me away, he retreated. When he realised that she didn’t claim us back, he disappeared almost completely,” I tell them.

“She never gave the answering bite?” Jet asks in shock.

I shake my head. “I can’t say I blame her, but now I feel completely off.”

“I never heard of that happening before. I need to look into this,” Ryker says before getting up and rushing out of the room.

“Keep your phone on you and stay close; we have to see if there is a chance you will lose your wolf because of this,” Max says before also getting up. When he looks at me in question, I shrug.

“I really don’t care. Nothing else matters if Hailey won’t talk to me again,” I mutter, feeling hopeless. There is no coming back from this; I can already feel it.

I get up and leave the room, but not before I catch their worried gazes.

I already feel like a piece of me is missing because she’s gone, and I don’t know if she’s coming back.

Chapter Eleven

Hailey

I ran away like a coward.

I needed to process everything that happened.

Of course, Ryker and Pen were at Ryker's when I got there. They were having breakfast.

They rushed after me once I went to the room I'm staying in and asked me what's wrong.

I muttered something about a stupid mate, and Ryker left to probably go check on Isaac. Penelope stayed with me, and I ended up telling her everything.

She looks like she's fighting an urge to say something.

She looks over at me worried. "I understand if you don't want to tell me, but I'm wondering why you didn't claim him back?"

I look at her with worried eyes. "Why? Is that a big deal?"

She locks eyes with me and gives me a serious look. "Yes, it has never happened before. That's why Ryker left. He must feel the lack of connection to Isaac's wolf. As the Alpha, Ryker can feel all of us in the pack. He needs to find out if this has serious consequences. It could be nothing for all we know, or..." she trails off. I nod my head, understanding what it is that she cannot say.

"It could mean something horrible," I finish, and drop my head into my hands as a sob escapes.

"Do you know why you never bit him back? Your wolf must have wanted you to do it," she says softly. She doesn't look like she's judging me, or even angry at me for making the choices I made. She just seems curious.

"I wanted to. I felt that my wolf wanted to. I just wasn't ready for it. I went from hating him, to tolerating him, to wanting

him around me as much as possible. I felt like I was just falling into everything between us and, if I gave into the mating, maybe I would lose myself too. I don't know, it sounds stupid when I say it out loud, but I just got scared and then, when I felt the pain of his bite, it was enough for me to pull away," I tell her.

She tilts her head and looks at me curiously. "Pain?"

"Yeah, the sharpness of his teeth when he bit down. A wave of pain came over me," I say with a shrug, figuring that it was normal.

"Well, that's not right. There isn't supposed to be any pain. When I bit Ryker, there might have been a sting, but we both claimed each other right away and it was a feeling like I had never felt before," she says, and gets this dreamy, lust filled look on her face that has me gagging.

"Right. Well, I didn't get any of that," I say, starting to get worried. I really fucked this up, didn't I?

"Maybe it's because you didn't bite him back?" Penelope offers.

"Everything is just too much," I mutter while tears fall down my cheeks. How has this become my life?

At some point, Penelope leaves. I don't bother moving from the bed. I need to think about a lot of things, and I can't have anyone try to make me feel bad for not claiming Isaac.

If I claim him out of guilt, then I know I will only resent him in the end.

I nudge my wolf in my mind, but she seems distant and is ignoring me. I guess she's mad at me, but humans don't move as fast as wolves do. All the wolves want to do is find their mate, fuck, and claim; that's it.

If I claim him back, then wouldn't that be like forgiving him for all the shit he has done over the years? Could I really do that?

Am I still angry at him for everything he had put me through over the years? The hateful words he always said to me?

I know why he said them now, but it still doesn't erase anything.

Those words caused me a great deal of pain and doubt throughout the years. His words made me believe that I was unworthy of anyone.

I think about everything Isaac has done now since Ryker has taken over the pack. He has shown Ryker his complete support. The other day, he laughed and talked with each little kid that came up to him. Not once did he show any annoyance. I didn't see his eyes stray to any other women in the room either. I can tell that he truly cares about me.

He has shown nothing but patience. I could see early on that he wanted to have all of me, and I know how much he fought to restrain his wolf this entire time.

But can people really change that much?

Isaac

Days pass by and I haven't seen Hailey. I don't think she has left Ryker's household. I can smell her there, but not once did I get a glimpse of her. I only showed up at night when there was less of a chance that she would see me, so that may be why I didn't see her. I also came just long enough to know that she's safe. I did not want her feeling afraid to go out for fear of running into me.

I spend an alarming amount of time walking the boundaries of the forbidden forest.

Ryker told everyone I was working patrol there until further notice, but what he and I haven't told anyone is the pull I feel towards it.

This place brings me more comfort than it should.

I lose track of time, and the next thing I know it's morning and the sun is peeking through the trees.

I walk over to the Thompson house for a check before heading home to sleep.

With my wolf being almost nonexistent, it's easier to leave her behind and rest.

That should worry me, but I barely have it in me to care. I feel so fucking numb.

When I make it through the clearing, Hailey is standing on the back porch looking out at the woods like she's searching for something.

I stay out of sight. I know she can't smell me at this distance, so I don't have to worry about her knowing I'm here.

I watch as she searches through every part of the woods visible from this area. Her eyes move past me a couple times.

Her shoulders slump before she rubs a hand over her face and heads back inside.

I can only hope she was looking for me, but she knows where I live. If she really wanted to see me then she would make her way over there.

As far as I know, she hasn't made that sort of attempt yet. There is only so much rejection people can take before they give up. I can't make my mate want me, and I wouldn't want to force her into this mating anyways. That's not the kind of life I want for her.

I stand there staring at the house she went back into, feeling empty. No wolf, no mate; no feeling.

Just a numbness that never leaves me.

I don't know how long I stand there but, all of a sudden, Hailey is shouting at me and waving her hand in front of my face.

I blink out of the trance I was in and look down at the beautiful woman before me. When did she get here?

"Sorry, what?" I say, clearing my throat.

She looks at me with concern. "I was shouting your name for ten minutes and you didn't move at all."

“Must have been lost in thought,” I murmur.

“Can we talk about what happened?” she asks.

“It’s alright. I get it. After how I treated you our entire lives, I can’t expect you to want to mate someone like me. Even if my wolf took that choice out of my hands,” I say before backing away from her.

I feel the first hints of my wolf as he stares at our mate longingly.

I feel a partial shift take over before I force it back.

Hailey looks at me with wide eyes.

“It’s not that I don’t want to be your mate. It’s just, I’m just not ready to be a mate. I’m still new to this whole wolf thing and everything it entails. I just need more time,” she states.

I raise an eyebrow at her. “The mate thing? You were ready to mate Max before when you were human, and you knew everything that came along with that. It’s just because you didn’t get the wolf you really want that you are reluctant. You don’t want to settle for something lesser than the dream life you had planned and the perfect mate you wanted.”

She shakes her head as tears fall from her eyes. “That’s not important anymore. Max is just a friend.”

“Of course, he’s just a friend. You guys didn’t become fated, and Max won’t settle for anyone less than his fated mate. I don’t want to live being someone’s second choice. You made your feelings loud and clear when you didn’t claim me. Let’s just move on and forget any of this ever happened,” I snap.

“You wanted Penelope! If anyone is someone’s second choice, it’s me. You wanted her, but Ryker got her and now you are stuck with me! The pathetic human who lucked out on becoming a shifter,” she shouts back angrily.

“I only wanted Pen because it was better than being beaten and locked in a cage at home. I chose to live outside of those walls so I could pretend I had freedom, and she was my only option to avoid winding up near death every single fucking day. She was never my choice; she was an escape,” I snarl.

Hailey looks back at me in shock at my words. “I-i never knew any of that. It’s hard to believe any of that still.”

“Of course, you never knew. You spend so much time trying to condemn me for my past that you don’t bother to ask what other shit happened to me. Since the beginning, it has been about how you feel and how I’m a fuck up. You were my light in the darkness, but I guess that’s gone. It doesn’t matter anymore,” I say in defeat.

She tries to grab my arm, but I pull away, ignoring the hurt in her eyes. “Please, if I just had more time,” she says with a sob.

“I don’t have any more time,” I state with a sense of finality.

She looks at me in confusion before my wolf takes over. I can’t fight the shift as he shoves me to the back of our mind and takes off while we hear our would-be mate call after us.

Chapter Twelve

Isaac

My wolf ran faster than it ever had before. I could tell that he did not want Hailey to follow. I felt his sorrow and pain. It wasn't until we lost her that he made his way to the forbidden forest.

The barrier around the forest used to be taken down for the Rite of Passage ceremony, but then Ryker put a stop to it. Now the only way in is to turn feral, and the only way out is to find your humanity again.

Which is how it is supposed to be.

A shock comes over me as my wolf passes the barrier without anything to stop him.

My wolf had to feel loss so strongly to be able to pass the barrier.

He gives a mournful howl that can only be heard inside of the forest.

I let my own devastation take over me as we wander the forest aimlessly. Now that Hailey can't chase us anymore, my wolf walks around sluggishly, barely alert.

Which is why I don't see the other wolf coming until it's too late.

The wolf crashes us onto our side to take us down, and we growl and snap at whomever it is trying to hurt us.

The scent is familiar; it's the same wolf that had attacked me before.

This wolf is out to kill me. I spend too long defending myself before I'm able to knock them against a tree and run away.

This place is big enough. I hope to lose whomever that was.

Wolves are territorial in here, but that attack felt different. Personal.

I don't know of anyone that has come into the forest, so I can't think of who would know me in here.

I feel like I'm being hunted, and I know it's the same wolf from months ago stalking us throughout the forest.

They jump us out of nowhere again and, when I catch a look at their eyes, I'm shocked to see that there isn't a trace of a feral wolf looking at me. This wolf looks like they know what they are doing.

My wolf is currently on the attack. I can't get him to shift back for anything.

The other wolf rips at my leg. I feel the pierce of pain. If I could scream out, I would. My wolf lets out a whimper.

"What the fuck? Who the fuck are you?" I yell at the wolf after I shift quickly back to my human form. My wolf doesn't seem to know what to do with this attack and cowardly retreats.

They shift like it's nothing, but my focus is on her eyes that look at me with such furiousness. She looks at me like she wants to tear me apart.

"I'm not surprised you don't know anything about me. But again, that doesn't shock me given who your father is," the woman growls out angrily.

"I have no idea what you are talking about. How do you know my father?" I ask, dread filling me.

She lets out a sigh. "He's my mother's ex-fuck or whatever. He trapped me in here years ago after I saw him kill her. She told him she was pregnant, but he was obviously cheating on your mom and didn't want her to find out. He was chasing me through the forest. He said he was going to enjoy me before getting rid of me so I couldn't turn him in for killing her. I felt so fucking devastated at losing my mother. She was my rock, my world. He chased me all around and, next thing I know, I was trapped in here. I've been in here for a couple years now."

"My father is dead. He died a couple months ago. He got taken out in a rogue attack, and no one was sorry to see him go as he

betrayed the pack. How did you know he was my father?" I ask, looking at her curiously.

She scoffs at my question. "You look just fucking like him. I would be an idiot not to see that."

