



Midlife

BEAR CLUBS

MIDLIFE SHIFTERS

J.L. WILDER

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Midlife Bear Cubs

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By: J.L. Wilder

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Midlife Bear Cubs



Chapter One

LAUREN
“I’m pregnant.”

Jessica’s jaw dropped. “You’re *what?*”

Lauren drew a breath. In truth, she was surprised that her friend hadn’t noticed something was different as soon as she’d walked up to the table. At two months pregnant, she could already see the differences in her own body.

Maybe Jessica didn’t notice that Lauren’s face was fuller, or that her waist was a touch thicker than it had been last time she’d come back to Chicago.

“I’m pregnant,” she repeated.

“I didn’t even know you were seeing anybody!” Jessica said.

Lauren bit her lip.

“Oh,” Jessica realized. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.”

“How far along are you?”

“Two months.”

Jessica whistled, long and low. “So I guess you’ve decided what you’re doing.”

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “I know we always said we wanted to be childless, but it kind of feels like if it’s happening at this stage in my life, it’s fate, you know? It’s not like I’m twenty anymore.”

“You’re not that old,” Jessica objected.

“I’m not that young,” Lauren said. “Forty-one is pretty old to be getting pregnant. I kind of thought...” She trailed off.

“You thought what?” Jessica asked.

“Well, I thought I was menopausal, to tell you the truth,” Lauren said. “I hadn’t had my period in a few months, even... before.”

“Stress can do that sometimes,” Jessica said. “You said you’re two months along? That would mean that you got pregnant right around the time your mother died. You were going through a lot.”

Lauren nodded. “That’s probably what it was,” she said. “And then afterward, I *still* didn’t get my period, so it took me a while to figure out what was going on.”

“This is wild,” Jessica said. “I can’t believe you’re really pregnant. And the guy doesn’t know?”

“No,” Lauren said firmly. “I don’t want him involved.”

“Yeah, I guess not,” Jessica said. “Your kids will be shifters, and having a human dad would be weird.”

Lauren didn’t say anything. Of course, her friend had assumed that the father of her children was a human man—she’d been living in the human world for the past twenty years. She’d been passing as fully human, working as the manager of an expensive restaurant and living in a suburban apartment. Paying taxes. Watching her favorite TV shows on the streaming service she subscribed to.

Her life had deviated about as far from the life of a shifter as anyone’s possibly could.

But now, she was going to be a mother to young shifters.

“So,” Jessica said. “Is that what brings you back here?”

“Yeah,” Lauren said, grateful that Jessica had moved on from the subject of the father. “I want them to be raised among the den. I want them to know this world exists.”

“Strange time to be coming back,” Jessica said.

“Why? What do you mean?”

“Well, you know your cousin Cody is our alpha now, I assume?”

“Of course,” Lauren said. “Cody was alpha when I came back for my mother’s funeral.”

“Right, of course,” Jessica said. “Sometimes it feels more recent than that. It’s been...kind of a culture shock.”

“What does that mean?”

“He’s not like Arthur.” Arthur had been their last alpha. He was uncle to both Lauren and Cody, and he’d had no direct male descendants. As the eldest male cousin in the family, Cody had had the best claim to the role of alpha.

“Cody’s never been like Arthur,” Lauren said. “He’s always been kind of—”

“A jackass?”

“I was going to say irresponsible,” Lauren said, chuckling. “But sure.”

“He doesn’t do anything for the den,” Jessica said. “He spends all our money on these wild block parties every weekend, which he says is valid because they’re for everyone, but I don’t know. It’s not what I would have chosen to do with den funds.”

“He’ll settle in,” Lauren said. “He’s still pretty new to the job.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jessica said. “It’s just hard. It’s going to be strange for you, coming back at such an unstable time.”

“I’ll handle it,” Lauren said. “It’s important for me to raise my kids here. I want them to know what it’s like to be part of a den.”

