



Stranded

with the

Wolf

Savannah Sterling

STRANDED WITH THE WOLF

GOLD CREEK WOLVES

SAVANNAH STERLING

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Savannah Sterling](#)

[Stay Connected to the Pack!](#)

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CHAPTER 1



EMMA

ANYTHING THAT CAN GO WRONG *will* go wrong.

That's not just Murphy's Law — that's my life, apparently. There's also a fun little addendum that most people forget: Anything that can go wrong will go wrong, *and at the worst possible time.*

So I shouldn't be surprised that our app decided to start crashing just before the most important meeting of my life. I also shouldn't be surprised that it happened while I was on the plane from San Jose to Denver when my team wasn't able to reach me. And because I need to get to Breckenridge by six, it's fitting that there's a massive wreck on Highway 70.

My GPS automatically reroutes me through Gold Creek and adds thirty minutes to my drive.

It's fine.

That's what I keep telling myself — even after I lose service going into the mountains. I just need to find a Starbucks and regroup.

The problem is that there doesn't seem to be anything resembling a Starbucks in the tiny town of Gold Creek, Colorado. There's exactly one stoplight as you pull off the highway and a giant statue of a wolf dressed like a lumberjack. Perfect.

I pull up in front of the first place I see — a fifties-style diner with a chrome exterior and a sad little filling station next

door. I shiver as I climb out of the car. I opted for a skirt and boots since I would be going straight to the meeting with my potential investor, but I'm starting to think that was a mistake.

A friendly little bell over the door dings as I walk into Maggie's Diner, and the smell of coffee and maple syrup practically bowls me over. I gave up gluten and dairy a year ago, but *damn*. Those waffles slathered in butter sitting under the warming lights have my mouth watering.

"Have a seat anywhere. I'll be right with you," comes a cheery female voice.

I look over and see a plump, sweet-looking woman clearing away some plates and wiping down the long counter.

I take a seat toward the middle of the counter, perching on the end of the stool and tugging my skirt down as far as it will go. It was sixty-five degrees when I got on the plane this morning, but I guess I should have known better.

"What'll it be, hon?" asks the woman, whose embroidered shirt tells me she's Maggie of Maggie's Diner.

"I'll just take a coffee. To go."

"Room for cream?"

I nod. "What's the Wi-Fi password?"

"Password?" Maggie looks genuinely confused by my question and turns toward the old-timer sitting near the door — the one who ordered the Belgium waffles with so much butter it should be illegal. "Ernie, what's our Wi-Fi password?"

"Huh?" The old man is watching a football game on his phone — with the volume turned up loud.

"Password! For the Internet!"

"Darla just set a password for me on this thing," he says, waving the giant smartphone in our direction. "It's one, one, one, one. But don't tell nobody."

"Not your *phone* password!" Maggie snaps in exasperation. "You know what? I don't think there is one."

“Thanks,” I say, shaking my head and pulling up my email. My inbox is full of unread messages from my team — most of them from the last two hours. I scan through them and try to call my head developer, Nate, but I keep getting the same “Call Failed” message.

“Shit,” I murmur, just as four guys on ATVs pull up in front of the diner. They’re dressed in heavy winter coats and stocking caps, though there’s not a helmet among them. I roll my eyes as one of them does a donut in the snow, leaning the ATV over on two wheels.

“Business or pleasure?” asks Maggie, startling me so badly that I jump.

“W-what?” I stammer, turning back toward the counter.

“What brings you to Gold Creek? Business or pleasure?”

“Uh, neither,” I say, still trying to get a call out to Nate. “I’m just passing through on my way to Breckenridge.”

“Oh!” Maggie’s face brightens as she pours my coffee. “Perfect weather for skiing, if you can get there.”

“I’m not going to ski,” I tell her. “I have a meeting with an investor.”

She clicks her tongue. “I hope you can make it, darlin’. We’re about to get hammered by this storm.”

I glance out the window behind me, where snow is coming down in thick, heavy flakes.

“If you’re headed to Breckenridge, you should double back to Highway 74 and take I-70.”

“There was a really bad wreck on 70,” I explain. “My app told me it would be faster to take 74 and then get back on at Idaho Springs.”

Ernie snorts as if I just said something funny. “What kind of app thought it would be faster to get off the interstate and take a two-lane mountain road in the middle of a snowstorm?”

I swallow, glancing over at the old man.

“Little Bear Creek Road can be treacherous this time of year,” says Maggie. “What’re you drivin’?”

“A Tesla. It’s a rental.”

Ernie shakes his head. “I hate to break it to ya, but you ain’t gonna make it. Not unless you get back on I-70.”

“Stop it!” Maggie clucks. “You’re scaring the poor girl.”

“It’s all right,” I say, just as the bell over the door dings and a snowy draft blows in.

A huge man is standing in the doorway dressed in a flannel shirt, jeans, and a Carhartt vest. He’s clean-shaven with short dark hair and biceps for days. He’s also *incredibly* good-looking.

His eyes snap onto me the second he walks in, and something about that look he gives me makes my spine go stiff. His eyes are an unusual kind of hazel that look almost golden in this light, and he’s staring at me as though I’m an intruder in his diner.



JARED

THE SECOND I walk into the diner, her scent hits me full force. It’s sharp and fresh like juniper berries with an underlying feminine sweetness that makes my wolf scream *mine*.

I’ve never smelled anything like it before, and it makes my mind go totally blank. My head swirls as my vision tunnels, zeroing in on the only stranger here — the most beautiful little human I’ve ever laid eyes on.

Long dark hair. Big green eyes. Soft in all the right places.

But it’s the outfit that gets my attention — an outfit that screams “I’m not from around here.” She’s wearing a tight black turtleneck under a printed vest with a faux-fur trim. It’s a look that wouldn’t be out of place in Colorado if it weren’t for the high-heeled boots and tight little skirt.

The first thing I think is that she must be cold. The second thing that crosses my mind is all the creative ways I might be

able to warm her up.

Twelve glorious inches of perfect, kissable skin are laid bare above her knee-high leather boots, begging me to run my hand up that soft thigh of hers and see what she's wearing under that skirt.

“Jared, will you tell her that she's not gonna make it down Little Bear in a Tesla?”

The old man's voice pulls me out of my trance, and I tug my eyes away from her legs.

“*What?*” I ask, the word coming out with more of a bite than I intended.

That's the problem with being a lone wolf. You fall out of the habit of having normal human interactions.

“She thinks she's gonna get to Breckenridge from here,” said Ernie, tugging me back to the present.

I slide my gaze back to the beautiful female, who, I'm pleased to see, is checking me out almost as brazenly as I was looking her over.

“Unlikely,” I say, glancing out at the snow. I got out to grab a new filter for my chainsaw down in Idaho Springs, but even I'm second-guessing that plan. This woman doesn't look prepared for a hike across a parking lot — let alone a romp down the snow-packed switchbacks of Little Bear Creek Road.

“Thank you for the coffee,” the woman says to Maggie, grabbing her to-go cup off the counter and hopping off her stool.

Shit. She's leaving.

Suddenly my wolf is frantic. He doesn't want to let her out of our sight. But all I can do is stare like an idiot as she grabs her purse and heads for the door.

As she brushes past me, that sweet scent hits me all over again, and it's all I can do not to capture her wrist and beg her to take me with her.

My wolf whines as I watch her go — practically salivating with the urge to mark her. I rein him in and try to get my head on straight, startled by the intensity of his reaction. I've heard other wolf shifters describe the mating urge as sudden, obsessive madness, but I've never experienced the urge myself.

She's beautiful, yes, but I've seen my fair share of beautiful females without getting the urge to *mark* them. To mark this woman would be to claim her forever as my mate, and I could never do that to a female — human or shifter.

Ever since I left my birth pack, I've been living in the Gold Creek wolves' territory. I never joined Adrian's pack — my wolf is too dominant to fall in line. I'd have to fight for my place as alpha, and I have no desire to take over the pack.

So I've been living as a lone wolf. No pack. No family. To choose this life for myself is one thing, but I would never wish it on a mate.

“What can I get you, sweetie?” Maggie asks. She's staring at me with an odd expression, and I realize it's maybe not the first time she's tried to get my attention.

“Uh —” I'm distracted by the rumble of a four-wheeler and the sound of male voices outside. One of Adrian's wolves is talking to her, and my wolf is overcome with the need to burst out into the parking lot and claim what's mine.

“Just a sec,” I tell Maggie. “I forgot something in my truck.”

I know it's not smart, but I turn and shove my way back through the door. All wolf shifters are territorial — especially dominant wolves like me. Throw an unmated female into the mix, and things can escalate quickly.

A gust of snow smacks me in the face as soon as I step outside, and I see my girl talking to Maddox, one of Adrian's wolves.

A low growl rumbles up my chest. My wolf is ready for a fight.

Reel it in, I tell him sternly, determined not to shift in broad daylight and send my girl running in the other direction.

When did I start thinking of her as *my* girl? She's not my *anything*.

But my wolf has other ideas, and he's pissed that Maddox is talking to her.

I know Maddox. He's basically a good guy, but the moment I hear him tell her she's welcome to wait out the storm at his place, something inside me snaps.

"Leave her alone, Maddox," I say, crossing the distance between us and throwing a little of the alpha command into my voice.

I don't do that often, because it's kind of a dick move — downright dangerous on the wrong wolf. But Maddox knows me, and he doesn't want a fight, so he backs up and climbs onto his four-wheeler.

"You didn't need to do that," says my girl, watching Maddox sputter off. She turns to me with an expression that's half annoyed, half amused and pulls a cute little smile that nearly undoes me.

"Do what?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes. "*Is this guy bothering you, miss?*" She says it in a low-pitched impersonation of my voice, which for some reason I find absolutely adorable.

"Was he bothering you?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes. "I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"You say that, and yet you roll into the mountains in this thing," I say, patting the hood of the sharp little Tesla that's already covered in snow. "Do you at least have chains?"

She gives me a blank look.

"Snow chains ... for your tires?"

"N-no," she splutters. "It's a rental," she adds, a little defensively.

“You’re not from around here.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yes,” I say, unable to stifle a laugh.

She swallows and says, a little sheepishly. “I’m from California.”

That explains it. This girl doesn’t know what she’s gotten herself into. “We have chain laws around here,” I explain. “That’s assuming they haven’t shut down I-70 by the time you get to Idaho Springs.”

She looks a little worried at that but shakes her head dismissively. “My app isn’t showing any road closures. Just the wreck I bypassed.”

“These things can happen fast,” I warn. “Sometimes the plows just can’t keep up.”

“I’ll be careful,” she says in a tone meant to put an end to the conversation. She turns toward the driver’s side door and uses her sleeve to brush the snow off her window. “It was nice to meet you,” she says over her shoulder, sounding a little less confident than she did before but climbing into the front seat anyway.

She starts the car, and I grimace as she backs out of her parking spot. A bunch of snow slides down from the top of the car, obstructing her view once again. The windshield wipers groan under the weight of the snow, and her tires spin briefly as she hits the gas.

Unease settles over me like a dark cloud. My wolf is whining and pacing inside me — *demanding* that I not let her go. The instinct to protect her is overwhelming, and he’s worried I’m letting our mate slip away.

Knowing I may never see her again is eating me alive, but I tell myself it’s for the best. A lone wolf can’t give his mate what she deserves — the warmth and protection of a pack.

Still, my wolf is howling at me not to let her go. Wet, heavy flakes are coming down in droves over the stuff that

melted and refroze the night before. She's never going to make it to Breckenridge — not the way she's going.

Grinding my back teeth together, I hop in my truck and start the engine, rubbing my hands together for warmth. My wolf thrashes and whines, dying to get out, but my human half reminds him that following a total stranger is creepy and stalkerish.

Even if she is my fated mate.

Even if she could be putting herself at risk.

For several minutes I just sit there, grappling with my wolf, and a sick feeling bubbles up inside me when I remember the last time I ignored my gut. It was the night those pieces of shit killed my brother — something I could have prevented if I hadn't ignored my instincts.

I throw my truck into reverse and back out of the parking space. It's not stalking if I was headed that way anyway, and I still need that filter for my chainsaw. She has to go through Idaho Springs to get back on I-70, and if she makes it that far, she'll probably be okay.

I know there's a good chance the hardware store will be closed and that I won't make it back up the mountain tonight, but it will be worth sleeping in my truck to know my mate is safe.

CHAPTER 2



EMMA

BY THE TIME I pull onto Little Bear Creek Road, I'm really second-guessing my decision. Snowflakes the size of silver dollars are falling from the steely gray sky, and the tires keep losing traction on the snow-packed road.

I get stuck on the first decent hill I come to, my tires spinning uselessly.

“Idiot!” I bite out, shaking my head at my own stupidity.

I had not one, not two, but *three* locals warn me not to come this way — four if you count the guy on the ATV, which I didn't at the time. Guys who do donuts on four wheelers without helmets might score high on spontaneity and confidence, but they're in the basement when it comes to intelligence.

I know it's shallow to score every guy I meet on the LoveIQ framework, but I honestly can't help myself. Quantifying personality to establish a love match is what I do — what my company does. Our algorithm takes the traits that make two people compatible and uses them to find an ideal match.

It's been an uphill battle to prove our technology works, which is why this meeting is so crucial. Mitch McKeown is a venture capitalist with the Midas touch. Every startup he touches turns to gold. That's the only reason I'm risking life and limb to meet with him.

As the tires get traction, I glance at the clock on the dashboard. I'm *definitely* going to be late.