Yeah, I do look like the asshole. It's one of the things I hate about myself.

"It's definitely not a secret anymore what kind of an asshole he is. The new alpha is still figuring out how deep the corruption ran. Can't say that I'm sad to see the asshole you know as my father is gone."

She seems to look at me with a different expression on her face; like she wasn't expecting me to hate him too.

"Is there a way to get out of here?" she asks.

I shake my head. "You know, I'm not really sure. My wolf is on the edge of turning feral which is how I think I was able to get in, but your attack made him retreat back."

"Did you lose a mate?" she asks, looking at me with sympathy.

I shake my head, but watch as she grabs some clothes. She laughs at the look of confusion on my face.

"Well, some of you come in here and shift but stay shifted, so clothes are left behind. I gather them up and place them around random parts of the forest," she says with a shrug.

"That works. What's your name, by the way? I don't want to call you 'that wolf who has attacked me twice.' I will help you find your way out," I say with a wince.

My father was a real piece of work. She doesn't deserve to be in here. She's been in here too long already; I'm surprised she hasn't lost her humanity.

"My name is Willow, and you are?" she asks before taking a seat beside me.

"Isaac," I mutter.

"Care to tell me about you turning feral?" she asks softly.

“Want to tell me about you getting stuck here? You obviously aren’t feral; you should have been able to break free,” I counter back.

She lets out a sigh. “I will tell you, if you tell me,” she says, and I nod my head in agreement.

She raises her eyebrows at me like she expects me to go first but, heck, my story is probably way shorter than hers.

With a sigh I let it all out. “Well, I had spent my life bullying anyone who wasn’t popular because my father is an asshole who wasted no time in beating me if I was kind to anyone that he didn’t think I should be kind to. My mate turned out to be this human who I spent my life bullying and, as could be expected, she hates me; not that I blame her. She told me she couldn’t trust me after my father forced me to reject her. I worked really hard for her to see the real me, but then I ended up giving her a mating bite and she didn’t return it, which made my wolf run. Next thing I know, I’m in here being attacked by you.”

“Wow, okay, that wasn’t what I was expecting. I am not surprised that your father treated you that way. He never did have a heart,” she says with a pained smile.

“Well now it’s your turn to tell your story,” I say, looking at her expectantly.

“I was scared. I was always worried he was waiting for me on the other side, and I wasn’t sure if anyone would believe me if I told them. I think that fear has kept me back. Every time I try to get through, I can’t,” she says with a sigh.

“From what I know about the barrier, it probably felt that helpless feeling, which is similar to how feral shifters feel before they walk into here. It let you in, and I’m guessing you still feel helpless because, otherwise, you could have gotten out,” I tell her softly.

“How would you know that?” she asks, looking skeptical.

“Well, we had a bear that was in here not too long ago, and a wolf. They both found peace in their wolves before the barrier let them out, so I know it’s possible to get out. The fact is that

the magic won't let you out, so you haven't found peace yet, which makes sense since you were probably in here out of fear. Heck; most of us didn't know how it worked until a couple weeks ago," I say with a sigh.

"I guess that makes sense. I don't even know what life is like out there now. You said there is a new alpha. Who is the alpha now?" she asks.

I tell her about the drama with Penelope's father, the attack on the pack, about my mate being turned into a wolf, and about Ryker taking down the alpha, making it his pack. I tell Willow that Ryker is young, but that I think he could make this pack something great.

She listens and can't believe everything that has become of her pack. She said that she's more than ready to go back now that she has heard how much it has all changed. I know a part of me doesn't want to be in here, but the other part of me is willing me to stay. My wolf and I have no reason to get out.

Our mate doesn't want us, so what the point?

I will work on getting Willow out of here though because she shouldn't be trapped.

I will do whatever I can to help her.

As for me, I'm staying.

Hailey

The days are too fucking long without seeing my mate. After Isaac ran away from me while I shouted out his name, my wolf took over and we watched as he disappeared into the barrier.

I tried to get through too, but I couldn't follow him.

My wolf has been pacing and whimpering for her mate for days.

Ryker had found me, and I shifted long enough to tell him what happened. Ryker had left, but I'm not sure where he went since my wolf won't let me leave the barrier.

We can't even feel Isaac near. I know it's the magic doing that, but I didn't realise how cold I would feel without his presence. The warmth and safety I felt when he was near is very apparent now that he's gone.

He has constantly been there with me since the attack on the pack, and now he's just gone.

I play the scene over and over in my head.

The devastation and hopeless look in his eyes before running away is something I will never forget.

I did that. I hate that, no matter what our past was, I had made our mate look that way.

It hasn't been long since I had even decided to give us a chance.

I start to think about everything I know. All the partial shifts I had seen him take. He really never had any control over his wolf.

They were like two beings fighting for control, instead of them working together.

I had to find a way to get him back.

"Hailey, you need to rest. He's not going anywhere while he's in there," Max says, and I turn around to bare my teeth at him.

He puts his hands up in the air, and I notice Penelope and Ryker behind him. They are looking at me with expressions of pity.

"Your parents want to see you," Max says.

I shift back, ignoring my nudity, but Penelope throws me a sundress and I quickly cover myself.

"They are supposed to think I'm gone on a road trip with you. How do they know I'm here?" I snap out.

"Well, they saw me in town and asked how come you haven't come home if we were back. I just told them you had food poisoning for the last couple days, so you haven't left the bed

at Ryker's house," Max says with a sheepish smile and a shrug.

I shake my head. "I can't leave here. I can't leave him," I whisper brokenly.

I feel arms come around me and, by the scent, I can tell its Pen.

"How about I stay here with Ryker, and Max gets your parents to meet you at the house? That way, you are still close if he comes through, and I'll be here as a friendly face," she says softly.

"Alright, but I want to know the second he comes through," I tell her sternly.

"Of course. Just let your parents see you so that you can tell them you are fine," she says with a nod.

I let out a sigh and look back at the barrier one more time before Max takes off to tell my parents where I am.

My parents look at my worriedly when they see me and wrap their arms around me. I take the comfort their arms give, but it all still feels meaningless.

"What's wrong, Hailey?" my mom asks, pulling away and looking me over.

"I'm fine," I rasp.

She shakes her head, "No, you are not fine. Tell me what's wrong," she says in a demanding tone.

My father doesn't take his eyes off of me. "You've changed. There is something different about you," he says softly.

"I wish I could tell you, but I can't," I mutter, looking away from them.

My mom closes her eyes for a second. I have no idea what she's doing but it takes a minute before she opens them, and her eyes almost look purple and are glazed over.

I take a step back. "M-mom?"

“It’s okay, sweetie,” my dad says, stepping closer to me like he’s prepared in case I run. Which I very well might.

“What’s happening?” I choke out in disbelief.

When her eyes turn back to normal, she looks at me with a soft smile.

“You’re a wolf,” she states.

My mouth drops open in shock. “What are you talking about?” I hate that my voice cracks at the question.

“I’m sorry we had to keep things a secret from you, but we wanted you to have a chance at a normal life. When you didn’t show any sign of powers, we decided it was best,” my mom says with regret in her voice.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I say, telling well in my eyes.

Has my whole life been a lie?

“My family comes from witches, though it seems to skip a generation sometimes. My life was full of chaos with danger lurking around every corner. When I met your father and got married, we moved here and made an agreement with the alpha that if we protected the barrier, we could live normally. I didn’t want you to live with the same fear as I had growing up. Maybe that was wrong of me, but all I wanted for you, and for us, was a normal life,” she says, suddenly looking tired.

“The barrier? Tell me about the barrier,” I say, ignoring everything she had said to focus on the only matter important to me right now.

“What do you want to know about it?” she asks, looking at me curiously.

“I need to get through the barrier,” I state.

“We don’t let anyone through anymore,” she tells me sadly.

“You let everyone through for the Rite of Passage ceremonies, didn’t you? Why can’t you let me in?” I cry out.

“It wasn’t right, but that was part of the agreement. I was able to let it go for a second so that no one could escape and listen for when people wanted out. I hid so no one knew it was me. I

feared there would be more danger if people knew I was the one who controlled it,” she says.

“Then let me in,” I say, even more determined.

She shakes her head with tears in her eyes. “It’s dangerous in there. I can’t let my only daughter in that place.”

“I need to get to him. He needs me. I can’t feel him through the barrier,” I try to plead with her.

“Who is him?” she asks.

“My mate,” I say before a sob erupts from my throat.

“Why is your mate on the other side of the barrier? It’s supposed to only let the feral in,” she asks with a concerned look in her eyes.

“He thought I didn’t want him. He felt so hopeless that he was able to pass, and I couldn’t follow him to tell him he’s wrong,” I say with tears falling as I remember Isaac looking at me in pain and despair right before he fled from me.

Tears well in my mother’s eyes and I can see her begin to weaken. “How am I supposed to let you in there knowing how dangerous it is?”

“You used to let people in all the time. This isn’t any different,” I say, raising an eyebrow at her.

“I knew it was wrong, but the alpha wouldn’t let me have it any other way. He threatened me with your life so many times. I didn’t have a choice,” she says, sounding defeated.

“He’s gone, and Ryker is nothing like that. We can have people around the barrier in case any ferals try to escape,” I try to plead.

My tone is getting desperate, but I don’t care anymore. I need to get to my mate. I’ll do anything to get him back.

She lets out a sigh. “Okay, let’s do this before I change my mind,” she replies reluctantly.

I eagerly call for Ryker and tell him the plan.

While we wait for the rest of the pack to arrive, I talk to my parents and ask why they kept this a secret from me. I wouldn't have told anyone.

"We just did what we thought what was best to protect you," my mom says in a pleading voice.

"Tell us more about your mate. That's who you were talking about on the phone, right?" my mom asks when I don't say anything.

"He's a different person now. He's told me a lot more about his past, and I now understand why he was the way he was. It has been hard to see him as my mate when I remember everything he had said and done to me before," I state honestly.

"People can change. It's up to you if you think you could give him a chance," she tells me.

"I know, and I had been giving him a chance, but then he claimed me before I was ready. He told me he was having problems controlling his wolf. I guess I didn't really believe him until it actually happened. I can see now that there was more of a divide between him and his wolf than I even realised," I say.

"It was more about him losing control. From what you are saying, it seems like he was trying to hold back as long as he could, but the wolf took the choice out of both of your hands," my dad suggests.

I nod my head in agreement. "I know it's not his fault, but maybe I figured it out too late because now he's in the barrier. What if something happens to him in there and I can't get to him in time?"

"You will, sweetie. I can tell you care about him very much," my mom says softly.

I more than care about him. I feel like I had felt this way for a while now, but I was just too scared to see it.

The thought of losing him is already ripping me apart. I can see why shifters fall in love so fast. The pull of fated shifter love is more intense than any human love can experience.

I had always felt a little pull towards him; maybe that's why his words always hurt so much. Now that I know it was the fates trying to bring us together, the pull is stronger than ever. It's always pulling me in his direction.

I only just started to realise and accept my feelings for him. I have to fix this.

I feel like I need him as much as I need to breathe. If this is only a fraction of what he went through, then I don't know how he has been able to hold on for this long.