“I honestly never thought you’d be here with us again,” Jessica said. “When you left to live the human life, I thought that was it.”

“So did I,” Lauren admitted. “I’m as surprised as anyone. Believe me.”

“And you really don’t want these babies’ father to have *any* part in their life?” Jessica asked.

“Definitely not.”

“Who is this guy?” Jessica asked. “I mean, I know you can’t let him in on the shifter stuff. But that doesn’t mean he can’t know them at all, right? Is he that much of a jerk?”

“No,” Lauren said. “Not a jerk, exactly. But he’s not the father type.”

“Okay, but I wouldn’t have called you the mother type either,” Jessica pointed out. “People can surprise you.”

Lauren sighed. She had come here knowing that she was going to tell her friend the truth. She just had to toughen up and do it.

But it was hard. Jessica was definitely going to look at her differently once she knew.

She might even be angry.

So far, she’d been supportive, but when she learned the truth about these babies, that supportiveness might go away. And Jessica was the only person Lauren really felt she could rely on. She *needed* her friend.

Still, she owed it to Jessica to be honest with her. They had never lied to each other before.

“The father isn’t a human,” she said.

“He’s a shifter?” Jessica blinked. “I don’t get it. Then what’s the problem?”

Lauren steeled herself.

“It’s Wesley,” she said. “Wesley is the father.”

“My *brother* Wesley?” Jessica said.

Lauren closed her eyes. “Yeah.”

“How the hell did *that* happen?” Jessica demanded.

Lauren drew a breath. “It was the day after my mother’s funeral...”



Chapter Two

Two Months Earlier

L AUREN

“All right,” Wesley Simms said, emerging from underneath the sink. “The drain works now.”

Lauren sighed. The past couple of days had been utterly exhausting, and the damaged drain had been one problem too many for her. “Thanks, Wes,” she murmured.

“Sit down,” he suggested, pulling out a chair. He took her hand and guided her over to it. “You look dead on your feet.”

“Hah,” she said. “Thank you. I’m sure I’m a complete mess.”

“I didn’t mean it like *that*,” he said. “But you do look exhausted. Is there anything else I can do to help you out while I’m here?”

“No,” she said. “Not unless you want to go through all of my mother’s old clothes and sort out what to keep and what to throw away.”

“I mean, I could,” he said. “I’d probably get it all wrong, though. I don’t know what you want.”

“I’m only joking,” she said. “Honestly, it will be a relief to sell this place and stop worrying about it.”

“So you’re definitely planning to sell, then?” he said.

“Definitely. I don’t have any need for this house now.”

“I guess I wondered if you might be considering coming back here to live with the rest of the den,” Wes said hopefully.

“Oh,” she said. “No. No way. I’ve never regretted going out and joining the human world. That’s where I belong now.”

“If you say so,” he said.

She stood up to walk him to the door. As she did, she impulsively leaned in and gave him a hug. It felt so good to

her to embrace an old friend. She felt a nice warmth radiate through her body.

“Thanks again, Wes,” she said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you. You look good.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” he said.

“You just said I looked dead on my feet,” she pointed out while laughing.

“Oh, you know that isn’t what I meant,” he said.

He reached up and gently traced her cheekbone with his thumb. “You look really pretty, actually,” he said. “I was noticing at the funeral.”

She sucked in a breath. She and Wes had known each other for years, of course—they’d grown up together, and she was used to being around him, thanks to the fact that he was her best friend’s older brother.

But he had never looked at her the way he was right now.

What is he thinking?

A part of her didn’t care. What did it matter? She had been so sad for the past few days about her mother’s death. She hadn’t encountered a single positive feeling. And now she was feeling something else, something other than pain and grief.

It was weird.

But it wasn’t bad.

She sucked in a breath just as he leaned in to kiss her. Her head swam as his lips met hers.

“Is this okay?” he murmured, leaning away.