"You can do it!" I chant to the car as the tires snag gravel and inch us up the snowy hill. I cheer as I reach the top, but it turns into a groan when I see the rest of the road.

The old man at the diner wasn't kidding. This road is *gnarly*. It's a steep downhill that tees into a hairpin curve — and an endless drop over the side of the mountain.

Swallowing down my nerves, I inch my way over the crest of the hill, throwing all my weight onto the brakes. The tires groan as they grind through the deep snow, and my brakes shudder as they try to find purchase.

"Crap," I whisper as the car starts to slide. I turn the wheel so it doesn't glide right off the edge of the cliff, but all that does is make the back end fishtail like crazy. I jerk the wheel to try to right the car, but it just continues to slide.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" I scream — just as the back end of my Tesla slides off the shoulder.

The whole vehicle pitches sideways, and I have half a second to contemplate my own untimely demise before the car slams into a tree.

I scream as I'm thrown into the driver's side door. My shoulder barks in pain as it hits the hard plastic, and my temple bounces off the window.

Heaving for air, I look down and instantly wish I hadn't. It's a twenty-foot drop onto the switchback below, and a very thick, old pine tree is the only thing keeping my Tesla from plummeting off the side of the mountain.

I can't seem to catch my breath, and a hard sob works its way out of my throat.

Get it together, Em, I tell myself. Think, dammit!

But the only thing I can think to do is get the hell out of this car.

Scrambling across the center console, I shove the door open and look down. There's a two-foot gap between the car

door and the crumbling edge of the road. I'm damn lucky this tree was here.

Bracing myself on the inside of the door, I clamber out onto the snow, grabbing my purse from the front seat.

As I stare at the wrecked rental, a feeling of hopelessness swamps me. The car is precariously balanced against the huge pine tree. There's no way to get it back on the road, and even if I could, I'm not stupid enough to try that again.

Rummaging in my purse, I locate the paperwork for the rental and try calling the number on the back. I can't get the call to go through, so I type in a search for a towing company.

No luck. I don't have service along this road — not even one measly bar. I try walking up the hill a bit, but I still can't get any service.

“Dammit,” I hiss, stomping back to the car. Why did I have to be so stupid to think I could make it down this road?

What happens when you wreck a rental? Did I pay for the extra insurance? I usually do, but I was in such a big hurry to get on the road that I skimmed over all that paperwork.

I've just resigned myself to hoofing it up the steep mountain road when a pair of headlights beam through the snow. They belong to an old red pickup with a brush guard and snow chains on the tires.

I honestly don't know if I even want the driver to stop. On the one hand, I could use a ride, but climbing into a car with a total stranger seems like a really bad idea.

The truck slows to a halt as it reaches my vehicle, and the driver rolls his window down. I get a sinking feeling in my stomach when I see who's behind the wheel. It's the sexy mountain man from the diner — the one who lectured me about Colorado's chain laws.

My face burns as he takes in the sight of the wrecked Tesla hanging off the road. He must think I'm a complete idiot.

“Are you all right?” he asks in a low, worried voice. There's no mocking or smugness in his tone. He sounds

genuinely concerned.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Just feeling pretty dumb.”

Mountain Man nods, grimacing a little as he takes in the position of the car. “I have a winch, but I can’t pull it out the way it is. You’re gonna need a tow truck.”

“I tried calling one, but I don’t get service,” I say, my throat burning with frantic tears. The stress of being late combined with the wreck is making me feel out of control.

Mountain Man’s eyes soften as he takes me in, and he chews on the inside of his lip. “Get in,” he says. “I can call a buddy of mine once we get down to Idaho Springs.”

I hesitate. Even though I’m up a creek, I *don’t* get into cars with strangers. Mountain Man doesn’t look like an axe murderer, but that doesn’t mean anything. I’ve already made one stupid decision today.

I glance into the bed of his truck. There’s a gigantic chainsaw, a length of rope, a five-gallon bucket, and a shovel.

Nope. Not getting into a vehicle with a guy who carries everything you need to murder someone and get away with it.

“That’s all right,” I say. “I can just ... get an Uber.”

If they even have Uber out here.

“I thought you said you didn’t have service.”

I wince. “I’ll just ... walk.”

Mountain Man gives me a look that says I’m being ridiculous. “It’s two miles to Idaho Springs, and you’re hardly dressed for the weather.”

I shuffle my feet in the snow. He isn’t wrong. I have a heavy winter jacket that I bought for the trip, but it’s in my big suitcase in the trunk of my car. I didn’t plan on having to hike two miles in a blizzard, so I didn’t bring any decent boots.

“I don’t bite,” he says, though there’s a hint of mirth in his eyes. I’m glad he doesn’t add “unless you ask me to,” because then I would *have* to hoof it down the damn mountain.

I hesitate for a moment longer before heaving the door open and climbing into the truck. It's deliciously warm inside the vehicle, and I almost groan in relief as my bare legs make contact with the warm leather seat.

"You want me to get your bags?" he asks. "My buddy's going to be busy with the storm. I'm not sure he'll be able to get you out tonight."

My heart sinks, and I stop wiggling to get my butt deeper into his heated seat.

I can't be stuck in the mountains tonight. I need to get to Breckenridge and try to salvage this meeting. But the look he's giving me says that's not going to happen, so I lean my head back with a sigh. "I have an overnight bag in the back seat."

Mountain Man doesn't hesitate. He gets out and opens the back door of the Tesla, and I hold my breath as he climbs half inside the car to extract my little wheelie bag.

He tosses it into the back of the cab and climbs into the driver's seat. As he does, I realize that my mountain man is a lot bigger than he looked when I spoke to him outside the diner. His arms are as big around as my thighs, and two of me could wear the vest he's got on.

He smells *really* good — clean, like pine trees and fresh snow, along with an earthy musk I can't quite put my finger on. It makes me want to lean in closer, and for a second I imagine climbing into his lap and feeling those giant arms wrap around me. I bet those big rough hands would feel amazing roving all over my skin, exploring my most sensitive parts ...

I snap myself out of it and take a deep breath, trying to get my head on straight. What the hell is wrong with me? Mountain man is *so* not my type.

"You sure you're all right?" he asks, glancing over at me as we start down the road. "You've got a ..."

He taps his temple to indicate the bump I sustained in the crash.

"Oh yeah. I'm fine," I say. Though maybe I hit my head harder than I realized if I'm fantasizing about getting it on

with the first guy to come along and pick me up off the side of the road.

“What made you decide to rent one of those to go skiing?” he asks, glancing at the Tesla in his rearview mirror.

“It’s all electric,” I say in my car’s defense. “And I’m not here to ski.”

“I thought you were on your way to Breckenridge.”

“I am. My company is looking for investors,” I explain. “I’m going there to meet with a venture capitalist.”

“What does your company do?”

“We have an app,” I say, being purposely vague. I spend half my waking hours pitching LoveIQ to potential investors, but something tells me Mountain Man is old-fashioned and would probably balk at the idea.

“Huh.” He nods slowly, though I can tell he has no idea what to say. He’d probably score low on extraversion, which is fine by me. I can’t stand people who have to fill every second with small talk.

“What do you do?” I ask — not to be polite, but because I’m genuinely curious. Based on the flannel and the chainsaw in the bed of the truck, I’m guessing he doesn’t sit in a cubicle all day.

“I work for the Forest Service,” he says. “Mostly I do wildfire mitigation.”

That explains the chainsaw.

He shoots me a sideways glance. “I’m Jared, by the way.”

“Emma,” I say, trying not to white-knuckle the door handle as he navigates us down a particularly steep hill.

“Emma,” he repeats, as if he likes how my name feels on his tongue. I find that I like the way he says it in that deep, growly voice of his. I like it just enough to relax my death grip on the door handle.

A few minutes later, we pop out in Idaho Springs. The downtown looks like a postcard with all the buildings covered

in snow. It's getting dark, and the street lights are starting to come on.

Jared pulls over and picks up his phone, dialing the buddy with the tow truck he mentioned. While he's doing that, I try to get ahold of someone at the rental-car place.

As the hold music plays, I listen to Jared give a description of the vehicle and the location of the wreck. I don't know why, but there's something soothing about the matter-of-fact way he speaks to the guy on the phone. I get the feeling that it's all being taken care of, and I have to admit that it's a relief to let someone else take charge for once.

By the time he hangs up, I've lost patience with being on hold. I need to find a place to rent another car and call Mitch to tell him I'm going to be late.

"He says he'll have a look as soon as he gets back, but he's not sure when that'll be."

"That's okay," I sigh, feeling a little defeated. What are the odds I'll be able to find a rental car in this town?

I can feel Jared watching me out of the corner of my eye and know he must think I'm a mess. If this day were a headline, it would read: Stupid tourist ignores all advice, wraps car around tree.

"I can give you a ride," he says after a moment. "To Breckenridge, I mean."

I turn to look at him, startled by the offer. "W-why would you do that?" I stammer.

Jared shrugs, but the uncertainty feels forced. There's a lot going on behind those strange golden eyes, but I can't tell what he's thinking. "Your meeting sounds important."

"It is," I say, still confused why he would be offering to help.

Maybe he *is* an axe murderer, I think wildly. Maybe he picks up stranded women all the time. Maybe the "buddy" with a tow truck is just a ploy and —

I take a deep breath and try to stop my crazy train of thought. No more true-crime podcasts, I tell myself firmly. Not everyone is out to get you. Some people are just nice.

And yet there's a loud, very cynical part of me that just doesn't accept that. I don't trust people easily, and I don't like putting my life in someone else's hands — certainly not someone I just met.

"I can't ask you to go to all that trouble," I say.

"You're not asking. I'm offering." He looks so genuine that it throws me for a loop. What is this guy's deal?

"If you could just take me to the nearest rental car place, that would be amazing."

Jared raises his eyebrows but pulls back onto the road, headed for the highway. "You sure they're going to give you another car?" he asks, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"I'm a rewards member," I say tersely. "They'll give me one."

Jared doesn't reply. He just chews on the inside of his cheek and turns toward the ramp for I-70.

But as soon as the ramp comes into view, I can tell that something's wrong. The road is blocked by a giant metal gate swung shut across the on-ramp.

Jared sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "I hate to tell you this, but it doesn't look like you're getting to Breckenridge tonight."

"What do you mean?" I ask dumbly, staring at the "Road Closed" sign like it's written in code.

"They shut down I-70."

"What does that mean?"

Jared's eyebrows inch up as he looks at me, as if he's afraid I might have a concussion. "It means it's closed until they reopen it."

"How long until that happens?"

He shrugs. “It could be a couple of hours, but with the snow coming down like this ...” He trails off. “It might be closed until tomorrow.”

That news hits me like a punch to the gut. I can’t even believe this is happening.

“W-what am I supposed to do?” I stammer. This can’t be the only way to get to Breckenridge. I can’t be out of options.

“I guess you’ll just have to stay the night here. Or you can come back to Gold Creek with me.”

I shake my head. This *isn’t* happening. I can’t seriously be stuck in a snowstorm.

“Sorry,” he says. “But I don’t think you’re going to make your meeting. This is one thing you can’t control.”

It’s just an offhand comment, but something about the way he says it rubs me the wrong way. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” he says, letting out a low chuckle. “You just seem like the kind of girl who’s used to making things happen. But this is one of those times when you just have to *let* it happen.”

I roll my eyes. So he *was* calling me a control freak.

It shouldn’t bother me. People have been calling me a control freak my entire life — parents, friends, boyfriends — but something about this handsome stranger saying it like he knows me lights my fuse like nothing else.

I try to smile at him as I undo my seatbelt, but I probably just look constipated. “Thanks,” I say. “I’ll take it from here. I appreciate all your help.”

My words are nice enough, but I know they come out kinda bitchy. I decide that I don’t care.

Jared’s eyebrows scrunch together, plainly bothered by my reaction. “Look, I’m sorry about your meeting. If you want to come hang out at my place, I’ll take you to Breckenridge whenever they reopen the highway.”

“No thanks,” I say hotly, grabbing my little wheelie bag from the back and stumbling out into the snow. “I’ll take my chances here.”

CHAPTER 3



JARED

I GRIND my back molars together as I watch her stomp away. I fucked up when I implied that she was a bit of a control freak. That was the final straw that sent her running away from me.

Her instincts are good. She *should* run. A lone wolf like me is nothing but trouble for a human with the world at her feet.

And yet my wolf howls as I watch her struggle in her high-heeled boots, dragging her suitcase through the snow. She has to be freezing in that ridiculous skirt, and I clench the steering wheel in my hands so I don't leap out after her.

It kills me to leave her stranded like this. A wolf never leaves his mate. But humans have different rules than shifters, and I know that if I keep pushing, I'm going to lose her for good.

The hardware store is already closed, so I head on up the hill toward home. My wolf fights me the entire way, and it's all I can do to keep myself from turning the truck around and going back to find her.

There are only so many places to stay in Idaho Springs, I tell my wolf. I can come back tomorrow when the hardware store opens, run into her and make it look like an accident. Maybe she'll give us another chance. Somehow I doubt it, but I have to try.

It's been snowing steadily for hours, and by the time I reach Soda Creek Road, my tracks have nearly disappeared.

My tires spin in the fresh, wet snow, but I dig down to dirt and finally get traction.

The truck fishtails as I accelerate up the hill, sliding sideways and nearly landing me in the trees.

Damn. After everything, I might just end up stuck here, too.

I climb out of the truck and reach for the five-gallon bucket and shovel I keep in the back, hefting it out of the bed. It's full of finely crushed granite, and I shovel some onto the road to give my tires better traction.