I can barely hold on as it is.

Chapter Thirteen

Hailey

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Ryker says minutes later as the pack starts to gather around the barrier.

“I can’t just let him live in there for the rest of his life thinking that I don’t want him that way,” I cry out to my best friends who are both looking at me with concern.

“Then why didn’t you claim him back if you wanted him so bad,” Max snaps back.

“BECAUSE I WAS SCARED!” I shout, and everyone looks at me stunned by my reaction.

“Scared of what?” Ryker asks, looking at me with sympathy in his eyes.

“Well, I’ve hated the man my entire life, and then I find out we are mated and he’s nasty to me.” I take a deep breath to say the rest. “But then his parents died, and it was like he was this different person. The weight of the world no longer hung on his shoulders, and he could finally be the person he was meant to be. But how am I supposed to trust that he won’t change back to the person he was before?”

Tears are falling from my eyes when a bunch of arms surround me.

When everyone pulls away, Penelope looks at me with a soft expression. “He won’t. He was a different person when we were alone. I knew what his life was like. That’s the only reason we kept getting back together. The beatings would stop if we were together. I hated it, but we both saw no way out. We felt both relief and agony after finding out that we weren’t fated to each other. I knew the outcome wouldn’t be good for him. He doesn’t have to worry about that anymore though, and neither do you. He needs to know that you will give him that chance to be the person he always was but was forced to hide.”

“I just needed time, and now I may never get the chance to tell him how I feel,” I say brokenly.

“You will. We need to send someone with you. I can’t let you go in alone,” Ryker says, and the looks in his eyes shows that he is not backing down from this.

“I’ll go with you,” Max says, but I shake my head. “No, I can’t let you do that. Not to mention that Isaac thinks I want you over him, so showing up with you would send the wrong message.”

“She’s right,” Pen says in agreement.

“I’ll go,” Jet says. “He knows I don’t want his mate, and we were sort of friends over the years.”

“I agree,” Ryker says.

“Okay, everyone into position,” he shouts, and the pack surrounds the barrier.

My mom closes her eyes and raises her hands in the air. I see her hands light up and feel the magic of the barrier come down.

I hear her scream. I turn around to see a wolf taking her to the ground before taking a bite out of her left arm.

I run towards her but hear a bunch of animal noises and human screams behind me.

I turn and look in horror at the broken barrier, and then at all the feral wolves, bears, tigers, and any other shifters you can think of, going wild.

When I turn back towards my mom, I see that Ryker has taken the wolf down. He then shifts and uses his alpha voice to force the other wolf to shift. Ashley is standing there with an evil grin on her face and blood dripping from her mouth.

“My parents had it right. This pack doesn’t deserve to live. You are all nothing but a bunch of weaklings,” she says with a cackle.

I don’t think. Instead, I just charge at her and throw my fist back to hit her repeatedly, over and over again.

I hear a roar, and I check to see Ashley knocked out before turning around to see a lion coming after me, heading for a killing hit.

I shift before I can blink and run at him.

We both hit each other and tumble around as we attack. I don't want to hurt him because I know there is a person who his hurting underneath his feral, glazed eyes; but I can't let them kill me either.

There's a moment where I hesitate a second too long and his teeth are at my throat. The fear is real that my life is about to be over.

Isaac will never know how I feel.

"Hailey!!" is shouted in a roar before the lion is knocked off me. I look over to see Isaac's wolf now fighting with the lion.

I see another feral shifter runs towards them but, before I can make my way over there, I'm being attacked again. This time, I know who it is. Ashley is grinning down at me.

"If I can't have him, you can't either," she bellows. I try to kick her off me, but she somehow has my head in a lock and turns me around to see two feral shifters attack my mate.

One swipes at his underbelly and a roar of pain fills the air as he stumbles to the ground.

Tears fall from my eyes as I am given the real possibility that I could lose him for good.

Anguish fills me as I see one of them go for his throat and the other brings his jaws down to his belly.

A scream erupts from me as I let the pain take over.

"ISAAC!!!" I cry as everything turns to white noise. The whole place stills.

I feel Ashley's arms around me loosen. I get out of her hold and look down at her, but her face and body are frozen, though her eyes are moving in a panic.

I ignore her and run to Isaac. I notice that everyone else seems to be frozen too. I use all the strength I have to push the feral

shifters off Isaac, and they all fall to the ground like statues.

Isaac is looking up at me, frozen in time, and I let out a sob at all the blood surrounding him while I cry into his chest.

“Please don’t die. I can’t live without you,” I cry, letting the tears fall.

A wave of pain leaves me as I sob uncontrollably, trying to will Isaac into being okay. I am flooded with the feeling of anguish. I feel like I’m being ripped apart before the air changes again. There is some sort of power in the air, and I close my eyes as I feel it leave me.

I open my eyes to look down at Isaac who takes in a deep breath at the same time everyone seems to unfreeze.

I anxiously look over his chest, throat, and stomach to see that he’s completely healed.

“Isaac?” I cry.

His arms wrap around me, pulling me down to him.

“Hailey,” he says into my neck.

“I’m sorry I was too scared to claim you back, but I can’t live without you,” I cry.

“You won’t have to,” he says, kissing me hard.

When we pull away, I finally look around and notice my mom setting the barrier back up. Jet is holding down Ashley, and the feral shifters are walking back to the call of the barrier. The two that were attacking Isaac are human now and looking down at me in disbelief.

“What just happened?” one asks, looking down at his arms, surprised that they aren’t paws.

“How did I?” the other one asks, sounding just as surprised.

“What is going on?” I ask, looking around.

Ryker and Penelope come rushing towards us.

“Hailey, did you see what you did?” Penelope asks excitedly.

I shake my head. “I don’t know. I just saw that Isaac was about to get torn to pieces and I felt undeniable pain at the thought of

losing him. Then it's like everyone froze, so I ran to him and saw all the blood. I wished that he would be okay and felt desperate as some sort of power left me. Next thing I know, he's okay," I say, looking at them in confusion.

"You froze everyone somehow and then healed him," Penelope says proudly.

"I don't understand. How? I'm not a white wolf," I say, confused.

"I think it's because you are part witch," my mom says while walking up to us.

"You must have come into your powers in all of your pain," my father says thoughtfully.

"I don't even understand what I did," I say, shaking my head.

"You have the power to heal, and I think you froze everyone to get to Isaac in time. I'm not entirely sure how it works, but I do know you can heal people. Not just physical injuries either. It looks like you are also able to heal mental ones," my mom says, looking at the two shifters who were just feral.

"It's like I was asleep in the background. I just lost my mate when my lion pushed me back and I woke up here. I don't know what happened," the guy says in disbelief.

"This is an interesting turn of events," Penelope says in excitement.

I look over to where Ashley is and see that she's being held by Jet and Calvin.

"How did she get out of the holding cells?" I growl out, wanting to rip her throat out myself.

I see another wolf being pulled forward and it looks like Jeremiah, one of Isaac's friends who always hung around with him.

"What do you think you are doing disobeying an alpha's orders?" Ryker asks in a low, dangerous tone.

"You will never be my alpha," the guy sneers out before spitting towards Ryker.

Ryker smiles at him coldly. “Well, if that’s how you feel then you will be banished from the pack and pack lands.”

Everyone gasps. I heard enough from Ryker and Max to know a wolf without a pack will go crazy. They need the pack bonds if they don’t want to lose themselves.

Usually, people who are banished aren’t accepted by other packs.

Jeremiah’s face pales, but he doesn’t protest as Ryker orders some pack members to send him home to pack a bag and walk him out of pack territory.

Ryker turns back and looks at Ashley. “Now, what are we going to do about you?”

“I challenge Hailey Weston for her mate, Isaac,” Ashley says before anyone can say anything.

Isaac

My mouth drops open when I hear the words. I have never wanted to mate anyone else but Hailey. Ashley is just throwing the challenge out there because she knows that challenges end in death.

Ryker grins at her words. “Alright, if you want it that way.”

I can tell he fully believes that Hailey will win this challenge, or he wouldn’t have willingly sent her into a life-or-death situation.

I pull Hailey closer and whisper in her ear. “You can do this, baby. She has nothing on you.”

She nods her head. “She thinks I’m a weak wolf since I was changed and not born into this, but I’m about to show her just

how wrong she is.”

There is a deadly look in her eyes as her wolf shines through without an ounce of fear.

I feel some small amount of fear that something might happen to my mate, but I also know how strong she is. She has trained with the Thompsons and has a better handle on her wolf than most people that have been shifters their whole lives.

Ashley looks at her with a vicious gleam in her eyes.

I swallow hard. Hailey’s friends and parents stand beside me as we watch Hailey fully unleash.

Ashley shifts into her wolf but, somehow, Hailey shifts faster. Damn, I really need to learn how to do that.

Ashley charges for Hailey, but Hailey just simply steps out of the way looking bored.

I have to hold back a chuckle when this goes on for a few minutes. Hailey nips at Ashley’s feet like she’s playing with a pup.

“She’s completely fucking with her like she’s playing a game,” Max says with a laugh.

I can tell Ashley’s getting more and more frustrated by the second. I hear her growl in frustration.

Ashley shifts back to her human form. “Fight me, you coward!” she shouts at Hailey.

Hailey sits back on her back legs and tilts her head. When Ashley just stands there, Hailey belly crawls towards her.

Everyone in the pack is laughing now.

Ashley shifts and tries to pounce on Hailey’s back, but Hailey rolls out of the way and grabs Ashley by the throat.

Her teeth are in Ashley’s throat, and she rips into it without hesitation.

She stares down at Ashley and watches the light leave her eyes.

Everyone watches in silence. Hailey just took Ashley out with one single move.

Hailey shifts back and walks towards me. I grab my shirt and take it off to cover her with.

She smiles at me. "Well, that was fun," she says, causing everyone to laugh.

"I'm proud of you," I tell her and pull her close.

"Let's get this cleaned up, and then we can discuss everything that went down here today," Ryker commands.

Everyone searches around to ensure that all the feral shifters were brought back to the barrier. The two shifters that changed back to their human form are given clothes to wear, but they are still in a state of confusion.

There is so much we have to talk about.

It's going to be a long day.

Chapter Fourteen

Isaac

Food is ordered and everyone eats. It takes a lot of energy to shift, so it makes sense that everyone is starving.

The wolf inside me is silent once again. It only came out when Hailey was in danger but, once she healed me, he retreated. I know he's hiding from the hurt of her not claiming him.

"Isaac, tell me about your wolf. It seems you have more problems with him than I realised," Ryker states as everyone sits around the table and stares at me.

I clear my throat before I start talking. "Well, it has always been this way for as long as I can remember. It's not a secret anymore that I didn't have a good childhood, but I think that's where it started. My wolf wanted to protect us but, for the longest time, I wasn't strong enough to stand up against my father. I knew if I fought back, he would probably kill me. Even though I was young, I knew I didn't want to die. Since my wolf couldn't understand why I acted the way I did and why I treated people the way I did, we never saw eye to eye and never got to connect. Shifting has always been painful for me. Lately, my wolf has been trying to shift and claim Hailey because I was refusing to do it myself. I wanted to give her the time she needed. When my wolf claimed her, but we didn't receive the bond, he retreated. I can barely feel him now."

"I think we need to work on your connection to your wolf. You both should be one. As your alpha, I will help you," Ryker states.

His father gets an excited gleam in his eyes. "One on one training?" he asks.

Ryker laughs and nods his head. "Yeah."

I swallow hard. I know Ryker's dad is good. He's trained his family, and he has also trained Pen, Hailey, and Max. I know

he was working with other pack members, but I was too busy trying to win my mate over to train with him.

“I’ll do whatever it takes,” I say. I look out the door when someone opens it and feel the pull of the barrier tugging at me.

Hailey grabs my chin and turns me to face her. “You aren’t going back there. If you try, you are going to do so with me hanging onto your ankles,” she says in a determined voice.

I chuckle at her words. “I’m trying not to, but I still feel the pull,” I say softly.

I know everyone can hear us, but I ignore them and focus on my mate.

“Then we are going to have to change that,” she states in a determined voice.

I nod my head, but I try hard not to get my hopes up.

I sit back as we talk to each other about Hailey’s parents and everything they have done for the pack for all these years without anyone knowing.

When the conversation moves to the two lion shifters, they look completely lost.

“Can you tell us your stories?” Ryker asks, looking at them.

“I am the son of the alpha of my pride. I lost my mate in a war between prides. She was protecting our cub when they attacked. I couldn’t get to her in time and, when I felt her life force drain away, I just couldn’t stay strong enough for our cub. I just let the lion take over so I couldn’t feel the pain,” one of them says. Tears fall from everyone’s eyes at his words.

“I lost my mate before I could claim her. Someone claimed her and took her from me out of revenge. She claimed to love him and rejected me. She was one of my best friends. Losing her felt like losing a part of me. I didn’t want to go on after that. I knew no one else would be good enough for me or take her place. I left, walked here, and let myself walk into the barrier. Once I was inside, I let my lion take over. I knew there was nothing for me outside of it. So, I stayed,” the other one says.

“Do you want us to call your prides? Do you want to go back?” Ryker asks after a few minutes.

“What if I don’t want to go back?” the second one asks.

“Then you are more than welcome to stay here. I’m not like most pack alphas. I’ll welcome any and all shifters here. It doesn’t matter that you aren’t a wolf,” Ryker says.

“Then I’ll stay. There’s nothing for me back home, but I don’t want to lose my humanity again,” he says.

Ryker nods his head, easily accepting him into the pack. That’s why he’s a great alpha. Because he had been on the outside and not good enough for the pack before, he would never turn anyone away if they are wanting to be a part of the pack.

“I’d like for you to call my pride. I want to see my cub,” the first lion says. He gives Ryker the name of his pride and the number to call.

Ryker does just that. He doesn’t bother leaving while he phones and instead puts his phone on speaker.

“Nolan,” a deep voice says.

“This is Ryker from the Blue Walkers pack,” Ryker says.

“The pack that protects the barrier?” the man asks, sounding almost hopeful.

“That’s right. There have been some recent developments with the barrier,” Ryker says.

“Is it my son? Deke? I know he had to have ended up there after losing Elise,” Nolan says, sounding more alert.

“Yes, it regards your son. Your son has recently gotten his humanity back, and would like to see his cub,” Ryker says.

“I’ll fly us out first thing. Is he there?” Nolan asks.

“He’s right here listening,” Ryker says, looking at Deke.

“Deke. Son. I have missed you so much,” Nolan rasps.

“Father,” Deke says through a choked voice.

“It has been so long since I heard your voice. Boy, I missed it. Even when you used to piss me off. I longed for the day I

could hear it again,” Nolan rasps.

“I’m sorry,” Deke says.

“None of that, son. You can’t apologise for how you handled your grief. I would have done the same thing if I lost your mother,” Nolan says.

“How soon can you be here?” Deke asks, sounding desperate.

“We are on the next flight out. We will be there before you know it,” Nolan says.

They make arrangements for his family to come. His parents, son, brothers, and sisters are all on their way to see their brother after having missed him for a couple years.

Tears well in my eyes. All I ever wanted in life was a parent to love me and miss me like Deke is loved and missed. Why couldn’t I have that growing up?

I get up and head home when I can’t deal with my emotions anymore.

I hear footsteps following me. I don’t have to look to know it’s Hailey.

I don’t say anything as she follows me. She grabs my hand as we walk towards my house, and I try my best to ignore the call of the barrier.

Hailey

I don’t even hesitate to follow Isaac home.

I can’t part with him even if I wanted to.

When we get home, he walks into the shower to clean up. I follow him into the bathroom and take off my shirt before climbing inside the shower without question.

He jumps when I touch his back and turns to look at me in shock.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” I say as I grab the soap and start to wash his back.

“You don’t have to do that,” he rasps.

“I know, but I want to,” I tell him as I keep washing him. My eyes well, but I hold back the tears as I look at all the scars on his skin. There are so many. It hurts me to think of all he had went through considering that shifters usually heal very quickly.

I feel him stiffen as I trace a deep scar with my hand. He doesn’t say anything but lets out a shaky breath. I press my lips to the scar in a light kiss. That seems to be all he needs for the tension to leave.

Words don’t need to be spoken right now. He’s trusting me to see this vulnerable side of him.

We don’t say anything as I clean him, and he turns around so I can clean his front.

His cock is hard, so I take extra care in washing it. When my hand touches him, he closes his eyes as he shudders.

“Let’s make sure this is all clean,” I purr as I get down onto my knees.

I don’t know where this confidence comes from, but I don’t mind. I have been itching to taste him for a while now.

He looks down at me in awe as I take the tip of him in my mouth and swirl my tongue around the head before I suck.

“Hailey,” he says in a low husky tone.

I hum around his cock as I take more of him into my mouth.

I love the taste and the feeling of him.

It doesn’t take long before he’s thrusting into my mouth.

He moves to pull away, but I grab his ass to pull him in deeper before swallowing around his cock, causing him to erupt into my mouth.

When I make sure I got it all, I pull away and look up at him.

“Fuck, that was better than I could ever have imagined,” he rasps.

When I stand up, he takes the soap to clean me. “My turn,” he says with an excited gleam in his eyes.

I gasp when his hands touch me on all areas of my body. My nipples get hard when he soaps them up before pinching them.

His hand moves to my pussy and his finger glides to my clit; no doubt he can feel how wet I already am for him.

“Looks like you need to be cleaned right here,” he says as he slides a finger inside of me.

I nod my head rapidly.

“Turn around,” he rasps as he pulls away. I whimper at the loss of his hand.

I do as he says and show him my back.

“Hands on the wall,” he says. I do as he says before he washes my back down to my ass.

I feel him move, and I turn to see him on his knees as he grabs my ass with both hands.

His fingers feel almost teasing as they aren't where I need them to be.

“So wet,” he mutters before I feel his tongue at my entrance.

I gasp and drop my head as he feasts on me like a starving man.

One hand is holding onto my hip and the other moves to pinch my clit. His tongue slides in and out of me, like he doesn't want a drop of me to go to waste.

“Isaac,” I moan out as he fucks me with his tongue.

He lets out a growl as he devours me.

My orgasm comes crashing into me without warning as I cry out his name.

My knees feel weak, but he holds me up, turns off the water,
and helps me dry.

We climb into bed. I feel tired, but happy and safe, as he wraps
his arms around me.

I sigh at the feeling of his skin on mine since we didn't bother
with clothes.

How could I have spent so long fighting this?

Chapter Fifteen

Hailey

I wake up the next morning with Isaac's hand on my breast and his hard cock against my ass. He shifts so he grinds against my pussy and, judging by the feeling, I'm already wet for him.

I want to wake up like this every day.

I push myself back against him as the head of his cock catches on my entrance. When I turn my head to look at him, I can see that he's still sleeping but the desperate feeling to have him inside of me burns hotter.

I push back against him and feel his cock slide inside of me.

Fuck.

I let out a quiet moan. I don't want him to wake up just yet. It feels almost naughty taking him like this.

Slowly I rock myself back against him, fucking myself slowly on his cock. His hand squeezes my breast as he lets out a low groan.

When I turn my head to look at him, he's still sleeping.

The need to move faster is something I can't ignore, so I give in.

I grab his hair in my hand and fuck myself back against him hard. That seems to be what wakes him.

He stills and takes a moment to process what's going on.

"Hailey, I'm sorry. I don't-" he says, but I silence him as I fuck myself against him.

"I'm not sorry, but you will be if you don't make me come," I demand.

A smile comes over his face. "Anything for you," he replies.

He takes over and fucks me just how I wanted him to.

He moves his head so he can take my lips in a kiss. I feel his hand move to my clit when he pulls his mouth away.

Before I can protest, he moves my hand from his hair but keeps it up so he can take my nipple into his mouth as he fucks me.

Everything becomes too much as I clench around him and feel him release inside of me. That seems to be what sets me off as I scream in pleasure.

We are both breathing hard, but he makes no move to pull out as he slowly fucks his come into me. "I could stay in this pussy forever," he rasps as he doesn't stop.

"Yes," I moan out, but he pulls out and turns so I can straddle him and slides me back onto his cock.

"Just like that, baby," he says, grabbing my hips while I ride him.

I don't stop until we both come. I fall against him feeling completely exhausted.

"If we don't get up now, I don't think I'll ever want to stop," I rasp against his chest.

"Fuck, don't say things like that or I won't let you leave the bed," he says with a light chuckle.

I grin and look up at him.

"If you didn't have training right away then I'd say go for it, but we know if you don't show up Scott is going to drag you there anyway and your lesson will be harder than it's supposed to be," I tell him.

"You're right. I need to go fix this connection with my wolf," he says with a sigh.

"Do you feel him?" I ask in a whisper.

"A little bit more than yesterday. Maybe sleeping with you in my arms helped him come back a bit, but it's something that might take time," he says.

"Go work on that. I'm going to see my parents," I tell him.

He nods his head as we both get up to get ready for our day. He kisses me hard before leaving. My smile won't leave my face.

This is going to work.

I can feel it.

Isaac

When I pull up to the Thompson house, Rose leads me to the basement where Scott, Ryker, and Max are.

“We are going to help you in any way we can,” Ryker says when he sees me.

“I'll do whatever it takes,” I tell them.

We get to work, but Ryker has to force the shift on me a few times before my wolf completely comes back instead of hiding.

I'm fucking glad he has decided to come back. It felt like a part of me was missing.

Though Scott Thompson is a hard ass.

The training he puts me through is grueling.

I'm exhausted when it's over, and I drop onto my back as I gasp for breath.

Ryker and Scott head out to talk, and Max sits beside me. He's breathing just as hard as I am, since we all trained.

“I think it's about time we talked,” he says, breaking the silence.

I look over at him and sit up. I can't help but stiffen at his words.

“I know you care about Hailey. She's a special woman,” he starts.

“She’s the best thing that has ever happened to me,” I tell him simply.