I'm just about to get back in my truck when I hear the low-pitched whine of a snowplow. My stomach clenches, and my wolf starts to growl as the stench of bear musk hits me full-force.

"Stuck, wolf?" someone yells, and I wheel around.

Callum McGregor is hanging out the window of the plow, sneering at me in amusement.

"Just enjoying the scenery," I bark, annoyed but needing to keep control of my wolf.

Callum McGregor is a bear shifter and a total scumbag. His family has been encroaching on the Gold Creek pack's territory for years and starting fights with Adrian's wolves. It isn't my business, but having six bear shifters living so close means nothing but trouble. If I were alpha, I'd drive them out or eliminate the threat altogether.

"You gonna do your job and clear the road?" I call.

"Nah," says Callum, still sneering at me as if I'm a bug on his windshield. "The fewer wolves in my town, the better."

"*Your* town?" My wolf is dying to yank Callum out of the cab of the plow and tear him to pieces, but I force myself to smile. "I'm not sure Gold Creek is the place for a little cub like you ... I don't know how much longer Adrian is going to tolerate having you underfoot."

Callum's nostrils flare. "Yeah, well ... things change. Adrian won't always be around."

Callum says it in an offhand way, but it makes my blood run cold. I don't answer to Adrian. He isn't my alpha, but I'd sure as hell rather have him running Gold Creek than the McGregors.

"Drive safe, pup," he says, grinning as though he knows his words had their intended effect before rolling up his window and driving away.

My wolf snarls as I watch him go, but I force myself to climb back into my truck and ease onto the gas pedal. I was hoping the gravel would help me get up the snow-packed hill without spinning out. No such luck.

I grind my back molars in frustration — more irritated with myself than Callum. I *knew* it was a bad idea to come down the mountain tonight, but I couldn't stand watching her drive into danger — couldn't stand her leaving me behind.

Now I'm stuck here without my mate, and it's eighteen degrees outside. It's much too cold to sleep in the truck, so I turn around and head back toward Idaho Springs. With a little luck, I'll find a place to stay the night and try to find her again tomorrow.



EMMA

BY THE TIME I reach the steep driveway leading to the front office of Creekside Cabins, my feet are frozen in my boots. I'm thoroughly regretting not asking Jared to drop me off.

I spotted the little cabins on the way into town, but the resort was a *lot* farther back than I thought. The sign out front proclaims free Wi-Fi and a hot tub, which sounds like heaven on earth.

The dirt driveway is covered in snow and ice, and I slip three times before I make it to the top. There's a beat-up green Subaru parked out front. I rush inside the cabin that serves as the main office and nearly groan as warmth engulfs me.

The front office smells strongly of incense, and Native American flute music is playing from a pair of ancient-looking

speakers. A giant chocolate lab shaped like a sausage bounds around the counter to greet me, wagging his tail and licking my knees.

“Hello?” I call, scratching the dog behind the ears.

“I’ll be with you in a minute!” trills a voice from the back.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, pulling out my phone to call Mitch, my investor. It goes straight to voicemail, so I leave a message explaining what happened and asking to reschedule just as soon as I get to Breckenridge.

I hear the tinkle of a beaded curtain, and a gray-haired woman in a gauzy purple shawl appears. Her arms are dripping with about a million silver bangles, and she looks charmingly out of sorts.

“Sorry for your wait,” she says, heaving a theatrical sigh. “I’m reorganizing some things back there, and it’s just a mess. How can I help you?”

“I’d like a cabin, if you have one,” I say, wishing I’d brought a swimsuit. I’d kill for a soak in that hot tub — along with a huge glass of red wine. “I was on my way to Breckenridge, but they’ve shut down I-70. I just need it for one night.”

The old woman’s eyes twinkle as she takes in my wind-swept hair and snow-covered suitcase. “We can plan all we want, but sometimes fate intervenes!” She flutters her hands around her in mild exasperation. “I have cabin thirteen available, but it’s not ready yet. One of my cleaners couldn’t make it in on account of the weather. I’ve been getting them all turned over myself.”

“Oh. Okay ...” I say, shoulders sagging in disappointment. My legs are freezing, and my feet are killing me. I normally wouldn’t push the issue, but my whole body is aching from the cold. “I’m *really* tired,” I tell her, a little desperately. “I had some car trouble, and I just need a place to rest for a few hours. I’ll be on my way as soon as they reopen the highway and I can get a car to pick me up. I honestly don’t care if the cabin’s clean.”

“You poor thing,” the woman clucks sympathetically. “Well, you’ve come to the right place. I know just what you need. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

Relief seeps into my bones as she says it. I don’t know what it is about this woman, but something about her motherly demeanor makes me feel as though everything’s going to be all right. My own mom was a wreck after my parents split up, so I never grew up with the feeling of being taken care of by someone.

“Come back in an hour, and I’ll have cabin thirteen ready,” says the woman. “I just need a credit card to have on file, and it’ll be yours for the night.”

“Thank you,” I say, pulling out my wallet and nearly collapsing with relief. I’m not really the hugging sort, but in that moment I want to throw my arms around this strange woman and sob into her shoulder.

Instead, I hand over my credit card like a normal person and wheel my suitcase around. An hour gives me enough time to grab some supplies for the night — copious amounts of wine, mainly.

“Just head on around when you get back,” the woman calls after me. “Cabin thirteen is at the very end. I’ll leave the key in the room.”

CHAPTER 4



JARED

EVEN THOUGH I had no intention of getting a room in Idaho Springs, it's a relief when I reach the cabin. It's got its own private hot tub and is surrounded by trees on two sides. The little parking area is separate from the main lot, and the third side faces the creek.

It's the perfect place to relax and let my wolf calm down while I wait out the night. Plus, I could use a hot shower after shivering out in the cold.

The lady at the front desk was a little weird when I asked for a cabin, and now I understand why. The cabin at the end of the row isn't your typical rental. It doesn't have a heater, for one thing — just an old wood stove and a pile of unsplit logs under a tarp around back. The inside is basic — just a queen-sized bed, a loveseat, a table, and a little kitchenette. I can't imagine some city-dwelling tourist being happy to stay here, but it's the ideal place for me.

I head straight for the bathroom and shuck off my clothes, turning the shower on hot. I climb in and groan as the water pelts my body, chasing away the chill from the snow.

I scrub myself until my skin prickles, but I can't seem to wash away her scent. That sharp sweetness still coats my nostrils, and it's driving my wolf crazy.

I keep picturing the way she looked storming away from me in the snow. She was so cute when she stomped off that it almost makes up for her leaving.

And that skirt. *Damn*. I'm rock-hard just thinking about it.

I don't know what it is, but something about that fierce independence really turns my crank. She's a control freak, that's for sure, and my wolf fucking *loves* that. He wants to take care of her no matter how much she resists and show her how good it can feel to let someone else take charge.

No, my wolf growls. Not *someone* else — me.

I want to be the one who makes my determined, headstrong girl give in. I want to throw her over my shoulder, take her to bed, and spend the night dominating her sweet little body.

Maybe I'll tie her up, I think. My balls ache at the thought. I'll tie her up and torture her with pleasure until she *begs* me to let her come.

But I won't let her. I'll keep her teetering right on the edge until I'm sure she's forgotten about work, about her investor — forgotten everything except my name and how good it sounds coming out of her mouth.

My cock twitches as I imagine her head arching back into the pillows as I lick her to completion. I reach down and fist myself, slamming my hand from the tip of my cock all the way to my shaft. I stroke myself a few more times, picturing those soft lips yielding to my girth.

But before I can find my release, I hear a loud creak and the sound of a door snicking shut.



EMMA

IT'S cold inside cabin thirteen, and my heart sinks when I see the empty wood stove in the corner. If that's how I'm meant to heat this place, I'm in for a rough night.

I close the door and set my stuff down, startled when I hear the shower running. I hadn't heard the water before — not with the babbling creek just outside.

I glance at the closed bathroom door and see there's a light on. I pause. The woman at the desk told me to come back in an hour, but maybe she's still cleaning.

The shower goes off, and I hear someone moving on the other side of the door. Feeling uneasy, I open my mouth to announce myself, but before I do, the bathroom door flies open.

My eyes get caught on a bare muscular chest, complete with a freakin' *eight-pack*. Tanned, toned skin tapers to a "V," where a trail of fine dark hair disappears. The intruder has a towel wrapped around his waist, and I can see the hard bar of an erection straining against the fabric.

I swallow and drag my eyes up his glorious chest, only vaguely concerned that there's a naked stranger in my cabin. But when I finally get a good look at his face, I realize he's not a stranger at all.

Jared is standing in my bathroom — steam wafting all around him. He looks even bigger than he did in the truck. Everything about him is big.

Jared's dark hair is dripping wet, and I can see the water clinging to his lashes. Little droplets slide over full, kissable lips, down the swell of his shoulders, and make little rivulets around his biceps. One of his hands is fisted around the towel, which is doing a very poor job of hiding his — *er*, member.

It's all *very* distracting — borderline pornographic — which could be why it takes so long for the alarm bells to go off in my head.

The handsome mountain man/potential axe murderer followed me to the cabins. Not only that, but he was just in my shower with a *huge* fucking erection.

"What are you doing here?" I blurt, not sounding nearly as alarmed as I should for having a naked man in my cabin. If I'm being honest, I wish he were a little more naked.

"What are *you* doing here?" Jared rumbles. He looks just as confused as I feel.

“T-this is my cabin,” I stammer. But of course he already knows that. He must have followed me here and gotten naked so I’d walk in and find him like a cheesy old porno.

“No,” he says slowly. “This is cabin thirteen.”

“I *know*,” I say, feeling my face flush. I know I didn’t get the wrong cabin by mistake, but I feel stupid for walking in here anyway.

He reaches behind him to the bathroom counter, where he’s set his wallet and keys. He produces a brass key on a plastic card thing with the number thirteen printed in gold.

“T-the woman at the counter told me to come to cabin thirteen,” I say.

“Did she?”

Now Jared sounds amused. The corner of his mouth is twisting in a devilish smirk. He thinks I’m making this up. But why? How could I have known he was going to be here?

“It seems we keep running into each other,” he murmurs, taking a step toward me.

His voice is low and growly, and it sends a gush of liquid heat down through my core, where it settles between my legs.

My heart starts to race as he takes another step, and I shuffle back instinctively. The door knob jabs me in the back, and that smirk of his grows.

“If I didn’t know any better,” he rumbles, his gaze drifting to my mouth, “I’d say you were following me.”

“*Following* you?” I choke in disbelief. “If anything, it’s you who’s following me.”

“You’re the one who came barging into *my* cabin,” he says, those golden eyes dancing with amusement.

A treacherous blush spreads across my face, and heat blossoms between my legs. My hands are aching to reach out and touch him — to hook a finger in that towel and see what he’s hiding under there. I want to run my hands over those rock-hard abs ... and other parts of his anatomy.

What is it about this guy that makes me so horny? *I* know he's not my type, but my stupid body hasn't gotten the memo.

A low chuckle rumbles up Jared's throat, as if he's read my dirty mind. The sound dances over my body like a caress, making my pussy clench and throb.

He takes another step toward me, and with my back against the door, I can't move away.

He's so close that I can feel the heat coming off his body, and my nipples pebble up through my shirt. His wet skin steams a little in the frigid cabin, and I wonder what it would feel like to slide my naked body down his.

I imagine us tangled up in the sheets on that bed over there. Him bending me over the bathroom counter. Fucking me in the shower.

Jared takes a deep breath, and his nostrils flare as if he's scenting the air. "What are you thinking about?" he asks, his voice barely more than a whisper.

My stomach does an uncomfortable flop. "I'm thinking the woman at the front desk must have short-term memory problems."

"Don't lie," he growls, placing his hands on either side of the door so his arms form a cage around my head. His breath tickles my ear, making my whole body quiver, but he doesn't touch me. "I can smell when you're lying."

I frown at him, something about that comment riling the logical part of my brain. "Don't you mean you can *tell* when I'm lying?"

"That's not what I said."

I purse my lips, caught between the haze of my own arousal and annoyance with his domineering act. I put a hand on his chest to shove him back, but then something hits the top of my feet.

I look down, which was a mistake. The towel is lying in a heap between us, and Jared's magnificent lower half is on full display.

My mouth goes dry. His giant cock is pointed straight at me. It would be so easy to reach out and —

I tear my eyes away from his impressive length and force myself to meet his gaze. Judging by Jared's expression, he's just as surprised to have lost his towel as I am to be staring at his naked lower half.

He clears his throat, but before he can say anything, I reach behind me and turn the doorknob. I push the door open and slip outside, running full tilt toward the main office.

CHAPTER 5



EMMA

MY THROAT IS BURNING from the cold air by the time I reach the office. I try the handle, but the door is locked. I groan and bang on the glass.

A sign hanging inside the window says “Be Back Whenever,” but I keep pounding for several more seconds. The woman at the front desk screwed up big time. She’s going to give me another cabin.

A car crunches past me in the drive, and I stop banging long enough to look around. The beat-up green Subaru is gone, and there’s a bare patch of packed gravel that’s quickly being filled with fresh snow.

I let out a huff and reach for my phone before realizing I left it and my bags back in cabin thirteen with Jared and his giant penis.

“Shit,” I whisper to the empty parking lot, staring at the sign for Creekside Cabins. The “No” in “No Vacancy” is lit this time, and I realize that I’m out of options.