“She’s amazing. I know it’s not a secret that I wanted her to be my mate. I always knew she was incredible. I wanted her for a long time, but I couldn’t take her as my mate because I would always have to worry that one day, I might find the mate that I was fated to. I worried about leaving her for the mating pull because I knew how strong it was. My parents tried to deny the pull and had told me stories about how it was pretty much impossible to do so. I didn’t want to hurt Hailey that way,” he says.

My fists clench thinking about him wanting Hailey, but I know she wants me now. I can’t help but smirk at the thought of her this morning completely insatiable for me.

“I hated that you were her fated, but I can see I was wrong about you. I didn’t think you were going to be good for her, but I can see now that I was wrong. I’m more than happy to be proven wrong. I can see that you cherish her as much as she deserves, and that’s all I ask,” he says.

“She’s everything to me. Maybe she always has been, but I know nothing will stop me from doing anything and everything to make her happy. That woman has me wrapped around her finger, and I have no fucking problems with that. When you find your mate, you will understand,” I tell him.

“I already did,” he tells me.

I turn to look at him in shock.

“You found your mate?” I ask, looking at him in disbelief.

He nods his head. “Yeah, she was someone who came out of the barrier. Now she’s staying in one of the accommodations that the pack had set up.”

“Are you talking about Willow?” I ask him.

He looks over at me in surprise. “Yeah, that’s her. She scented me and I could tell she knew who I was to her, but she didn’t seem all that interested in getting to know me.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, well that would be from the shit my father put her through. He always was an asshole. She has been through a lot. She wasn’t feral. She was just trying to hide from my father and then was too scared to cross the barrier. She didn’t know what she would be coming back to if and when she was able to cross it,” I tell him.

“How do you know that?” he asks, looking at me like he’s eager for any piece of information I can give him about her.

“Well, she attacked me during the Rite of Passage ceremony, but I didn’t know who she was. Then, when I ended up back in there, she tried again but we ended up talking and getting to know one another. I gather it will be hard to trust after the shit she has been through,” I tell him.

“I don’t care how long it takes; as long as she gives me a chance, I will be definitely taking it. We were fated for a reason,” he states.

I nod my head in agreement. “The fates are a funny thing. I believed in it my whole life. I had hoped there would be someone out there for me who would love me for who I am and not for my past. I always knew people were meant for each other for a reason. Look at Penelope and Ryker. Fate never gets it wrong. Some people might try to fight it, but eventually you see why that person was always meant for you.”

“I’m glad you aren’t the person everyone thought you were,” Max tells me.

I give him a small smile. “Me too.”

Ryker comes back after a few minutes. “You did good today. Same time tomorrow?” he asks me.

“I’ll be here,” I say before getting up. I can already feel how sore I am going to be tomorrow.

“Good. We need to have a meeting later. Go get some food and rest, and then come to my place this afternoon,” Ryker says.

I nod my head and start walking out the door.

“Fuck, I don’t know how anyone can move after that brutal first workout,” I grumble.

They laugh at my pain. “My dad is a hard ass, but it will all be worth it in the end,” Ryker says, grinning.

“The first couple weeks are the worst, but then your body starts getting used to it,” Max adds.

I pretty much walk slowly to my house and know that it’s only going to be harder to move tomorrow.

Hailey

I can’t help the smile on my face when I see Isaac slowly walk home. I knew he was taking long but, when I looked out the window, I couldn’t help but laugh. Those training sessions are brutal.

“I made you breakfast,” I tell him when he’s close enough.

“Fuck, I’m starving,” he says before pulling me in for a kiss.

“I knew you would be,” I reply. I had cooked a lot since I knew he would need it after his workout.

“I can’t help but admire Scott. He’s tough, but I can see why the whole family is as strong as they are. They are all pretty much weapons just by themselves,” he says while sitting down. I pile a bunch of food on a plate and place it in front of him.

“I always heard about how hard the training was but, when I experienced it firsthand, it was way worse than I had even imagined. I hated Scott for a few days. Penelope told me she felt the same, but we are all stronger now because of it,” I say while grabbing my own food and then sitting down.

“I have to head to Ryker’s this afternoon,” Isaac says in between bites.

I nod my head. “Yeah, he messaged me too. After this, you can have a hot bath to soak your muscles and then we can walk slowly over there. Might take us a few hours if we are walking

at the pace you were going on your way home,” I say while laughing.

“Woman,” he growls but, when I look over at him, he’s smiling at me.

We make small talk as we eat, and I send him for a bath as I clean up the kitchen.

There’s a knock at the door. When I see it’s a delivery man with a bunch of boxes, I just sign my name and put them in the living room.

I’m not sure what Isaac ordered, but I’ll leave them for him to open.

He’s moving a lot better by the time we make it to Ryker’s house.

The lion shifter, Deke, is there waiting for his family. I already have tears in my eyes thinking about the reunion.

He tenses when we hear a couple vehicles pull up.

I look out the window and see who I am assuming are his family. The scents they give off are definitely not wolf.

Ryker and Penelope meet them at the door, and I don’t take my eyes off them as I want to see their reactions when reuniting.

When the first man and woman step in, they are older. I am assuming they are his parents. There is a little boy in the man’s arms who looks like a mini me of Deke.

Tears well in my eyes when they spot their son.

They both gasp before running and pulling him into his arms.

There are sobs as his siblings come in and join the hug.

“You look just like me,” a little voice says, and the little boy is looking at his dad in awe.

“That’s right, buddy. I do,” Deke says with a choked sound.

He pulls the boy into his arms and sobs.

Ryker talks to Nolan, and the other lion shifter comes walking into the room and stops when he sees them.

“Who’s this?” Nolan asks, looking at the newcomer.

“Matt, sir,” the shifter says before extending his hand.

“Where is your pride?” Nolan asks curiously.

He shrugs his shoulders. “I’m not interested in going back. Ryker here says I am more than welcome in his pack.”

Nolan looks thoughtful for a moment. “I think that’s great if you want to become part of this pack, but I’m going to offer you to come join my pride. Being with shifters is great, but a lion needs a pride.”

“Can I think about it?” Matt asks hesitantly.

Nolan nods his head. “Of course. The offer is open. Even if you decide months down the line. We don’t turn any shifter away.”

“That’s how it should be, no matter what type of shifter you are. I am hoping to bring that change forward now that I’m pack alpha,” Ryker says.

“That’s good to hear. The other asshole wasn’t worth my time. That’s why I never came here in hopes to see my son. He wanted a favour that he could call in at any moment if I wanted on pack lands. Can’t say I’m sorry to see him go,” Nolan says.

“None of us were sorry to see him go, along with every shifter who thought like him. This is a whole new pack,” Ryker states.

“Good,” Nolan says.

Throughout the afternoon, we get to know Deke’s family and they decide to stay for a couple days to take in the sights before heading back home. Deke doesn’t let his cub leave his sight. I can’t help but smile that they are already forming a bond.

I can’t wait for the day that Isaac and I have little pups running around. A smile comes to my face at the thought.

First, I need to claim him.

I can feel myself being ready.

Max asks to talk to me before we leave, so Isaac gives me a kiss and heads home. I don't sense any jealousy anymore, which is good because I don't want to lose a friend.

Max and I take a walk around the pack lands. He's quiet for a long time before he finally speaks.

"I'd like to say I'm sorry for how things worked out, but I know everything happened as it was supposed to," he starts.

"Sometimes there is a plan bigger than us," I state.

He nods his head. "There is. I just want you to know I wanted you to be my mate, but I knew that there was a fated mate out there for me and I wanted to try and find her. I didn't want to run the risk of mating you and then finding her. The pull is strong, and I couldn't leave you with that kind of hurt."

"I know all of this. I get it. You don't need to explain," I tell him before he can say anymore.

"Does he make you happy?" he asks me while stopping to look into my eyes.

"Yes. I didn't realise how happy he made me until I almost lost him. There isn't a doubt about it now," I say.

"Good. That's all I ask," he says before walking once again.

I tell him everything we had done together, leaving out the dirty parts, and he seems happy that we are getting to know one another. When I tell him about the theatre and pool in Isaac's house, he says that we have to invite him and our friends there immediately, causing me to laugh. I tell him that I will talk to Isaac when I get home.

He tells me that he found his mate, but he's unsure if she will give him a chance. I tell him just to give it time. Everything will work out.

It seems to be a conversation we needed. When I find out about his mate, I don't even feel a hint of jealousy or envy. I truly hope he is happy with her.

It's good that this seems like closure for us, and we can move forward with being best friends again.

We are both at a place that we can be happy for one another and that is a good feeling.

Chapter Sixteen

Isaac

After I leave Hailey talking with Max, I smile to myself since I don't feel threatened at all. I know they will always be friends.

I can even see myself becoming friends with Max. Something I never thought would happen.

When I get into the house, I see boxes in my living room. I walk over to them and smile. These are the things I had ordered for Hailey.

I make quick work of putting the gifts away before she comes home. I wonder how long it will take for her to notice.

I toss around ideas about the old pack lands, since no one wants to live there.

When I come up with an idea, I call Ryker. I want to set up a place for the feral shifters that come out of the barrier. Lots of them are only just getting their humanity back, so it would be nice if we can help them as they step back into their human lives again.

Especially for the ones that don't want to go back home.

With Hailey's healing ability, maybe we can actually save more people. I think that some of them are like Deke; they didn't want to lose their humanity, but the pain and grief was too much.

When I tell Ryker, he seems to think it's a good idea and tells me that I will be the one in charge of running it.

It's exciting that he's going to let me handle this. I can't wait to tell Hailey.

I get so immersed in writing down plans for the new feral shifter retreat that I don't hear Hailey come in.

She wraps her arms around me, causing me to jump.

"Shit, you scared me," I mutter.

“You were so lost in thought. I kept calling your name,” she says, moving to sit beside me.

“I was working on something, so I didn’t hear you,” I tell her.

“What are you working on so hard?” she asks, looking over all the papers I had managed to write out with my ideas.

“I had a plan to help feral shifters using the pack lands that nobody knew what to do with. Ryker told me to go ahead with it and asked me to head the project. I got excited and started writing everything down so I wouldn’t forget,” I say.

“Tell me about it,” she says, smiling proudly at me.

So, I tell her everything I wanted to do. Her excitement for me illuminates her eyes.

It feels good that she is encouraging me. I finally feel useful for a change.

“Max wants everyone to come over after he found out you have a pool and theatre room,” she tells me once I’m done talking.

I nod my head. “That’s a good idea. I’m sure everyone could use some relaxing after the last stressful few months.”

“Then we will set it up,” she says before pulling me in for a kiss.

My wolf stirs at the feel of her lips on mine. I can tell he’s more hopeful but still doesn’t want to come out much because he doesn’t feel she truly wants us.

I can feel it in my heart that she does want us.

One of these days, he will see it too.

I’m giving her the time she needs even though I ache to feel her claiming mark on me.

I pushed her too far many times and I won’t do that again.

Hailey

We decide to have a quiet evening at home, which is perfect. I think that's something we both need.

When I feel my feet getting cold, I run to our room so I can grab a big pair of his socks since I don't have any slippers here. Before I can make it out of the kitchen, I stop in my tracks as I see a pair of slippers.