Even if the flighty woman from before magically reappears, what recourse do I have? I gave her my credit card, but I never got a receipt or a key. For all intents and purposes, the cabin is Jared’s for the night.

Feeling thoroughly defeated, I walk back around to the tidy row of cabins. Lights are on in most of them, which tells me that Creekside actually *is* fully booked. An old Jeep passes

me on the narrow road, and I almost throw myself in front of the vehicle and beg whoever it is to take me with them.

What am I going to do? It's not as if I can ask Jared for a ride back to Gold Creek. I think I'd die of embarrassment. And why the hell didn't I leave the second I walked in on him? Instead I just stood there gawking like an idiot.

My face is on fire by the time I reach the cabin, and I stand there shivering for several minutes before I work up the courage to knock.

"It's open," calls Jared. He sounds infuriatingly casual.

I take a deep breath and swallow down my embarrassment, determined to act like an adult. I push open the door and walk inside, my gaze drifting around nervously.

Jared is seated at the small table by the window, an open pizza box in front of him. The heavenly scent of bacon wafts toward me, and my stomach gives an audible growl.

Mercifully, he's wearing clothes — jeans and the red flannel he had on earlier. It's hanging open in the front, and his chiseled abs are on full display.

"No luck?" he asks, still annoyingly calm.

"No," I huff in exasperation. "It looks like the manager went home for the night, and this was the last available cabin."

"I'm not surprised," he says, sounding totally unconcerned that the horrible woman double-booked the cabin. "I got the vibe that she was a seer, and they have a habit of meddling in other people's business."

I frown, not sure that I heard him correctly. "A seer?"

"Yeah, you know. A psychic."

I just gape at Jared, stunned that this rough-looking mountain man would believe in something woo-woo like that.

He grins at me, and I shake my head. He doesn't look at all worried. If anything, he seems ... cheerful.

"You hungry?" he asks, holding up a thick slice of pizza.

Am I hungry? What kind of question is that?

“I’m —” I start to tell him I’m off gluten and dairy, but suddenly that seems like a stupid thing to say. The truth is that I’m freaking starving, and the smell of his pizza is making my mouth water.

“It’s Beau Jo’s,” he adds, as if I’m supposed to know what that means.

“Uh, sure,” I say, too stunned to refuse. We need to get this cabin thing figured out, but I guess it can wait until after pizza. Maybe if I get some food in me, I’ll be able to think more clearly.

I sit down across from him, and he shoves the pizza box toward me. It’s pineapple and bacon, which I normally wouldn’t eat, but it looks and smells amazing. I pull out one giant slice and dig in, the hot tomato sauce gushing into my mouth as the tart sweetness of the pineapple pings my tastebuds.

Jared watches me eat, his eyes burning with something like deep satisfaction. It should be awkward, but it isn’t. It’s strangely erotic, as if he’s mentally undressing me as I scarf down his food.

When I finish the first slice, I reach for another. I haven’t had pizza in more than a year, and I swear it’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted. Jared gets to his feet and grabs a bottle of wine off the counter. It’s the one I bought at the liquor store down the street.

I realize then that he moved the paper sack to the little kitchenette. My suitcase isn’t where I left it, either. It’s resting on the luggage rack by the bed.

Maybe he’s planning on letting me have the cabin, I think as he pours me a glass of wine. The kitchenette appears to be fully stocked with dishes and cutlery, and there’s even a real wine glass.

I smile my thanks as he hands me the wine, practically groaning as the rich fruity taste coats my tongue.

We polish off the rest of the pizza, though Jared eats most of it. That first glass of wine is starting to hit me as he refills my glass, watching me with an almost predatory alertness.

“I’m sorry you’re going to miss your meeting,” he says, speaking for the first time in several minutes.

“It’s all right,” I sigh. “I should be able to reschedule.”

“You never told me what your app is,” he continues, gazing up at me through those long dark lashes.

“Oh.” I feel a slight heat creep up my neck. I’m not sure why I’m embarrassed to tell him. This is what I’ve devoted my life to for the last three years, and I’ve perfected my elevator pitch. “It’s an app that helps people looking for love find their ideal mate.”

Jared’s eyebrows shoot up. “Their ideal *mate*?”

I break his gaze and clear my throat, swirling my wine nervously. “Yeah, you know. Their perfect life partner.”

“So it’s a dating app.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Dating apps are just the twenty-first century version of going to a bar and trying to meet somebody. LoveIQ takes the guesswork out of dating and matches you with someone compatible.”

“That’s impossible,” says Jared, cracking a smirk. “No app can know if two people are compatible.”

“Mine can,” I say, sitting up a little straighter and crossing my legs. “It’s the algorithm. It uses six elements of personality along with more than a hundred lifestyle data points to match you with —”

“I don’t care how good your algorithm is. It can’t account for chemistry.”

“Chemistry is ninety percent compatibility.”

“And the other ten percent?” Jared leans forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees. “Pure animal instinct.”

“Pheromones.”

“Are you saying you’ve never been attracted to someone based on something intangible like pheromones?”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest. “Animal attraction isn’t an indicator of staying power in a relationship.”

I should know. My mom and dad are proof of that.

“An algorithm can’t tell you who you’re meant to be with. It’s instinct.”

“The data say otherwise.”

Jared narrows his eyes at me, though his expression is still playful. “What would your algorithm say about me?”

“I don’t know you well enough.”

“Best guess.”

I take a deep breath through my nose and sit back in my chair. “Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“Well, you’d obviously score high in confidence and low in extraversion, which might be compatible with my profile. But you seem low on agreeableness, middle of the road on intelligence —”

“*Ouch.*”

I wince, but Jared’s still grinning. He asked for honesty. “Are you spontaneous?” I ask.

“Definitely.”

“Well, based on what you do for a living, I’d say our backgrounds are a mismatch ...”

“I like how you just assumed I was asking about how I’d match up with *you*,” he says, those golden eyes smoldering.

I open my mouth and close it again, feeling my face heat up.

He leans in closer, and that clean woodsy scent hits me full force. His gaze drops to my lips, and he licks his own before

bringing his eyes up to meet mine. “And what do your instincts say about me?”

I swallow to wet my parched throat. Being this close to him is doing all kinds of interesting things to my body. My breaths are coming in uneven gasps, and the aching throb between my legs is almost more than I can stand.

Jared’s gaze roves over my body, as if he can somehow sense what I’m feeling. “Yeah,” he murmurs. “That’s what I thought.”

Before I can string two words together, he gets to his feet and opens the back door of the cabin.

“W-where are you going?” I stammer. Is he leaving already?

“Just going to start a fire.”

“Oh. You don’t need to do that,” I say, following him outside with my wine. Even though the mix-up wasn’t my fault, I feel sort of bad taking the cabin.

Jared doesn’t answer me. He just hauls two big logs out from under a tarp. I watch in fascination as he places one on top of the other, grabs an axe that someone left propped against the back wall of the cabin, and brings it down in one fluid motion — splitting the log in two.

I blink. I’ve never seen anyone do that before, and — weirdly — it turns me on.

I follow him back inside and watch as he stuffs some kindling into the wood stove, along with a few larger pieces. He starts the fire with the ease of someone who does this kind of thing all the time, and the sight of my basically shirtless mountain man coaxing a fire to life makes my inner cavewoman want to jump his bones.

Once a fire is crackling in the stove, he brushes off his hands and flops down on the bed, watching the flames lap at the logs.

I just stare at him sprawled across my comforter. He certainly doesn’t look as though he’s planning on leaving.

I clear my throat. “Well, thanks for the fire ... and the pizza.” I say it in a leading tone that I hope gets my point across. “I appreciate you giving me the cabin for the night since I have nowhere else to stay ...”

Jared’s brows furrow as he turns to look at me, his eyes sparking with mischief. “*Giving* you the cabin?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“The cabin *I* reserved?”

I scratch the back of my head. “Yeah, you know ... since she double-booked it.”

A slow smirk stretches across Jared’s face, and my core clenches uncomfortably. “Is that what happened?” he asks, cocking his head to the side. “Because it kind of seems like she rented the cabin to me, and you barged in here while I was showering.”

“That is *not* what happened,” I choke, my face burning with indignation.

“No?”

“No! She told me the cabin still needed to be cleaned and that I should come back in an hour. I gave her my credit card —”

“And she didn’t give you a key?”

“No, but—”

Jared raises one dark eyebrow.

I can feel a low growl building in my throat. He is so infuriating.

But something in my expression must amuse him, because he bursts out laughing. “Relax, will you? You can stay the night. I’ll even share the bed.” He pats the comforter as if inviting me to join him, and I grind my back teeth together.

I’m not sure why I thought he’d do the gentlemanly thing and give up the cabin. Clearly I misjudged him.

And how the hell did that woman forget she'd rented the cabin between the time she talked to me and the time that Jared showed up? I'm starting to think she double-booked it on purpose as some kind of sick joke.

But before I can form an appropriate response to the suggestion that we share a bed, headlights stream in through the cabin window, and I hear the low rumble of an engine.

I walk over to the window and peer outside. A snowplow is driving through the parking lot at a crawl, and I get a sudden idea.

CHAPTER 6



JARED

ALARM BELLS GO OFF in my head as she turns and runs for the door. I smell bear musk and know it's Callum before I even see the plow.

My wolf growls, and I follow her outside, not bothering to put on any shoes. "Emma—"

Blue and yellow lights flash across the snow, and I see her flagging down the driver. My stomach clenches when Callum's face appears, and I hear Emma ask where his route takes him.

Fury erupts inside me, and my wolf lets out a low growl. I can't believe she's considering hitching a ride with Callum. Maybe I came on too strong when I told her I'd share the bed.

Callum replies that he has a few private clients to see to before doing a contracted shift along I-70. I can practically hear Emma's wheels turning, wondering how far he might be willing to take her so she can get away from me.

My wolf feels as though he's trying to claw his way out of me in his urgency to protect what's ours. Callum is a notorious womanizer. There's no way she's going *anywhere* with him — even if I have to tear him to shreds.

"Emma," I growl, taking a few steps toward the plow.

But Emma ignores me and keeps talking to Callum. My dominant wolf can't stand being ignored, but my girl is determined.

Callum looks up as I approach, and I see a nasty smirk twist the corners of his mouth. “Sure, sweetheart. Hop in.”

In that moment, I sense Emma’s hesitation. She ran out here to talk to him on impulse without considering what she’d do if he said yes.

She’s not going to go with him. She’s too smart for that. But my wolf is pacing, snarling at Callum, and I can’t stop the words from tumbling out of my mouth. “Get away from him, Emma. He’s bad news.”

“Stay out of this, wolf,” Callum shoots back. “Let the lady make up her own mind.”

Emma turns to look at me. “You *know* him?”

“I know him,” I grit out, still glowering at Callum.

“He says he can take me as far as Georgetown. Maybe I can get —”

“*No*,” I growl.

“Why don’t you stay out of this, wolf?” Callum taunts. “The lady clearly isn’t interested in you. She wants to ride with ol’ Cal.”

At those words, something inside me snaps. I don’t know if it’s Callum’s general skeeviness that does it or the sinking feeling that he’s right.

Emma might be attracted to me, but she doesn’t want me. By some twist of fate, the front-desk lady gave me another shot with her, and I blew it. Now Callum is threatening to take her away.

I’m not aware of making the decision to shift, but I feel the telltale tightness beneath my skin and the prickle of fur sprouting all over my body. Emma’s eyes grow wide as my wolf bursts forth, ripping my jeans and tearing my flannel to shreds.

I land in the snow on four paws, hackles raised and teeth bared. I’m bigger than a normal wolf, but so is a black bear shifter. Callum leaps from the vehicle, shifting midair, and Emma’s scream pierces my eardrums.

I don't stop to look at her. I'm completely focused on the giant black bear, who rises onto his hind legs and growls.

I take a running leap and lock my jaws around his neck, but then a huge paw collides with my side, knocking me to the ground. I chuff to clear the snow from my nose, rolling back onto my feet.

I launch myself at Cal once again, aiming for the tender flesh beneath his arm. Callum roars as I sink my teeth into his furry body, and the taste of blood excites my wolf.

Emma screams, and I jerk my head back — taking a bite of the bear with me. Callum cries out and staggers back, dragging his paws through the bloody snow.

I leap at him again, nipping at his side, and the bear retreats with a low growl. He staggers back into human form, falling over naked in the snow. I growl at him until he clambers back into the cab of his plow.

The beep of the plow backing up makes me flatten my ears to my head, and I watch him go with a gnawing dissatisfaction. It's not smart leaving Cal alive, but I don't want the vision of my wolf ripping him apart to be burned into Emma's memory.

I look over at her and read the terror in her eyes before remembering I'm still a huge brown wolf.

As I shift back into my human form, the cold snow burns the soles of my feet. I grab my ripped jeans and pull them on. Nudity doesn't faze most shifters, but I'm afraid that the sight of my naked body twice in one night might be too much for my little human.

I turn to look at her and instantly regret my decision to shift. Emma's face is ghostly pale, and she's staring at me as though I just sprouted three heads.

“I can explain—”

“Get away from me!” she chokes, holding out a shaky hand as I take a step toward her. I can smell her fear.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I breathe. “I couldn’t if I wanted to.”

A look of confusion crosses her face, but it’s quickly replaced by panic. Emma’s gaze snags on my shredded flannel, and then she breaks into a run.

I’m still locked in the throes of battle, and her sudden movement triggers my prey drive. Before I can check myself, I’m darting after her, catching her easily around the middle.