They are silly ones that look like cows, but it brings a smile to my face. I put them on and groan at how soft they feel.

When did they get here? I could have sworn I didn't see them there this morning.

I turn to look at Isaac who is grinning at me.

"When did you do this?" I ask, walking over to him.

"I remember what you said about your feet getting cold, so I ordered you a couple pairs," he says with a shrug.

I put my arms around him. "Thank you. That's so thoughtful," I whisper before pulling him in for a kiss.

It's hard to pull away, so I can't help but deepen the kiss.

Sometimes it's the small things that matter.

This definitely matters to me. These gifts show me he listens to and considers everything I say, and these slippers mean more because they came from him.

The kiss only gets us going, and I end up showing him just how grateful I am right there in the kitchen.

~

When we finish having sex, we get dressed again and order food. I then head to the theatre room to prepare snacks for us.

Everything is finally coming together.

I get a text from Penelope asking me to help her the following day with the women and children that have escaped from their packs.

I completely understand their hesitation to trust anyone, let alone the men. These shifters were treated worse than dirt, but I hope we can make them see that these men are different.

I message Penny back telling her I will help in the morning and invite her to party at our place that evening.

She accepts. I already feel excited to have everyone over.

I want everyone to see the hard work Isaac has put into this house and our lives.

Their opinions will mean a lot to Isaac, even if he doesn't say it.

He walks into the room carrying the food delivery, and I have a hard time trying to pull my eyes away from him.

I have the strongest urge to claim him, and it intensifies every minute. If this is how he felt the entire time, then I can understand why his wolf took the choice out of his hands.

When he locks eyes with me, he stumbles a bit but rightens his steps. I see a flash of his wolf in his eyes before he puts the food down.

"If you keep looking at me like that, we are never going to eat and watch this movie," he grumbles, pulling me onto his lap and kissing me.

"If I wasn't so hungry, I would say let's forget about the food; but I'm starving," I say when I pull away.

"Let's get you fed before the food gets cold. Then we can go for a late run and enjoy the night sky," he says.

As much as I want him right now, that sounds like a perfect way to end the evening; running in the dark with my mate.

What more could I ask for?

Chapter Seventeen

Isaac

I can barely get out of bed this morning to train again, but I get ready slowly and leave Hailey sleeping in our bed.

We had a long night where she seemed to want me constantly, which worked for me because I was feeling the same way about wanting her.

After running through the forest in the dark, we ran back home, and I pretty much tackled her as I took her hard and fast. She seemed to be loving every second of it.

I could have sworn I felt the sharpness of her teeth on my skin, but she still didn't claim me. From her teeth alone, I could tell her wolf was itching to claim me right there and then.

Scott, Ryker, and Max were once again waiting for me when I stumbled in.

My muscles screamed at me the whole time but, once they got warmed up, everything seemed to be fine.

Ryker once again had to force the shift a couple times, but I could feel that it was only a matter of time before I will gain control.

The connection between my wolf and I was stronger today. I don't know if it's Ryker, the training, or everything that is happening with Hailey falling into place; but I wasn't going to question it.

"Your wolf is getting stronger," Ryker says when we are done and all of us are sitting around the floor.

I nod my head. "Yeah, I can feel him a little more each day. I know it's only a matter of time. I'm not going to push it."

"I think maybe once Hailey and you properly bond, everything will fall into place," he says with a nod.

I let out a sigh. “I know it will. I can feel it, but I will wait for the day she is ready. That’s not a choice I am willing to force on her. The day when she finally claims me will be the happiest day of my life. Because then I will know she chose me back, instead of just giving into the pull.”

Their eyes shine with approval. “That’s good to fucking hear,” Max says.

“I’ll do whatever it takes. Even wait months if I have to,” I say, though I really hope I don’t have to wait months.

“I don’t think you need to wait months, especially looking at the number of marks she left on you compared to yesterday,” Ryker says with a laugh.

I can’t help but grin at his words.

Hailey definitely likes to leave marks on my body with her nails and teeth. I love every minute of it.

Even though I want her to claim me more than anything, I know that I will wait no matter what.

When I get home, Hailey was gone to help Penelope with the new addition to our packs.

I take a shower and gather my work to show Ryker when there is a knock at the door.

When I open it, I find Willow standing on the other side. I look at her in surprise.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” I ask.

She looks at me with an unsure expression. “Sorry I showed up out of the blue but, since I haven’t seen you since everything went down, I figured I would check on you. Hailey told me where you guys lived when she stopped by my apartment.”

“Oh, it’s not a problem. I just wasn’t expecting anyone. Come in,” I say, opening the door wider.

We head towards the living room and sit down. She looks all over the place with a small smile on her face. “This place is cozy,” she remarks.

“Thanks. Hailey added touches to the place to make it feel this way. It was cold and empty before she did that,” I tell her.

“She’s a special one. I could see why it hurt you to lose her,” she says while smiling at me.

I nod my head at her words. “Yeah, she really is. I’m crazy about her.”

When she doesn’t say anything, I look over at her. “How’s it going since you are on this side?”

She blows out a breath and seems to think about my words for a minute. “Well, it’s weird you know. I don’t have to spend every moment worried about fighting for my life if I came across a feral that was hostile, but sleep is still harder to come by since I’m not on the ground or in the trees. I’m sure that it’s something that will only take time. I’m not ready to see a whole lot of people, and I don’t even know what I should do with my life.”

“You know that there is no rush, right? You don’t have to have it all figured out right away. Those apartments aren’t charging anyone for rent or food. That’s all included from the pack funds, and those aren’t going to dry up anytime soon. You will know what you want to do when you see it. Heck, I’m sure that if you wanted to you could even start helping Scott with training. You might be good at that, since you spent more time than anyone defending yourself against feral shifters,” I say out loud while realising that it’s not a bad idea at all. She could help a lot of people.

Her eyes light up at the idea. “I think that I could actually do that, and it would keep me busy, so I don’t go crazy with boredom,” she states.

“So, Max talked to me,” I say with a grin.

She rolls her eyes at the expression on my face. “I don’t know how to deal with all of that on top of everything else. He isn’t rushing me or trying to force me to mate him right away, so I take that as a good sign.”

“He’s a good guy,” I say before letting out a laugh. “I wouldn’t have said that months ago. He and my mate were attached at

the hip, but I think my dislike of him stemmed from them being close and him liking my mate. They had both hoped to mate one another, but that didn't work out in the end. Which is good for me."

"Why didn't they just become chosen mates?" she asks curiously.

"That's simple. He didn't want to chance finding his fated mate and feeling the pull strong enough to leave Hailey and break her heart. He had wanted to find his fated mate. He was wanting what his parents had, since he saw from observing them how strong the connection is," I tell her.

"That makes sense. You don't think he would want me to be like her, do you?" she asks hesitantly.

I shake my head. "No way. He doesn't want to find someone to replace her. I'm sure that once you get to know each other, you will see that. There was a time I wondered if Hailey wished I was him, but we spent a lot of time getting to know one another, and now I believe she wants me for who I am. You just need to give it time. There is no way he would rush you into anything. He might not know your story, but he probably figured you have gone through so much that you just need time."

"I hope you are right," she replies thoughtfully.

We talk for a bit before she leaves. I tidy up before heading out as planned to see Ryker.

I can see Willow becoming a friend. I could always use more friends.

Hailey

I smile as all the pack kids run around out behind the apartments. Lots of members are there to watch over them.

The women are still a bit sketchy about everything, but that's to be expected, all things considered.

I don't think I know half of the things they have all been through.

"I still can't believe this is all real," one woman named Becca says.

I look at her curiously. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, look at everything. I haven't seen the kids look happy and just be kids before. I didn't realise how much I ached for this. We can actually eat food without waiting for the men to eat, and we never starve. A lot of the time, the men would eat all the food and left nothing for us but scraps. A few more weeks of food like this and I will finally not see my ribs anymore," she says, pulling at the hoodie she's wearing.

I frown at her words. "You guys got dealt a shitty hand. I'm sorry you had to go through that. I wouldn't wish that kind of life on anyone, but the people in this pack won't treat you that way. I even knew that before I became part of the pack."

"When did you become part of this pack? You walk around here like you grew up in this pack," she asks me curiously.

"Well, I wasn't born a shifter like you. I actually died when Penelope changed me. Once I was a shifter, I healed very quickly. I knew most of the pack members from school. I had always known about shifters, so it wasn't like I didn't know before I got changed," I say when her eyes go wide. I take a look at the other women who are all wearing similar expressions.

Penelope smiles softly at me.

"Wait, how did she change you? That's never happened before," a woman asks, looking excited.

"I just felt this draw and pull. My wolf knew what to do. White wolves are born with abilities and that just happened to be mine. It worked out perfectly, and it saved my friend's life," Penelope says modestly.

“That’s pretty amazing. I’m glad it all worked out,” Becca says.

“Do you have an ability? You know, since she changed you?” someone asks.

“Well, I do, but I’m not sure if it’s because I’m from a line of witches or because of Penny. That’s something we won’t know unless she changes someone else,” I say with a shrug.

“This has to be the most fascinating pack,” someone murmurs.

“What about if you were born a shifter but never shifted? Do you think you have the ability to bring that out?” a small, timid voice says.

We both look over at the woman. “We won’t know unless we try. Are you saying you don’t have a wolf?” Penny asks softly.

The woman nods her head. “My family was full of shifters. I didn’t shift or feel a wolf in me at all. Then I ran away since I became the pack embarrassment and was found by the Star Creek Pack. They could tell I was a shifter but couldn’t change; I don’t know how they knew, but they did. No matter how many times I asked, they wouldn’t tell me. I kept thinking that if I just had a wolf, then maybe none of this would have happened,” she says as tears fall down her cheeks.

“I would love to try, as long as that is something you want for yourself and not for anyone else,” Penny says softly. She has a look on her face saying she won’t try if the woman is only wanting a wolf just so that she won’t be the pack embarrassment.

The woman blows out a breath. “I think this is something I had always wanted for myself. Not just for the reasons of being bullied or a disappointment. I always felt like a part of me is missing, or more like sleeping; like I am a puzzle without the last piece.”

“That makes a lot of sense. I mean, I felt like I wasn’t always my complete self, but then I never knew that I was part witch either. Maybe you are meant to help those who have a dormant wolf inside of them,” I suggest to Penny.

“That would make a bit of sense,” Penny says after thinking about what I said.

“We can see what happens, but I know there is a reason you are given this gift. I’m not the only shifter you are meant to help,” I tell her.

“Thanks. I always wondered why I was given this gift. Seemed pretty pointless to me, but if there are people out there that have dormant wolves and I can help release them, I think it’s a great gift. I couldn’t imagine not having my wolf,” Penny says looking over at the woman with a sad smile.

“Do you want to go somewhere private?” I ask the woman, since there are a lot of shifters around.

She nods her head. Penny, the woman, and I walk into the apartment set for her.

“Are you sure you want me here?” I ask the woman.

“Yeah, like you said. You had been through this before, so I guess it helps to have a bit of support,” she says, looking a little nervous.

“Then I will be here for you,” I state, and her shoulders relax at my words.