Emma screams and kicks, thrashing to get away, but it’s not even close to a fair fight. “Ow! Let me go!”

“No,” I growl, tightening my hold. She’s putting up one hell of a fight.

Emma throws her head back, colliding with my nose, but I don’t even feel the pain. I’m too focused on the feel of her soft little body. Victory in a fight always triggers a strong urge to mate, and Emma’s sweet scent is all around me. It’s making it hard to control my wolf.

“Stop!” I yell. “I can explain.”

“Explain what?” she screams. “How you changed into a giant *wolf*?”

I glance around with a grimace. Humans aren’t supposed to know about us, and she’s shouting my secret for the whole resort to hear.

Then she sinks her teeth into my arm, and the tether on my wolf snaps. Bites and nips can mean a lot of things to shifters, but between a mated pair, a bite is nearly always sexual.

Before I can stop myself, I’m lifting Emma off her feet and tossing her over my shoulder. She lets out an adorable little shriek, and I smack her ass to quiet her down.

For a split second, Emma goes very still — almost like a rabbit playing dead. Then she screams louder and punches me in the back, but I catch an interesting scent. It’s sweet and deep and a little earthy — the scent of feminine arousal.

Blood surges to my cock, and my erection is instantaneous.

Emma would probably deny it, but bodies don't lie. She *liked* it when I spanked her.

I burst into the cabin before someone calls the cops — and before I yank down her skirt and fuck her against the side of my truck.

Emma is still kicking and screaming as I slam the door, so I smack her rear again. My palm stings from the contact with her tight little ass, and I have to fight the urge to give it a squeeze. The scent of her sweetness fills the room, and I notice she's stopped struggling.

"You like that," I growl. My wolf is pleased.

"No," Emma snarls back.

"No?" I ask, my growl turning into a purr. My wolf has relaxed now that we have her alone. He just wants to play. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Emma's voice comes out a little breathless, and I smack her ass again.

I feel her sharp intake of breath. The scent of her is overwhelming. My cock is straining against the zipper of my jeans, eager to get inside her.

I sit down on the bed and pull her off my shoulder, flopping her down across my legs. Emma gasps but doesn't try to escape. Her ridiculous skirt has ridden up. It's barely there at all.

With a growl, I shove it over her ass, exposing her perfect cheeks. Her panties are a naughty black mesh. I can see right through them.

"Is your pussy cold, baby?" I ask, reaching down between her legs and brushing my fingers over her center. She's already so wet for me.

Emma moans at my touch, and that sound alone could make me come. I drag my fingers along the swollen lips of her pussy, applying just enough pressure that she can feel me through her panties.

She groans again, and when my fingers come away slick with her arousal, my wolf howls in delight.

Without warning, I bring my hand down and smack her right cheek, watching as the flesh jiggles from the contact. A cute little gasp tears out of her mouth, and I spank her two more times.

“You shouldn’t have run from me,” I murmur, running my palm over the mound of her ass.

“You ... scared me.”

“Was it the fight or my wolf that scared you?” I try to keep my voice casual, as if her answer doesn’t matter.

Emma drags in a shaky breath and lets it out in a whoosh. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do,” I say, swiping my fingers between her legs. I need to hear her answer before I fuck her, because there’s only one way this can work.

“Both?” she whispers. The word comes out almost like a question, and I can smell that she’s lying.

I bring my hand down to smack her again, but this time I let my fingers land lower. She gasps as I spank her sweet little pussy, rolling her hips over my hard-on and practically begging for more.

“I told you not to lie,” I say, massaging her aching cunt through the fabric of her panties. “I can smell it when you do.”

I hook two fingers under the mesh, pulling her panties off one cheek and into her crack so I can see the swollen pink lips of her pussy. “Just like I can smell how much you want me.”

“You can smell that?” she chokes. She sounds horrified.

“Mmmhmm ...” I pull her panties off the other cheek, tugging them up so the material drags against her sex. “And you smell *so* good, baby. It’s driving my wolf insane.”

“You say that like you have a split personality or something,” she rasps.

“No,” I say, positioning a finger at her entrance and swiping it along her creamy folds.

Emma shudders.

“We are two halves of a whole — one and the same. So if he scares you, tell me, and I’ll leave you alone.”

“He doesn’t,” she gasps. “I mean, I still think I might be hallucinating, but —”

I cut her off by thrusting a finger into her tight little hole. She drags in a breath, and I groan aloud when I feel her juices coating my finger.

My cock aches to be inside her, but it’s not time. Not yet. I need Emma to understand — *really* understand what this means.

“You’re not hallucinating,” I say, slipping another finger in. “I’m a wolf shifter.”

I drag my fingers along her inner walls, slowly stretching her for me. Emma moans and jerks her hips. She wants this just as badly as I do.

“Like a werewolf?” she gasps, pussy throbbing for my cock.

“Not like you’re thinking.”

I start to pump my fingers in and out, smacking her ass with my free hand. She fists the bedspread and moans louder as her aching cunt squeezes around my fingers.

“Will you — turn me into a werewolf if you — bite me?” she rasps, sounding more excited than fearful.

“No,” I rumble, withdrawing my fingers and bringing them to my mouth, tasting her sweet nectar.

I catch her watching me over her shoulder, and more of her cream beads out. My naughty girl likes that, but I have to focus. “Shifters are born, not made.”

In one fluid motion, I flip her over onto her back and slide her skirt down over her hips. Her beautiful little cunt is on full

display through her see-through panties, but I don't allow myself to go there.

I want to strip her naked first and see my mate laid bare.

Tossing the skirt onto the floor, I help her shrug out of her vest. Her breaths are coming in nervous little gasps, but I can see her peaked nipples beading through her thin black turtleneck.

That comes off, too, and a low growl escapes me when I see the flimsy lace bra she's wearing underneath. Her perfect breasts are heavy with need, and her nipples are hard pebbles beneath my hand as I palm her over the bra.

"If I was going to bite you, it would be for one reason and one reason only."

"What's that?" she whispers.

I flick her nipple with the pad of my thumb and watch it strain against the thin material. "To mark you as my mate."

Her eyes get big as I climb over top of her, straddling her hips and pushing the lace up over her breasts. I stare down at the perfect little mounds with their flushed rosy centers.

I pinch one nipple, and her head jerks back, exposing the long line of her neck. I'm tempted to rip the damn bra off with my teeth, but I can't let my wolf out — not yet.

Reaching around to release the clasp, I slam my lips down over hers. Emma arches up to meet me, and I moan as her tongue slips into my mouth. Her pillowy lips feel so good against mine. I could do this all day.

Keeping my weight on my elbows, I slide down over top of her and let my hips rest against hers so she can feel how much I want her. My balls are aching, full of cum, and when she wiggles her hips, that little bit of friction almost sends me over the edge.

I pull back, running my fingers through her hair, and see her green eyes are hungry with need. I reach down and feel her through those panties. They are completely soaked.

“I’m gonna take care of you, baby,” I growl, rubbing down her center and massaging her clit. “Tell me where you want me to put my mouth next.”

She jerks her chin toward her pussy, but she doesn’t want to say it.

I grin, taking the shell of her ear between my teeth and flicking my tongue over the sensitive lobe. “Here?”

She lets out a shaky breath. I take that as a no.

I plant a trail of kisses along her jawline, skimming over her pulse point and down her throat. She arches her back as I travel lower, cupping her breast as I plant my mouth over one hardened nipple.

She cries out as I bite down on it, the crown of her head smashing into the pillows as her hips jerk toward the ceiling. I lick the sting away and slide over to her other nipple, tugging gently with my teeth and making her growl with need.

“Here?” I ask, enjoying this game. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t love playing with her — drawing out that frustration just a little.

I pull back. She looks so damn beautiful, lying there with her dark hair spilling over the bed. She eyes me nervously, a little self-conscious, and shakes her head.

“I need you to say it,” I tease. “Tell me where I should kiss you, baby.”



EMMA

“SAY IT,” Jared rumbles, rubbing his fingers between my legs. “You’re so wet for me, baby.”

I squirm a little at his assessment. I am *sopping* wet. I’d be embarrassed by how much I want him, except I can see the outline of his erection through his jeans. The physical evidence of how turned on he is makes me feel powerful. Sexy even.

“Mmm.” He bites down on his lip and groans. “You liked it when I spanked you.”

It isn't a question, but before I can answer, he smacks that tight little bundle of nerves through my wet panties. I gasp in surprise as the sting surges out from my clit, transforming into an aching pleasure.

I moan.

Jared smacks me again. Two more times, and I arch back on the bed and let out a wanton cry. The stinging ache is just too much.

“Say it, baby.”

“*Please,*” I murmur. I'm so close. Just the fleeting contact of his rough hand was almost enough to send me over the edge. *Almost.*

“Please *what?*” he asks softly, still in that teasing tone.

I don't know why I can't just say it. It's not like I have a problem giving orders outside the bedroom.

I think I just don't want to admit how much I want him. I just met Jared today, and I saw him turn into a wolf not ten minutes ago. Now he's got me sprawled out on the bed naked, and I didn't even ask any pertinent questions.

I probably imagined the whole thing. The stress of the day plus the altitude must have caused me to hallucinate.

But all logic skitters out of my brain as I feel Jared's fingers brush the inside of my thigh. I shiver as he pulls the crotch of my panties to the side, laying my pussy bare.

His golden eyes flash, and he licks his lips, his face slack with need.

Something about that look undoes me, and I can no longer deny how much I want him — *all* of him. I want him to eat me out and then fill me up with that magnificent cock of his.

“Please,” I whisper. “Lick my pussy.”

Jared doesn't waste a second. He yanks my panties down so fast I hear the rip of fabric. His rough fingers are gentle,

almost reverent, as he parts my outer lips. He slides his fingers down along my folds, coating them in my slick juices and studying my pussy like it's a work of art.

Then, without warning, he buries his mouth in my core. I cry out when I feel the burn of his stubble against my delicate inner folds. It feels so good I can hardly stand it, and he moves his head from side to side so that his beard drags against me.

Jared hooks his hands around my upper thighs, pulling me tight against him. He starts to lap at me, drinking my cream, and I let out a pained-sounding moan.

He is ravenous as he devours me, and I grit my teeth to keep from screaming. I've never felt anything like this.

I grind my mound into his face, and Jared's movements become more jerky. He slides his hands down to cup my ass, lifting my hips clean off the bed. He flicks his tongue over my puckered asshole, and I feel my insides constrict as a sharp tingle runs through me.

He licks a trail back over my center, all the way to the base of my clit. His tongue works its way slowly inside me, and I let my knees fall open on the bed, spreading myself wide for him.

Once he's lapped up all my cream, he lifts his golden eyes to meet mine — wolf's eyes, I realize. He holds my gaze as his mouth finds my swollen nub, and I let out a high-pitched whine as he sucks.

Tingles shoot through my core, fanning out from the source of the pleasure. Liquid heat trickles through my body, coating my insides like honey. I can feel my orgasm building as he continues to suck my throbbing bud. Then he nips at it with his teeth, and a fresh gush of arousal spills out of me.

Jared laps at my wetness with a moan that travels from my pussy all the way to my toes. The pulsing heat is too much to bear, and when he takes my aching clit between his teeth and tugs, I tumble over the edge.

Wave after wave of pleasure rolls through me, and Jared envelopes me with his whole mouth. He eases me through the

aftershocks that have my hips jerking wildly.

Jared plants one last kiss on my mound, allowing his lips to linger there. There's a burning, almost painful need in his eyes, and I reach for the button on his jeans.

Gently but firmly, Jared catches my hand and lifts himself up off the bed.

CHAPTER 7



JARED

I RETREAT into the small bathroom, my balls aching with need. My dick is an iron bar against the zipper of my jeans. Even walking is painful.

I shut the door and brace my body against it, rubbing my eyes with the pads of my fingers.

I thought I could do this — get her off without giving into my wolf. But the need is just too damn strong.

My wolf doesn't just want to fuck her. He wants me to make love to Emma. He wants me to have her in every possible way and then mark her forever as ours.

But I won't do that to her. A wolf that can't protect what's his shouldn't have a mate.

When I left my birth pack and became a lone wolf, I gave up the security that comes with a pack. A shifter's pack mates keep his mate safe in the event that he's wounded or killed. And a lone wolf is always running from death — always fighting to live.

I've been lucky to make my home in Adrian's territory. Adrian is a good alpha and a good man. He isn't threatened by my dominance.

But if the McGregor bears want Gold Creek, they'll have to kill Adrian first. If any of his pack survives, the next alpha might not be so tolerant. Wearing my mark would make Emma a target, and if anything ever happened to me ...

I strip out of my jeans and hop in the shower, reaching down to stroke my aching cock. But before I can get myself off, I hear the bathroom door creak.

I freeze.

I can hear her breathing just inside the door — smell her cream on my skin. My cock twitches at the knowledge that I have her all over me. I close my eyes and try to breathe through my mouth, but her scent still coats my tongue.

Emma pulls back the shower curtain, and I suck in a breath at the sight of her naked body. Her eyes widen as they drift down to my cock, and I swell even more under her stare.

I can hear her heart racing. She's nervous. Unsure. But she steps one foot into the shower. Then the other.

My breaths are coming hard and fast. I shouldn't let her come any closer — not when the urge to mark her is so strong.

Emma sinks to her knees inside the shower, fisting me with her small hands. She runs her thumb over the head of my cock, and a shiver races up from the base of my spine all the way to the back of my neck. A drop of precum leaks out of me, and her tongue shoots out to capture it.

I groan and rake my fingers through her hair, squeezing my eyes shut as little jolts of electricity shoot through me. She takes me into her mouth as far as I will go, and I feel the head of my dick hit the back of her throat.

My knees wobble, and I clutch the shelf in the shower for support as she starts to suck me off. I open my eyes to find her staring up at me — big doe eyes all innocent and sweet as she takes my cock like a porn star.

Fuck.

I can't handle it. Water is cascading over her naked body, running over her breasts and shooting off the tips of her hard little nipples.

She starts to jack me harder, ramming my cock into her cheek. She can't take me all in her mouth at once, so she fists the base of my shaft to make up the difference.

Her mouth is hot and wet, but I want to be nine inches deep in her sweet little cunt. I want to fill her with my seed.

When Emma finally pops off my dick, I reach down and lift her up, hooking her legs around my waist so her tits are smashed against my chest. Her ass fits perfectly in my hands, but I want her on all fours so I can lick her tight little asshole again.

I lower her down until she can feel the full length of me pressing against her folds. She groans at the light contact and rolls her hips, driving my cock against that little bundle of nerves.

I feel her slick wetness coating my shaft and long to be inside her.

Emma rides me harder. My greedy girl wants me to make her come again, and I plan to give her what she needs.

I drop my head to her shoulder, breathing in her fragrance. I feel my fangs descend, and a bitter taste coats my tongue — the venom that will impregnate her with my scent and mark her forever as mine.

I turn my face into her neck, nuzzling that soft patch of skin where she would wear my mark.

But I can't. I won't.

I pull back and try to gain some control over my wolf, but I'm too far gone. She looks so sexy sliding that needy little cunt along my shaft that there's no way I can refuse her.

With a grunt, I take her out of the shower, grabbing a towel as I go. We leave a trail of water as I walk her over to the fire and perch her on the edge of a chair.

Emma watches me carefully as I drop to one knee and begin to towel her off. I take my time drying her perfect little tits and pressing the towel between her legs. She closes her eyes as I drag the rough material over her swollen pussy, and the scent of her arousal fills my nostrils.

I can't wait any longer.

I scoop her up and toss her onto the bed, loving the way her breasts jiggle as she bounces. Her mouth falls open as I climb on top of her, circling one nipple with my tongue as I run two fingers between her slick folds.

Emma moans at that light touch, and I draw her nipple into my mouth and suck.

She cries out, thrashing beneath me, and I rub my thumb over her clit. She moans and lifts her hips to grind against me, needing the friction of my fingers on her little pink bud.

I know it's torture.

Still, I take my time — rubbing and twisting that tiny nub and dipping my head to taste her. Her sweet cream coats my lips, and I flick my tongue inside her.

She tastes so good. My wolf is howling, but it's not enough. I want her to beg for my cock.

I run my tongue under the hood of her clit, sucking and kissing until I know she's right on the edge —

I pull off her, and she moans. I think it's the best sound I've ever heard.

“Please, Jared,” she rasps. “I need you inside me.”

At those words, all my self-control unravels. My mind gets hazy as I straddle her hips and position myself at her entrance. She watches me carefully, panting hard, as the head of my cock nudges her center.

I don't want to put a condom on — don't want anything between me and my mate. But a nervous look flickers across her face, and I feel like a dick for being so presumptuous.

“Wait!” she gasps. “I'm not on the pill.”

“You won't get pregnant,” I tell her. “Not now.”

“H-how do you know?”

“Your scent,” I rumble. “It changes. You aren't fertile right now — won't be for days.”

A look of relief sweeps over her, and I get a twinge of sadness. Even though I know a pregnancy is the last thing she wants right now, my wolf would love to put a pup in her belly.

Emma nods and I ease in, filling her with my need. She squeezes her eyes shut as I hit the end of her, and I shudder as her inner walls clamp down on me.

Fuck. She feels so good, almost as though she was made to take my cock. I want to pull out and thrust back in hard, but I give her a moment to adjust to my girth, stifling a moan as she swirls her hips.

Mine, my wolf growls. And even though I know I can't take her for my mate, I allow myself to think of her that way — if only just for a moment.

She is mine, and I am hers.

Mine to claim.

Mine to protect.

Mine to pleasure and worship.

When those bright-green eyes meet mine again, I begin to move in and out in slow, torturous thrusts.

Emma watches me enter her slowly, and it's the hottest fucking thing. My cock is covered in her nectar, slick and warm and tantalizing.

I feel my fangs descend again, and my eyes flicker to the soft valley between her neck and shoulder that smells like juniper and sweetness.

The need to mark her is intense, and I pick up the speed to distract myself. With every thrust, she lets out the cutest little grunt, digging her nails into my skin and dragging them down my back.

My wolf roars with delight that she wants to mark me, too, but it's not helping me keep my mind off sinking my teeth into her flesh.

Grabbing her around the hips, I pull back and lift her off the bed. I stagger over to the couch by the fire, staying inside

her the entire time.

I position us so that she's straddling me with her knees digging into the cushions. Her eyebrows quirk in surprise. I lift her hips and bring her down on my cock, coaxing a moan from her lips.

I slam her down again and again, setting a punishing rhythm. I stop when Emma lets out a little cry, but then she grips the back of the couch and starts to meet me, thrust for thrust.

"That's it, baby," I whisper, palming her breast. "Take what you need."

She slams her pussy down, burying me inside her, and my eyes roll back in my head. She closes her eyes and grinds against me, using me for her pleasure.

I fucking love it. I kiss her hard, gripping her by the hair, and she moans against my mouth.

When I pull back, her eyes are glazed, and I know she's close to the edge. A soft flush has worked its way up her cheeks, and her lips are swollen from my kiss.

She's so fucking sexy, and my wolf is howling *mine, mine, mine*.

I know I won't be able to keep from marking her — not with her looking up at me with those big, beautiful eyes.

In one rapid motion, I lift her off me and drape her over the arm of the couch. I have a second to appreciate the view of her juicy little ass before I need to be inside her again.

Nudging her legs apart, I spread her open and enter her from behind. She groans and clamps her thighs together, but she can't stave off the pressure that's building deep inside her.

I reach around to play with her clit, and I feel it when she comes apart. A ragged scream tears out of her throat, and her pussy spasms around me.

A second later, I feel a tingle from the base of my spine and the surge of release as I fill her with my cum.

Emma goes limp over the arm of the couch, her walls caving in around my cock. I drape myself over top of her, drinking in her intoxicating scent. My wolf is still raging with the need to mark her, but the orgasm calmed me enough to control my animal.

Slowly, I pull out, and my wolf preens as I watch my seed spill out of her. I grab the towel to sop it up, taking care to be gentle with her sore little pussy.

I scoop Emma up and carry her to bed, drawing back the covers and tucking her in. Her eyes are hooded when I meet her gaze. She's lazy and spent from our lovemaking.

A flicker of sadness rushes through me as I take in the sight of her all cuddled up. Her cheeks are flushed, and her dark hair is adorably mussed.

I could fuck her every day and tuck her in every night, and still it wouldn't be enough. But this is it, I think to myself. This is all I get.

Tomorrow when they reopen the highway, I'll have to say goodbye.

CHAPTER 8



JARED

THE RUMBLE of engines rouses my wolf, and I carefully uncurl myself from Emma, trying not to wake her. I didn't let myself get too close when I climbed into bed beside her, but somehow she still ended up in my arms.

I pull back the curtains and squint as headlights beam through the window. I see three figures on snowmobiles, and a growl rumbles through me when I smell bear.

“What’s going on?” Emma asks, her voice low and husky from sleep.

“Nothing. It’s all right. I’ll be back in a minute.”

The McGregors are here for me, and I don't want them catching my scent on her.

I pull on my destroyed jeans and stuff my feet into my boots. My wolf's hackles are up as I storm outside, and I can feel him trying to claw his way out. He doesn't like other shifters getting this close to our mate.

“That’s him,” rumbles a voice as a man dismounts from his snowmobile. I don't know him, but I recognize his scent. He smells a lot like Callum.

I tense as he strides toward me and the others dismount. Three bear shifters — all here for me because I hurt their brother.

My wolf growls, snarling to get free, and this time I let him. My body aches as he surges forth, my muscles and bones

rearranging themselves before the fur even covers my skin. I grimace as cold air hits my tender bare flesh in that split second I'm mid-shift.

I plant four paws in the frigid snow, and a tingle of satisfaction rolls through me. Sounds and smells travel farther in the snow. My wolf fucking loves it.

The musky scent of bear intensifies as the three men shift, circling me in the snow. I expected the McGregors to retaliate, but I was too preoccupied with Emma to worry.

A low warning growl rumbles through me. Fighting the urge to mate has left me on edge, and I'm anxious to sink my fangs into the McGregors.

But despite the bloodlust pounding through me, my mind is back at the cabin with Emma. Three against one are not good odds, and if something happens to me, she'll be left unprotected.

I wouldn't put it past the McGregors to hurt Emma to send a message to the Gold Creek wolves. A low growl rolls through me at the thought, and the nearest McGregor bares his teeth.

It lumbers toward me on four huge paws, churning the snow as he runs. I bound toward him, sinking my fangs into his neck, but the bear is protected by his thick winter coat.

He throws me off as easily as a dog would a flea. I land on my side and roll to my feet just as a second bear charges me. I yelp as he bites my neck, but I'm faster than the bear. I tear away and lunge for his face, snapping my fangs down on his snout.

The bear whines and shakes me off, but then his brother comes up behind me. Long, sharp claws drag down my back. I let out a yowl of pain and skitter away, my blood splattering the snow.

I leap at the nearest bear, driving my fangs through his thick coat, but he swats me down so hard I see stars.

Another bear mauls me, sinking its teeth into my flank. I whimper and snap to get away from him, but he holds me

down with two powerful paws.

A scream shatters the night as he tears into me — Emma's scream, I realize.

I bite and thrash, trying to get to her, but I can't escape the bear's hold. Panic lances through me as the other two turn their attention to Emma, and I slash at the bear with my claws.

My only thought is to protect my mate, but then the bear takes another bite out of me, spraying the snow with my blood.

I can feel myself weakening. I can't get up. But then I hear the rumble of two more engines, and headlights flash through the snow.

I catch two familiar scents, and for once I'm glad to smell them. Maddox and Adrian come tearing through the snow on four-wheelers, and the McGregors scatter.

Leaping off the ATVs, the shifters begin ripping off their clothes. Adrian's strong alpha energy butts up against mine, but the aggression I sense isn't directed toward me.

He's only halfway out of his snow pants when he shifts into a huge gray wolf with eerie yellow eyes. Maddox's wolf is just as large, only his animal is black as night.

I scent their anger as they charge the McGregors, Maddox attacking the bear who had me pinned while Adrian herds the two brothers away.

I smell blood as the black wolf rips into the bear, and I catch a flash of that predatory gleam Maddox always seems to have in his eyes. For him, this is just a fun Friday night. He *lives* to tussle with bears.

Adrian is more measured. He drives the McGregors toward the woods and looks back at Maddox with an irritated chuff. He thinks Maddox was too aggressive, but the black wolf just opens his mouth in a pant, his long pink tongue lolling out.

The bears shuffle into the trees, and for a moment, I think the McGregors are going to tuck tail and run. Three against three isn't an easy fight, and bears are lazy by nature.

Lifting his nose to scent the air, Adrian turns back toward the cabin. The gray wolf raises his head, suddenly alert, and I realize he's staring at Emma.

A territorial growl rumbles through me, and I limp over to position myself between her and Adrian. My message is clear — she's off-limits — but Adrian doesn't back down.

The alpha fixes me with a hard stare. Even in wolf form, I know what he's thinking.

Emma is human, and humans aren't supposed to know about us unless they're mated to a wolf. Emma might carry my scent from our lovemaking, but it's not strong enough to mark her as my mate.

Before I can get too worked up, Adrian starts to shift. His wolf shivers, and his limbs start to elongate as the hair retracts from his body.

At the same moment, I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. The largest of the three bears is hurtling toward him — planning to attack while he's mid-shift.

A growl tears out of me as I lunge for the bear, piercing through fur to get to his flesh. Blood coats my tongue, and the bear roars in pain, but I clamp down harder.

I catch a glimpse of Adrian's stunned expression just before Maddox enters the fray. He's still in wolf form, and he charges up on the bear's other side, snapping at his belly.

I scent the bear's panic and release him, sending him scampering into the trees. His brothers take one look at Maddox's bared teeth and follow suit, blundering off into the darkness.

I roll my snout in the snow to clean the blood off, panting from the fight. Emma is standing just outside the cabin. She's wearing my flannel, which hangs down to the middle of her thighs. It looks damn good on her, and it carries my scent — telling the other wolves she's mine.

I preen a little at that subtle declaration. I know Adrian and I are going to have words, but I'm too proud to be concerned that she just witnessed our fight.

Maddox is the next to shift. Even in human form, he's intimidating — big and burly like a football player. His eyes are shining with excitement from the fight, and for once I'm glad we're on the same side.

It takes me a bit longer to shift. Adrian and Maddox are almost fully dressed by the time I complete the change. My wolf is still riled up, and he thinks we can protect Emma better if we're in animal form.

"Thank you," says Adrian as soon as I'm fully human again.

I give a curt nod, my whole body tense as I pull my shredded jeans back on. As a rule, I try to give Adrian a wide berth to show I'm not a threat to him. But he and Maddox just saved my ass. I owe them a debt of gratitude.