I take a seat on the couch after we had moved the coffee table to the side and made sure there was plenty of room for a shifted wolf.

Penny stands there for a few seconds but turns to look at me with a lost expression on her face.

“Just breathe and relax. Don’t over think it,” I tell her in a calm voice.

“I’m just not sure how I did it before. I saw you dying, and my body took over itself,” she says.

“How about you both close your eyes. Penny, picture your wolf and use her to sense if there is another wolf besides me around that is maybe hiding,” I suggest.

I turn to the woman, “How about you close your eyes and let yourself be open to Penelope’s wolf. Accept her into your

mind.”

The women do as I ask, and I feel the urge to close my eyes. With my eyes closed, I let my mind open and it’s like I’m a part of this with them.

“Okay, I see you, Hailey, and my wolf. I think I need your help with this, Hailey. My wolf is telling me we need you,” Penny says.

I just let my wolf take over as we enter the woman’s mind. What we see when we get there is a scared little black wolf in the corner in the dark. When she sees our wolves, she whimpers. I feel the urge to push through and, when I get closer, I can see that her wolf has some mental healing that needs to be done.

The poor thing had been locked in here for years with no way out.

My wolf nuzzles the little wolf, reassuring her that it’s okay and safe to come out.

Penelope nudges her on the other side, and it takes a few minutes before the wolf stands up.

The wolf is tiny compared to the adult sized wolves we know. It seems like, due to her tight quarters, she hasn’t had the chance to grow.

Maybe this is the runt of the pack. Ryker’s wolf isn’t particularly very big. He had been the runt of the pack along with the rest of his family.

Another possibility is that because her wolf didn’t come out, it stunted its growth.

It takes a bit of time, but we finally get her wolf to come free.

When we all pull out of it, I blink my eyes a couple times and suddenly feel completely drained.

When I look around the room, I notice, Ryker, Isaac, and Max looking at us with wide eyes.

“When did you guys get here?” I ask tiredly.

“We have been here for a while but, when we noticed you guys doing your hocus pocus shit, we decided not to disturb you. That was forty-five minutes ago,” Ryker says while walking to Penny.

He wraps his arms around her, and she leans into the embrace. Isaac pulls me into his arms, and I sigh happily. I’ll never get over how good it feels to be in his arms.

When I turn to look, I see the same wolf that was inside Isabella on the ground looking at us curiously.

It’s just as small as I saw it. She almost looks like a pup.

“Is that Isabella?” Ryker asks, looking down at the pup who tilts its head in submission.

Penny nods her head. “Yes. She hasn’t been able to shift, which is why she was with that dreadful pack and not back home. Then she asked to see if I could help,” Penny says.

“Looks like a runt,” Ryker says with a fond smile.

“She’s precious,” I say, kneeling down.

Ryker gets a glazed look in his eyes before he tells me to move away.

“Shift!” he says with the alpha power behind his voice.

Isabella shifts and looks completely exhausted. “Thank you. I wasn’t sure how to shift back,” she says with a sigh.

“You might need my help for a bit, which means you need private training until you can get a handle on it,” Ryker explains to her.

Isaac laughs. “Oh, Scott is going to love having a new wolf to mess with.”

Everyone nods their heads in agreement. We have all been through the same thing.

“I’m so small though. What good am I?” Isabella says sadly.

“I think you are looking at this the wrong way. My wolf isn’t very big. You can tell my family isn’t on the big side. We are the runts of the pack. There is an advantage to being small,

and I will gladly teach you how to use it to your advantage,” Ryker says with a smile.

“Thank you,” Isabella says.

“Get some rest. I’ll have someone bring you some food to replenish the energy you used,” Ryker says before we all leave.

As we walk out of the building, Ryker and Isaac explain their ideas for a feral retreat for anyone who wants their humanity back. They then ask me if I can help them.

Ryker wants to go into the barrier to see if he can read the minds of any of the feral shifters that are just trapped but don’t know how to get their humanity back. That way, I can come in and heal them before bringing them to the retreat.

Isaac seems reluctant to let me help but, in the end, he knows it’s for the best.

We will only send a small group just in case we need to defend ourselves from anyone.

We end up standing in front of the building before seeing Jet running towards us. He stops in front of us breathing hard, and we are immediately on alert.

“I think I felt my mate. It wasn’t for long, but I could have sworn,” Jet says, looking at us with wide eyes.

“Maybe it’s Isabella? Since she only just shifted for the first time,” Penny says looking thoughtful.

I nod my head. “That would make sense. I’m not sure why he would feel her from so far away though.”

“His wolf could have sensed his mate was near, but then he had to have been close enough to the community apartments to be able to tell. The pull could be strong because she was a late bloomer, or maybe that hocus pocus you guys performed made the pull snap right into place and Jet’s wolf felt it strongly,” Isaac says.

“How would you know that?” Ryker asks, looking at Isaac.

Isaac shrugs. “I have read a lot about pack history and shifters. Whenever I was locked in my room, all I had were books, and my father had a lot of the history of shifters. Before I had the place burned down, I took all the books out and brought them to my new place. Our wolf halves aren’t black and white. There’s more to it than that.”

“I’d like to look at those,” Ryker says.

“Sure. I can bring them by your place,” Isaac replies.

We say our goodbyes before Isaac and I walk back home.

I lean against him as he wraps an arm around my shoulder.

I can’t help but think everything is going to be okay.

Chapter Eighteen

Isaac

Two weeks later...

Everything has been going great with my life. My mate and I have seemed to work things out. I don't have to worry about much anymore. The feral retreat has been coming along great. We are still setting everything up and it's going to be quite the drive, but I don't mind. Hailey will be coming with me most of the days I need to go.

She still plans to help the women who need help in the community apartments with Penny.

I'm tired when I get home, but I can't wait to see my mate. She had been so busy today and yesterday that I barely had been able to see her. She crawled into bed when I was asleep. I felt her body next to mine, but it was like I blinked and when I opened my eyes again, she was gone.

I don't have to get up quite so early now that I've finished my training with Scott. I have now been helping train others, so Scott and Ryker can focus on training Isabella.

I feel more connected with my wolf every day, but I know that we will only feel complete once she claims us.

When I spot her in the bedroom, she smiles softly at me.

"How was your day?" she asks before giving me a gentle kiss.

"It was great. Long. I missed you," I murmur against her lips.

"I'm home all night. So, we can go out, or you can have me all to yourself," she says with a grin.

My cock hardens at her words. Fuck.

"I want you all to myself," I rasp.

"I was thinking the same. I think I am ready," she says, and starts pulling up my shirt to take it off.

“Ready?” I ask, confused.

She bites her lip and smiles shyly at me. “Yeah. Ready to claim you as my mate.”

I freeze at her words. “Are you sure?” I ask, my voice breaks when I speak.

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking a lot about it, and there is nothing I want more. I think we are both ready for this,” she says softly.

“If you are ready, then I won’t say no. I would love nothing more than for you to claim me back,” I tell her.

She keeps undressing me as she speaks. “I needed time to think. I spent so much time feeling like I was everyone’s second choice. I was Max’s after his fated mate, then yours after Penny. I wanted to be someone’s first choice instead of someone they would settle down with if the person they really wanted didn’t work out.”

“Baby, you were never my second choice. I never wanted Penny because I actually wanted her. I had to want her. If my choice wasn’t taken away, it would have been you from day one. It has always been you,” I say softly, tilting her face up to mine and kissing her with intensity.

When I pull away, tears well in her eyes. “I love you so much, Isaac. More than I ever thought possible.”

My heart soars at her words. “I love you too, baby. I will never stop loving you. I’m so grateful you gave me a second chance.”

I lean down and kiss her before she can say anything else. Before our conversation, she had already taken off my shirt and pants, along with my boxers. I kick them off my feet before I lift her shirt over her head. I’m glad to find that she’s not wearing a bra, and I walk her backwards to the bed.

She moves to the middle, and I follow her, not able to tear my mouth away from hers.

Her nails run down my back. I shudder at the feel, and I can tell they are partially shifted.

When I pull back, we both breathe hard, and I lean down to take one of her nipples into my mouth making her cry out.

I can feel my hands shift to claws as my wolf knows what's about to happen.

I work my way down her body, kissing and licking as I go.

I pull her shorts and panties off, and groan when I see her already wet for me.

“Fuck baby,” I rasp.

I pull her legs wider, being careful of my claws, and bring my mouth down to her clit.

I lick her clit before sucking it into my mouth.

She lets out a moan as I devour her like it has been years since I've tasted her, instead of only a few days.

Her legs shake as I bring her closer to release, but I stop before she's about to come.

When I lean back on my knees and look down at her, she's biting her lip. I can see her teeth already shifted and her wolf flashes in her eyes.

I make my way up her body and line myself up with her entrance.

Slowly, I slide myself inside of her. Feeling her wet warmth around my cock has me moaning. I push until I'm completely buried in her.

“Isaac,” she moans.

“Baby,” I rasp.

I fuck her slowly, enjoying the feel of her around me.

When she looks up at me, my breath catches at the love shining in her eyes.

She really does love me.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“I love you,” she says as tears well in her eyes. She's smiling so I assume they are happy tears.

I lean down to kiss her, but she moves unexpectedly, and I find myself on my back.

She smiles down at me as she slowly slides up and down my cock.

I move my hand up to pinch her nipple and hold her hip with the other.

I sit up to kiss up her body and neck where my claiming mark is. I suck the skin into my mouth, and she hisses out a breath.

When I feel her walls start to tighten around me, she moves her head to my neck. I tilt my head to give her more access.

Her teeth lightly scrape on my skin before she bites down, and I feel a piercing pain before pleasure takes over and I find myself coming at the same time she does.

When she pulls away and licks the skin, I find myself biting where my previous claiming mark is. I bite down until I taste blood.

Pleasure consumes me, and I hold her tightly to me as I feel our wolves coming together and strengthening the bond.

We are breathing hard when we both come back down from our high. She looks up at me in awe.

“I can feel you,” she says as tears stream down her face.

“I can feel you too, baby. You feel fucking perfect. Mine,” I growl out.

“I didn’t know it would feel like this. I can feel how much you really do love me,” she says smiling.

“Now you won’t have any doubt how I feel for you,” I say with a smile.

I can feel how much she loves me too. It’s an amazing feeling.

This is something I may have missed out on if my dad wasn’t killed.

I would have never wanted to miss out on this.

Fate never gets it wrong.

Hailey

We made love a few more times that night. I couldn't help but want him over and over again. Hearing the words that he loves me seems to set off some sort of trigger that makes me want to immediately jump him. He doesn't seem to mind as his eyes glaze over with lust and we fuck in every room in the house.

We had to order a bunch of takeout since we seemed to be hungry, but neither of us wanted to part long enough to cook a meal.

I will never doubt how he feels, or if he desires my body, ever again. Not only can I feel it through our bond, but also through the way he looks at me like I am the only woman on Earth.

Penelope was right. The feeling of bonding isn't a painful experience. It's one of pleasure. The claim from him before hurt but, when he claimed me this time, I felt nothing but pure pleasure from it.

Now I know why claiming is special and shifters take it seriously.