"Thank *you*," I say. "For showing up when you did. Your timing was ..." I shake my head, not sure how they knew that there would be trouble.

"The McGregors were drinking at The Lucky Buck tonight," Adrian explains. "Damon overheard them and gave me a call. Figured they were up to no good."

"What did you do to piss off the McGregors?" asks Maddox, his deep, booming voice a mix of admiration and amusement.

"Took a bite out of Callum," I say in an offhand manner. "He was ... sniffing around." I'm acutely aware that Emma is listening, so I don't want to tell them that Callum was getting too close to my mate.

Adrian seems to catch my drift, though, because his gaze darts to Emma. He drags in a breath and lets it out slowly, chewing on the inside of his cheek. Adrian is a man of few words, and he always chooses them carefully.

"I don't make it my business to tell lone wolves how to conduct themselves," he says, turning his eyes on me. In human form, they're a brownish color, though I can still see the hint of gold that tells me his wolf is close to the surface.

He jerks his chin in Emma's direction. "But I'm sure I don't have to tell you how dangerous this is."

"She won't say anything," I assure him, terror shooting through me.

There are packs that will kill non-mated humans who learn about the existence of shifters. Adrian isn't that sort of alpha, but if he thought she was a threat to his pack, there's no telling what he'd do.

I have the sudden urge to scoop Emma up, throw her in my truck, and drive. I didn't think I needed to protect her from the Gold Creek pack — not while Adrian was alpha — but that may have been a faulty assumption.

"She your mate?" asks Adrian matter-of-factly.

It's a question I should have expected him to ask, and yet it still catches me off guard. "I, uh ... I haven't ..." I scratch the back of my neck, unsure what to tell him. "We just met this afternoon," I say, which should be answer enough.

It's not unheard of for shifters to take human mates, though it's not a decision anyone makes lightly. Humans are fragile, and they don't always understand our ways. Shifters will sometimes wait months, even years, before marking a human mate.

"But she's your fated?" Adrian asks. He knows me well enough to know I wouldn't drag just any human into this.

I give a shaky nod.

Adrian sucks in a sharp breath through his mouth, his expression turning calculating. I can tell he's gone into problem-solving mode — something the alpha excels at.

"Well," he says, "make sure you take care of that." A smile quirks at the corner of his mouth, something I don't think I've ever seen. "Being mated looks good on you."

I blink stupidly. Adrian barely knows me, and yet he acts as though he can sense a difference.

"Call me if those assholes show their furry faces again," he says, climbing back onto his four-wheeler. "You had my back.

I won't forget that. The Gold Creek wolves are at your service."

CHAPTER 9



EMMA

I WATCH the men on four-wheelers zoom away, churning a trail through the snow. Belatedly, I realize I could have asked one of them for a lift, but I can't leave now — not when I have so many questions.

Jared turns and starts limping back toward the cabin, and I gasp when he comes into the light. He's got a nasty claw mark across his face, and his chest and sides are striped with gashes.

"You're hurt," I choke, wanting to reach out a hand to soothe him but scared of causing him pain.

"I'll live," he says, pulling a grin that looks as though it takes effort. "Shifters heal fast."

"You should still let me clean those so they don't get infected."

I don't care how fast he heals. Those wounds look deep.

"All right," he says, his eyes softening as they look me up and down.

I realize I'm still wearing his gigantic flannel. It was the only thing I could throw on fast enough.

"Sorry," I say, heat flooding my cheeks. "I'll ... take this off."

"Don't," he says quickly. "It ... looks good on you."

I flash a shy smile and run into the bathroom, filling the sink with warm soapy water.

Jared drifts in behind me, perching on the edge of the counter and allowing me to fuss over his many bites and claw marks. The wounds look painful, but they don't seem to faze him. Or maybe he's just putting on a brave face.

"Will those bears come back for you?" I ask, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

"Not tonight," he sighs, looking tired but unconcerned about the gigantic bears that almost tore him to shreds.

"You aren't worried?"

He shakes his head. "I'm a lone wolf. I'm used to fighting to keep what's mine." His eyes flicker over me in a possessive way that makes my stomach clench with need. Watching those bears attack him was terrifying, but seeing what Jared's capable of made me shiver for an entirely different reason.

"So those other wolves ... they aren't your pack?"

"No," he says, his voice low and harsh. "I left my birth pack a few years back. Haven't joined another one."

"Why not?"

"I'm too dominant to play nice with another alpha. Adrian — the gray wolf — he's alpha of the Gold Creek pack. If I wanted to join, I'd have to fight for my place — probably kill him and one or two others."

I swallow at his bluntness. He talks of killing other shifters as if that's totally normal in his world. "And you don't want to," I guess.

"Right."

"Why did you leave your old pack?" I ask. It's probably a sore subject — and definitely none of my business — but I need to know.

"My brother Logan was killed," he rumbles. "It was ... my fault."

I frown, waiting for him to continue.

"He was seeing this she-wolf from another pack, and I knew she was bad news. Something just ... didn't feel right. I

tried to warn him, but he didn't listen." Jared lifts his eyebrows in exasperation. "One day this she-wolf ... she invited him back to her pack's lands. I should have gone with him, but I was working and —" Jared breaks off, clenching his jaw as his fingers curl around the edge of the counter. "He walked right into an ambush."

"They killed him?"

He nods, and a hard lump forms in my throat. "W-why?"

"He was next in line to be alpha. After Logan, it should have been me. I was always more dominant than my twin brother. But my father chose Jackson as his successor. Said the pack needed an alpha who could protect what was his. I've been on my own ever since."

A muscle works in Jared's jaw, and my heart breaks for him. The only thing worse than not having a family is to have it torn away from you. That's what it felt like when my parents split up, though Jared's had it much, *much* worse. He lost his brother and his pack, all in one fell swoop.

"Your brother's death wasn't your fault."

"It doesn't matter," he says tiredly. "What's done is done."

There are a million questions I still want to ask him, but my mind keeps circling around to the conversation he had with the alpha. "What did that wolf mean when he asked if I was your fated?"

Something like a grimace passes over Jared's face, and for a second I'm not sure he's going to tell me. It seems odd that he'd so willingly offer up details of what was probably the worst thing ever to happen to him, and yet he doesn't want to tell me this.

"Most shifters believe that each of us has a fated mate." He swallows thickly, staring down at the scratches on the back of his hand. "When two people are fated, their souls are drawn to one another. They can try to fight it, but the bond is powerful." Those golden eyes flicker up to meet mine, and all the air whooshes out of my lungs. "I've never heard of a shifter who could resist it."

My heart is pounding with the implication of those words. “And you think *I’m* your fated?”

Jared doesn’t answer me right away. He just reaches out and takes my hand, studying the way my fingers fit into his giant palm. “I don’t know what this is, Emma — only that I’ve never felt anything like it.”

I swallow, trying to find the words to ask the question that’s been hammering at me all night. “When you said you’d only bite me to mark me as your mate ...” I trail off, not sure I want to know. “Is it ... just a bite?”

“No,” Jared rumbles, looking up at me through thick, dark lashes. “It’s a bite that transfers my mating venom, marking you with my scent. It tells other shifters — and even humans — that you belong to me.”

My heart beats harder at those words, and I’m stunned by the little thrill that shoots through me. The thought of belonging to Jared, a handsome wolf shifter who knows how to make me come apart with his touch, makes my whole body quiver with an aching need.

I tell myself it’s just lust. That I only just met him. That it’s stupid to want him the way I do — body and soul.

This is how the wrong people end up together, I think. This is how you get your heart broken.

And yet my stupid heart doesn’t seem to care how risky and foolish this is. I trust Jared, and I don’t trust easily. Somehow it feels as though I’ve known him forever — that I’ve been waiting my whole life to meet him.

“Where would you mark me?” I ask nervously. It feels as though we’re discussing something intimate — something sexual, even.

Jared’s eyes seem to smolder as they search my face. I didn’t realize how close we’d gotten until he turns his head and plants a soft kiss in the tender spot where my neck meets my shoulder. “Here,” he whispers, his hot breath dancing over my skin. “But that’s not the only place I want to bite you.”

“No?” I ask, my voice coming out all breathy and weak.

Jared smirks. “No.”

My mouth has gone suddenly very dry, and there’s a desperate ache in my core. I’m not wearing any panties, and I can feel the slick wetness between my legs. “Where else do you want to bite me?” I ask hoarsely.

Jared draws in a long breath through his nose, and my face gets hot when I remember that he can smell my arousal. Can he tell how wet I am just thinking of those sharp teeth nipping at the most sensitive parts of me?

Slowly, he starts to unbutton my shirt — *his* shirt that I’m wearing. My nipples pebble up as he brushes them with the backs of his knuckles, and he pauses to rub them through the fabric.

My pussy clenches at his touch, and when he finally gets the buttons undone, he takes his time parting the fabric and then steps back to study me.

My skin tingles under his gaze, and my nipples tighten into hard little peaks. I wonder if he knows how my whole body aches for him. Judging by the huge bulge in his jeans, the feeling is mutual.

He moves toward me slowly, like a wolf stalking its prey, and when he pushes me back onto the counter, my legs come apart for him — my body opening like a book.

He unzips his pants, and his cock springs free — the tip slick with precum. I reach for it without even thinking, running my hand over his seam, reveling in the slickness of his arousal.

Jared’s hands come around to cup my rear, lifting me off the edge of the counter so he can slide in easily. A soft sigh escapes me as he stretches my entrance, and Jared holds my gaze as he withdraws.

He’s slow and deliberate with his lovemaking, and I can feel the tension building in my core. Every time he slides in and out of me, the base of his shaft rubs against my aching nub.

When I start to groan at the delicious friction, Jared lifts me up and slams in all the way to the hilt. I cry out and fist his hair in my hand, jerking my hips into him.

I want him to take me like I'm his. I want him to fill me up.

"Harder," I moan into his neck. "I want to feel all of you inside me."

Jared obliges with more hard thrusts, and I feel myself teetering toward the edge. A haze of torturous pleasure engulfs me, and I'm so lost in him that I can't even see straight.

"Who do you belong to, baby?" Jared rumbles.

"You," I rasp. "Just you."

"That's right," he growls. "You belong to me."

A shudder of delight rolls through me at those words, and my pussy clenches around him. I've never wanted to belong to anyone the way I want to belong to Jared.

"Come for me, baby," he murmurs in my ear. "I want to feel you come all over my cock."

I've never been one for dirty talk, but hearing those words unravels something inside me. I plummet over the edge into the abyss, squeezing my eyes shut and yelling his name as wave after wave crashes over me.

"I'm not going to bite you," he rumbles. "Not tonight. But I am going to mark you."

A tingle of excitement shoots through me at those words — and at the promise they hold.

"Yes," I croak, still squeezing the back of his neck as my pussy clamps down on his cock. I'm too overwhelmed by the spasms rolling through me to worry about what he means.

Before I can ask, Jared pulls out of me, and long jets of cum erupt from his cock. I gasp as his warm seed lands on my belly, my breasts, and trickles down between my thighs.

My legs feel like jelly. My body is spent, and inside I'm shattered by the intensity of our lovemaking.

Jared is gentle as he sets me back on the counter, parting the neck of his flannel and pulling it down so it rests in the crooks of my elbows. He studies me thoughtfully as he traces the pearly lines of cum, rubbing it into my skin.

I watch, breathless, as he spreads it over my belly — painting me with his seed. I shudder as he works it under my breasts and over the swell of them, tweaking my hardened nipples.

When he's finished, his eyes are burning like twin golden flames. "There," he says, his voice rough and satisfied. "Now everyone will know you're mine."

CHAPTER 10



EMMA

IT'S chilly in our little cabin by the time the first rays of sunlight fall across the bed. The fire has gone out in the wood stove, and the sound of Jared's snores tells me he's still asleep.

One of his big arms is locked possessively around me, and it takes several seconds of scooting and wiggling to extract myself without waking him.

Looking down at Jared's face, peaceful with sleep, I can hardly believe what happened last night. Did I really just spend the evening having wild sex with a werewolf?

That can't have been me. And yet, it was. I can feel the crackle of his dry cum on my skin — the mark he left behind.

For a second, I worry that everything Jared told me was a lie. Werewolves aren't real — at least, that was what I always thought.

I'd be panicking if I hadn't seen him shift right before my eyes. If I hadn't seen two more wolves shift and fight off a family of bears. And even though it's completely crazy, there's a part of me that trusts Jared implicitly.

I take a shaky breath. It doesn't make sense. A mountain man who turns into a wolf is the absolute *last* person I ever would have expected to fall into bed with. But last night felt like more than just sex. It felt almost like the start of something.

There's a pleasant soreness between my legs, and I can smell him on me. I need to shower, but I don't want to wash away his scent.

Grabbing my suitcase, I take it to the bathroom and locate my toothbrush. I splash cold water over my face, brush my teeth, and comb my hair. I neglected to pack any clean underwear in my small suitcase — or anything that would go with my boots — so I slip on my outfit from the day before. The panties are ripped from Jared's manhandling, so I go commando.

Slipping out of the cabin, I make fresh tracks through the deep snow, shivering as the cold air hits my bare pussy. I imagine Jared waking up to find the panties I left behind and hunting me down by scent to ravage me in the snow.

Flushing at my own dirty thoughts, I make a beeline for the little store I found the night before. Jared got dinner, so I want to make breakfast. I already fell off the gluten- and dairy-free wagon last night, so I'm thinking pancakes. With butter. Something tells me my werewolf lumberjack would like that.

My phone rings just as I'm coming out of the little store with pancake mix, butter, maple syrup, and bacon. It's Mitch McKeown, my investor, and I nearly drop the phone in my haste to answer.

“Hey Mitch.”

“Morning, Emma. You still snowed in?”

I can hear cars speeding by on the highway, so I know they've opened I-70.

“Nope. I think I might be able to dig myself out this morning.”

“Good, good.” He sounds distracted. “Hey listen, I need to fly back home this afternoon, so I was hoping we could do brunch and talk about LoveIQ then. Say ten thirty?”

“Oh.” After everything that happened last night, I'd almost forgotten that I was supposed to be begging Mitch to reschedule our meeting. “Uh, well ...”

Why am I hesitating? This is what I wanted. Mitch is a big, *big* fish and the entire reason I came to Colorado. He lives in the Cayman Islands eleven months out of the year. He's only here visiting his second home in Breckenridge.

This is my one shot to talk to him face-to-face. I'm lucky he still wants to meet me at all. But in order to make a brunch meeting, I'd need to leave now. I'd have to leave *Jared* now.

"C-could you do lunch?" I ask.

"Nah, sorry. I have a flight out of Denver at three. If you can't make it, that's okay. I'm gonna be in California sometime in early March. We could set something up then."

I swallow. March is three months away, which is a lifetime in the venture-capitalist world. Who knows if he'll even still be interested then?

I know I should just wake Jared up and ask him to drive me to the nearest rental-car place. But bailing on him after everything we shared feels wrong. It feels like running away.

I've been trying to get a meeting with Mitch for months, and I know that if I miss it, I might be throwing away the opportunity of a lifetime. And yet, after last night, everything I've worked for — everything I've accomplished — feels depressingly hollow.

But Jared ... Jared felt real. And something tells me that if I leave now, I may never see him again.



JARED

I WAKE up with a massive boner and a pair of aching balls. I seek her out, still half asleep, needing to sink into her soft little pussy.

My hand brushes cold sheets as I reach for Emma. Bright sunlight hits my eyes as I peel them open, only to find her gone.

Gone.

My gaze flickers over to the luggage rack where I set her bag, but it's gone, too. My wolf whines, and I jump out of bed — looking around as if I might find her hiding somewhere.

No. *No, no, no, no, no.*

Even though I knew that nothing could come of me and Emma, losing my mate still tears me open. I allowed myself to hope, to entertain some fantasy of the two of us, and here I am alone.

My wolf thrashes inside me, howling with grief. He's demanding that we go and look for her — track her down and drag her back here if necessary. The human part of me knows that can't happen — that I have to let her go — but I don't have the will to fight the shift.

My skin burns and prickles as hair sprouts all over my body, and I get the familiar feeling that I'm being turned inside-out.

My wolf bursts out of me, claws catching on the soft rug, and I bound up onto the bed.

Emma's scent is everywhere — on the bedspread, on me. I bury my snout in the tussled sheets, snuffling as I drink in her scent. Torturing myself with her sweetness.

I leap off the bed and follow her trail, my senses lighting up when I find her discarded panties. They're all that's left of my mate.

I whine at the knowledge that she's really gone, pawing at the stupid door. I can't turn the knob to go and search for her, and I'm tempted to burst through the flimsy wooden door. It's only my human sensibilities that stop me.

Instead I start to pace the cabin, letting out a forlorn howl. I bound up on the bed to taste her scent, ripping the sheets with my claws.

Soon I'm digging at the mattress like some untrained pup, tearing into the comforter and gnashing a down pillow between my sharp teeth. I shake the pillow like a dead rabbit, sending feathers flying everywhere. I know that human me will have to pay for the damages, but my wolf doesn't care.

Losing my mate hurts like a physical wound, and a wounded animal can be dangerous. Trashing the cabin is still preferable to leaving it, because I don't know what I'd do then.

The crunch of footsteps outside cuts off my whine. I pause with a fresh pillow in my teeth and listen. The doorknob turns, and the door creaks as it slides open.

I'm about to launch myself at whatever maid has dared to interrupt my grief, but then her scent hits me like a Mack truck, and I let out a muffled yowl.

Emma comes around the door, her eyes going wide as she takes in the destruction. The bedsheets are in tatters, and bits of fluff from the mattress are coming out. The floor is covered in white feathers, and more are raining down like snow.

But I don't care about the bed. Every inch of my being is focused on her.

My mate is here. She came back. My stupid heart is fist-pumping.

“What *happened?*” Emma cries as the bag in her arms hits the floor.

I open my mouth to speak before realizing I'm still a wolf. I release my latest pillow victim and bound off the bed, wagging my tail like a happy dog.

Emma's eyebrows inch up as I come springing toward her. Fear and confusion lace her scent, and I realize I probably scared her.

Lowering my head in a submissive posture, I whine as I sniff and lick her all over.

Emma seems to relax as my tongue brushes her hand, and she tentatively reaches out and runs her fingers through my fur. “So soft,” she murmurs, her voice gentle.

My mouth falls open in a contented pant.

Then I catch the scent of strangers and pork, and I'm briefly distracted by the brown paper sack. I start to salivate when I find the package of bacon, but Emma pushes me back with a soft scolding noise.

My tongue lolls out with happiness, and my human half returns. I shudder as the shift comes over me, and I scramble up onto two legs.

Emma's eyes nearly bug out of her head as she takes in my naked form. I scent her arousal as her eyes rake over me, but I don't dare touch her. Not yet.

"I ... thought you left," I mumble, my voice hoarse after all my yowling.

"So you destroyed the cabin?" Emma asks sharply, gathering up her bag and setting it on the counter. "I just went down to the little store to get some things for breakfast."

Shame rolls through me as she unpacks the bag, but then she turns — pouting as she takes in the destroyed mattress. "And here I was hoping to have another go-round."

I brighten at that, grinning like an idiot. "We still have the couch."

Her eyes glimmer with something like mischief, but she's all business as she pulls out a box of pancake mix and starts reading the directions on the back. My mouth waters. Three shifts in less than twelve hours have left me ravenous.

"I thought you left for good," I say, needing to explain why I went full wolf.

Emma shakes her head, but I catch something heavy and dark in her scent — guilt, I think. She purses her lips and looks at me as though she's got some kind of confession to make. "I got a call from my investor, Mitch."

Inside, my wolf gives a low growl. He hates hearing another man's name on her lips, but I force myself to stay silent so she doesn't think I'm a total psycho.

"He wanted me to meet him in Breckenridge for brunch before he flies out."

"Oh," I say, trying to sound casual even though my wolf is frantic.

She's leaving.

“I told him no.”

I frown at her, not quite understanding what this means. This investor meeting was the entire reason Emma came to Colorado. And yet she’s here with me, about to make pancakes.

“You turned down a chance to meet with your investor?”

She takes a shaky breath and nods, as if she can’t quite believe it herself. “I figured I could come to him,” she says, smiling a little. “I’ll bet the Cayman Islands are beautiful this time of year.”

Her eyes twinkle as she looks at me, and still I can’t make sense of it. She turned down her investor to stay here ... with me.

I take a tentative step toward her, and Emma turns, placing a hand on my bare chest.

“I ... didn’t want to run out on you after last night,” she murmurs, flushing from her neck all the way to the roots of her hair.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I growl, taking her tiny hand in mine and running my thumb over her fingers. “But I ... I’m glad you did.”

“You are?” she asks, her voice so small and unsure as she tilts her head up to look at me.

I nod, my throat too tight to speak. Emma turned down a chance to meet with her investor — turned down what could have been an amazing opportunity — just so she could have pancakes with *me*.

I’ve only known her for a day, but I get the impression that she’s not the type to let opportunities slip through her fingers.

All the reasons why I can’t have a mate fade into the background. It doesn’t matter what I think I should have — what I think I deserve. It doesn’t matter if I don’t think I’m worthy of her trust or if some wretched part of me fears that I won’t be able to protect her.

Emma chose *me*, and I'm too damn selfish to try to talk her out of staying. The best thing I can do is to spend every day trying to be the man she deserves.

"I-I don't know what this is," she stammers. "But I want to find out."

"Even if I don't fit your algorithm?" My heart feels as though it might burst. I just want to love her and protect her always — as long as Emma will have me.

She cracks a grin, biting down on her lip in a way that sends all my blood rushing south. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but ..." Her gaze flickers up to me, and I catch a flash of emerald. "Just this once, I think I'm going to go with my instincts."

My wolf howls with pleasure at those words, and it's all I can do not to bend her over the counter and ravage her like a wild animal. Instead I smash my lips into hers, breathing in her sweet scent and tangling my hands in her hair.

Emma rises to meet me, and I tug her forward until her breasts are smashed against me. The scent of her nectar fills the room. It's driving my wolf wild. I need to taste her — bury myself inside her — to know that this is real.

Reaching down, I slip a hand under her skirt, and my cock swells as my fingers brush her bare, wet pussy.

"You weren't wearing any ..." I trail off, remembering her discarded panties from earlier.

She shakes her head, and I feel the heat of her blush. My animal thrashes inside me at that knowledge, and a low growl rumbles up my throat.

"Bad girl," I murmur, slipping a finger inside her.

Emma moans, and I swivel her around and bend her over the counter. Her breath hitches as I yank her skirt all the way up, revealing the inviting swell of her ass.

I spank her hard, and Emma cries out, but I quickly massage the sting away. My hand slips down to cup her pussy. She's already dripping with need.

“Tell me where you want me to kiss you,” I growl softly in her ear.

EPILOGUE



EMMA

ONE YEAR LATER ...

I wake to the loud groan of a chainsaw and open my bleary eyes. Light is filtering in through the green-and-brown curtains that have a pattern of little wolves on them.

They're hideous curtains. Old Emma would have hated them, but I love all of Jared's little touches. They make our cabin feel like home.

I've made my mark in the decorating department, layering my own style on top of his mountain-man aesthetic. I picked out a couch that wasn't plaid, along with some tasteful area rugs.

The front door slams, and then I hear footsteps before the whole bed shifts. Jared seeks me out under the covers, his hand sliding over my bare hip.

"Morning, beautiful," he rumbles, scooting closer and curling his big body around mine. His hands are cold, but I don't mind. His touch turns my insides molten.

"Morning," I sigh, staring out the window. A few light flakes are falling outside, and I secretly hope we get snowed in.

Jared's hand drifts up and over my stomach, proudly rubbing my tiny bump. He growls his approval and nuzzles my neck just over where I wear his mark. It's just a little pink half moon now that it's healed, but it still tingles at his touch.

The mating mark will always do that, he tells me — just like I'll always carry his scent. Jared assures me that this is a good thing, especially living in Gold Creek around so many other shifters.

Despite Jared's lone-wolf status, he's been friendly with Adrian and his pack ever since they fought the McGregors. Apparently, it helps that Jared is mated. He says that I calm his wolf, which I find hard to believe. He's crazy protective now that I'm carrying his pup, and I sometimes catch him snarling at random shifters we pass on the street.

I feel Jared's erection against my rear, but he's all business as he plants a kiss over the mark and rolls back out of bed.

I turn to face him, pouting a little. I don't know if it's the hormones or the look of feral pride that comes over him anytime he sees my bump, but being pregnant means I'm horny all the time.

"I have a surprise for you," he says, his eyes glinting with mischief as he tucks his swollen cock off to the side of his pants.

"What kind of surprise?" I ask, propping up onto hands and knees so my ass sticks up in the air.

A pained expression flickers across his face as his eyes rove over my body. "One you'll like," he assures me. "Then I'm going to have my way with you."

I waggle my eyebrows and bound out of bed, grabbing one of Jared's giant red flannels that he must buy in bulk from the tractor supply store. I slide into it, reveling in his scent, and follow him into the main living area.

Jared slips outside in a gust of cold air, and I scoot into the kitchen to start the coffee. Work used to be the first thing on my mind when I woke up in the morning, but these days I draw out the first hour in bed, savoring those little moments with Jared as we explore each other's bodies.

It helps that I sold my majority share in LoveIQ to Mitch. These days, I just collect quarterly distributions, which I'm using to fund my next endeavor. It's a mail-away scent-

collection kit to help shifters find their mates. I know the market will be small, but it's more of a passion project. Algorithms might help some people find their mate, but instinct is what led me to Jared.

A gust of snow flurries drift into the living room as the door flies open again. The top of a gigantic tree edges into the room, and I break into a wide grin.

I've been bugging Jared to get us a Christmas tree for the last week and a half. But seeing the huge Douglas fir invading my living room, I know I should have helped pick it out.

The thing is at least ten feet tall. There's no way it's going to fit.

"Is it ... too tall?" I ask innocently as Jared stands the tree on its end. The top is smashed into the ceiling — at least eighteen inches bent to the side.

Jared grunts and drags the tree back outside, showering the carpet with needles. I hear the repetitive zip of a handsaw, followed by the sound of branches dragging in the snow.

He comes back in and turns the tree right-side up, smashing the trunk into the tree stand. Now the top of the tree is gone — hacked off by the saw. "Not anymore," he says gruffly.

I can't help it. I laugh. Launching myself across the room, I stand on tiptoe and throw my arms around him.

The fresh, woody scent of Jared engulfs me, mixing with the aroma of fresh Christmas tree. His fingers dig into my sides as he pulls me closer. I know he loves it when I wear his clothes — especially a shirt and nothing else.

"You like it?"

"It's perfect," I say as he drops a kiss on the top of my head.

"Good," he says, reaching down and sweeping my legs out from under me. I squeal as he lifts me into his arms and marches me back toward the bedroom.



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