Isaac and I had a rough road that we needed to get through to become what we are, but it made us both better people and a much stronger couple.

The changes made us who we are. I feel like we were meant to go through everything we had went through just to find this and feel this way.

I now know that no matter what happens, I will never regret claiming Isaac.

Later, when Isaac had fallen asleep, I can't take my eyes off him as he looks so happy and peaceful. I have never seen that look on his face.

His wolf feels settled for the first time since I have known him.

I didn't realise how out of control he was until this feeling came over me when we finished the bond.

His wolf is content.

I had known for days I wanted to claim him. I just wasn't sure how I wanted to go about it. When he walked in today, I knew I couldn't go another night without having the bond complete.

I'm so glad I was right.

A soft sigh escapes me when I think of the powerful feeling of love that washed over me earlier.

I hadn't known he had felt that strongly.

I had wondered if I was his second choice, despite his words, but I can see now that I shouldn't have worried.

Everything he said he felt was true.

That night, I fell asleep in his arms feeling safe and happy.

When I wake up the next morning, I can barely keep my hands off him.

We spend the morning having sex until we are called away to Ryker and Penelope's house.

When we get there, they are smiling at us.

"I see you finally finished the bond," Penny teases.

I place my hand on my mating scar and shivers come over my body. I wonder how long it will be sensitive for.

"We did," Isaac says proudly.

He wore a shirt with a loose collar so he could show everyone his claiming mark.

"Your wolf doesn't feel unsettled anymore," Ryker says before pulling us both into a hug.

"Congratulations," he whispers in my ear.

"Thanks. It feels right. Perfect," I say while pulling away.

I smile as we spend time with our friends with my hand never leaving Isaac's.

Max comes over later and, when he sees the matching claiming marks on our necks, he gives us a wide smile and you can tell that he is genuinely happy for us.

“Finally!” he shouts, making everyone laugh.

“Don’t worry. I hear you are next,” I say, smiling at him.

His smile fades a bit. “I hope so. My mate isn’t willing to be claimed any time soon, if at all.”

“She will when it’s time. It takes patience. I know you guys will work through it,” I say with a small smile, trying to reassure him.

“I hope you are right,” he says thoughtfully.

“Me too,” I say.

Months ago, I thought fate was stupid that she would pair me up with a man like Isaac. I’m sure I’m not the only one to question what fate was thinking.

I’m glad to be so wrong about Isaac. That we all were.

He’s so much more than we had all thought he was. He’s a better man than we could have ever imagined him to be.

He also makes me happier than I ever thought possible. I never thought I could be this happy; let alone with someone I spent most of my life hating, but here I am. Completely in love with Isaac.

Things won’t always be easy, but I know that, with him by my side, we can get through anything. We are a stronger couple because of everything we have been through.

We made it through so much already.

If I had learned one thing, it’s that you can never resist fate.

Epilogue

Hailey

Three years later...

So much has happened in the last three years.

A lot of pack members have been getting settled and finding their mates. It has made the pack a lot stronger. Especially with all the training Scott has been putting everyone through.

We are escalating in numbers. We had also gotten quite a few feral shifters to come through the barrier, and some of them joined our pack. Helping all the feral shifters we have helped gives me a sense of satisfaction.

There are more feral shifters who wanted to come back to humanity than we had thought. They usually wanted to return for their families or children. Some just simply wanted to try and live a peaceful life without their mates.

We also discovered that there was such a thing as second chance mates when some of the feral had felt the pull to the women we had rescued.

Their journeys weren't easy, but most of them found their way onto the other side. A lot of them seemed to want to be a part of the Blue Walker pack. We are accepting of all shifters.

The biggest surprise was finding out that a wolf shifter and bear shifter are able to become mates. We discovered this after one of the wolf shifters was fated to one of the bear shifters. There were obviously people who had looked down on different shifter species mating, but Ryker was supportive of whatever his pack members wanted, and he had a lot of reason to trust fate.

Seeing my friend growing and becoming one of the best pack alphas I had ever seen or heard of is also amazing. So many packs came to see Ryker and what he had done to make up for all the shit the other alpha did.

There was always a bit of initial judgement upon meeting Ryker because of his size, but Ryker proved time and time again he had what it took; especially against shifters who thought they could take him. When it came down to a challenge, Ryker beat them every time.

They didn't fight to the death; Ryker just wanted to teach them a lesson that appearances aren't always what they seem.

Max was able to make things work with his mate, though their story was a lot harder to push through than most.

I'm lost in thought while I wait at home for Isaac.

Penelope smelled something different with me, and I hadn't seen my mate in a couple days.

He had to stay up at the feral retreat to help out a bit and make sure everything was still running smoothly.

These days, we do have a few pack members who watch over the retreat that wanted to live there.

It makes things easier but, once a month, he goes up there a few days to see how things are progressing.

I pace the house. Most of the lights are off since it's nearing dark, but darkness has not quite fallen.

When I see headlights pull up, my heart beats faster in excitement.

I'm running out of the house and into Isaac's arms before he can even move a couple steps.

"Baby," he rasps, and he takes a deep breath in before he stills.

When he pulls away, he looks at me with wide eyes.

"Are you?" he asks before moving his face to my neck and taking another breath.

"I had my suspicions, but Penny smelled it this morning," I say smiling.

"Holy fuck. You're going to have my pup!" he shouts in excitement.

"We are having a baby," I say with a chuckle.

He swings me around before kissing me hard on the mouth.

“I can’t believe this. This is amazing,” he says as he puts me down, but then pulls me into him again.

“Does anyone else know?” he asks, grinning down at me.

I shake my head. “Just Penny. Unless Ryker read her mind, but then she could have blocked him; but then he would want to know why she’s blocking him,” I say with a shrug.

“She probably told him, but that’s okay. He’s our alpha, and there are no secrets from him,” he says with a laugh.

No one outside the pack knows that Ryker can read minds, or that Penelope can change people into shifters, or that I have healing powers. We feel that we would have enemies knocking at our door to challenge us or try to take us for their own reasons if word got out. Sure, people have assumed based on white wolf rumours, and the fact that I am part witch, but no one has confirmed anything. Everyone here is loyal to Ryker and the Blue Walker pack.

“We can head over and tell them if you would like,” I tell my mate.

“Let’s do it. I want everyone to know how lucky I am,” he says, pulling me to the passenger side of his truck.

I laugh but let him do what he wants. It’s not a long walk, but I know he’s excited.

I message Penny, and she tells me she has everyone over already since she knew Isaac would want everyone to know.

I laugh and shake my head. Yeah, he’s not known for his patience.

Isaac takes my hand in his as he drives. I can feel his happiness through the bond.

We weren’t trying, but we also weren’t preventing anything from happening. We knew when it was time to have a baby that the fates would bless us with one.

After all, everything happens for a reason.

I questioned fate before, and I knew never to do that again.

As Ryker and Penelope say, “Fate never gets it wrong.”

Isaac

The smile never leaves my face as we walk into the alpha’s house.

Everyone is there: Hailey’s parents, Max and his mate, Jet and his mate, Calvin and his mate, Ryker’s family, and Penelope’s family. All the people who have become important to me had now become my own family.

They had showed me that family is more than blood. We can make our own family.

They make me feel loved and give me a safe place to be myself.

I never thought I would have this.

People who love you unconditionally.

That’s something I hope to give my pup in the future. The family I always wanted. The upbringing I never had.

Ryker, Max, Jet, Calvin, and I have become the head of the pack. We all follow Ryker, but Ryker officially named us his line of shifters. It makes it easier with the pack growing so that any pack member could feel like her or she could come to any one of us. There are five of us, so if one of us is busy then they can go to someone else.

I felt completely honoured that Ryker wanted me as one of the heads. That’s something I will never ever take for granted.

I have never been happier in my life. I don’t spend my time thinking about my parents anymore. At times, I would feel guilty for being happy because my entire family is dead.

Then I remind myself that I wouldn’t have this life if they were alive.

The nightmares still come, but they are very few. Hailey is always right there with me, helping me cope with every single

one.

That woman has become my rock. She might not realise that she is my everything, but I would do anything for her.

Any time that I spend without her seems too long. When I finally arrived home, I couldn't wait another second to have her in my arms.

When I smelled that she was pregnant with my pup, I don't think I had ever been so happy.

This is something I had wanted for a long time, but I would never have pressured her. When she said we should just leave it to fate and see if she blesses us with a pup, I hoped every single night that it would happen.

"We're pregnant!" I shout as soon as we enter the room.

The room fills with shouts and cheers as everyone takes their turn to hug me and my mate.

"Congrats man," Max says, clapping me on the back.

"Thanks," I say with a wide grin.

Max and I have become very close over the years, and he has become one of my best friends.

He has been very supportive, and he's the one I go to when I need advice, and vice versa.

Ryker, Max, Calvin, Jet, and I have spent many guys' nights out when the women take a girls' night.

There are times we have hunted together in wolf form, or just played pool, or hung out in my theatre room playing video games.

This was never something I had with the guys I called friends at school. When I became close to them, my old friends ditched me; but I didn't miss them anyway.

I don't need to spend time with wolves who think they are better than everyone else.

I have everything I need right here.

Penelope pulls me in for a hug. “I’m so happy for you,” she whispers in my ear.

“Thanks Pen,” I say softly.

“I knew you would be happy one day. I’m glad that everyone finally got to know the real you. I knew they would love you,” she says while pulling away.

“I lost hope that I could have this. Thank you for always being by my side,” I tell her.

“I never would have left it. We were there for each other when we needed it growing up, and that’s not something that will ever change,” she says.

Lots of food and drinks are passed around as we celebrate the news. Everyone tells stories and laughs.

Every time I pull Hailey close, I breathe in the scent of our new pup. I’ll always be forever grateful that Hailey couldn’t resist fate.

Author Notes

Thank you so much for reading my second shifter book.

I'm sorry it took so long to get their story out but I wanted to tell it right and they weren't cooperating very well!!

I hope you love Hailey and Isaac!!!

There will be a third book with Max, Ryker and Hailey's best friend but there is no release date as of right now.

Thank you to my beta readers, Mary, Miriam, Makayla, Renee, Shari, Annemarie, Raylene, Cindy and Holly! I always appreciate your input and thoughts on each book I send you.

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Thank you to my hubby and my kids who put up with mom when she's in writing mode!!

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And of course thank you to my readers. You guys are rockstars! Thank you for reading this book and taking a chance on this author.

Much love and tacos,

Mallory

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Ultimately Yours (Katy & Stitch)

Unbelievably Yours (Ink & Shield)

Always Yours (Lily & Prez)

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What the heart wants (Kyla)

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About the Author:

Mallory Funk has enjoyed writing since she was a child. Raised with three other siblings by a single mother, Mallory often places an importance on her characters having, or developing, strong familial bonds. Mallory has always wanted a big family, and is now married with three children. Mallory has a strong sense of humour and loves making people laugh. Her teasing nature is always in good fun, and often shows up in her writing. Mallory can usually be seen at her home in Nipawin, Saskatchewan sitting with her laptop and laughing at her own jokes as she writes them into her newest book.