“Yeah,” she said. “God, yeah.”

He nodded and reached down to unzip his pants. Then he took her hand and guided it down to cup him. She carefully drew his cock out and wrapped her fingers around it, feeling him throb against her.

She closed her eyes and exhaled, losing herself in the sweeping force of her arousal. It felt so good to give herself

over to something that was purely physical, that wasn't emotional at all. She wanted to get lost in it.

He hiked the black dress she'd worn for the visitation up over her hips, hooked his thumbs in the waistband of her panties, and eased them down.

What am I doing? Lauren thought briefly. This was so unlike her.

But do I really care?

As he worked two fingers slowly into her, she decided that she did not.

She rolled her hips with the motion of his hand, forgetting everything but the pleasure rising within her. She leaned her head back against the wall, still stroking him with one hand, marveling at how hard he was. He was going to feel so fucking good inside her. She didn't know how she was going to wait even a moment longer to have him.

She forced herself to keep breathing.

He pressed his palm against her, driving his fingers in deeper, and she let out a desperate cry.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

"I want you to fuck me," she moaned, hardly able to believe that she was saying this to her best friend's brother. "*Please, Wes. I need it.*"

He hesitated. "I don't have anything."

"I don't care. It doesn't matter." She was forty-one years old. She wasn't going to get pregnant. And she wasn't going to be able to stand it if she didn't get the chance to experience this cock pulsing inside of her.

She squeezed him, desperate.

He groaned.

Then he turned her in his arms, pressed her hands flat against the wall, and wrapped his body around hers. With one smooth thrust, he was inside her.

She was aware of his hands moving over her body—coming to rest on her hips, on her breasts. He seemed overwhelmed, unable to settle into a rhythm, unable to decide where he wanted his hands to be.

Wes Simms is inside me. She was as overwhelmed as he seemed to be. It was as if every bit of thought and instinct she had within her was dedicated to bringing their bodies closer together. Nothing else mattered but the feeling of him inside her.

I wonder if I'm going to regret this later.

She couldn't even commit to the thought. Even if she knew for certain that she would regret it, she wouldn't have been able to stop. The need she felt for him was intense.

He let out a guttural groan and fucked her harder, his hips stuttering, and she felt unhinged. She felt his absolute wildness. It was so much better than what she had been feeling before—loneliness, the loss of her mother. It was amazing to lose herself in something so entirely physical. To let her animal instinct be satisfied.

Lauren would have loved to make it last—to dwell here in the feelings of bliss he was giving her. But his hands were gripping her hips now, firm and hard, pulling her back into him, and the sheer force with which he needed her was enough to put her over the edge.

Her orgasm was so powerful that she was unable to focus on anything besides the pleasure of it all. She cried out in ecstasy, pressing against the wall to force herself closer to him, to take him deeper and deeper.

His arm tightened around her waist, and he roared, and she knew he was coming too.

His lips pressed against her shoulder.

Then he stepped back.

She stood still, her head hanging, as the skirt of her dress settled around her hips again. She listened as he arranged himself and zipped up his pants.

“Good to see you again, Lauren,” he murmured, lifting the hair away from her neck and placing a brief kiss there.

She heard the banging of the front door and knew that he was gone.

She stumbled back, away from the wall and over to the kitchen table, and sat down, stunned by what had happened.

I can't believe it. I just had sex with Wesley Simms.



Chapter Three

LAUREN

“Oh my God,” Jessica said slowly.

“Was that too much information?” Lauren asked, realizing she’d gotten carried away in retelling the story.

Jessica closed her eyes and shook her head. “I can handle it,” she said. “It’s not like I didn’t know Wes was a player.”

“Sorry about all the details,” Lauren said.

“You and I have always told each other everything,” Jessica said. Then she made a face. “Not that I’m going to pretend the fact that it’s my brother doesn’t make it *weird*.”

“Are you angry with me?” Lauren asked.

“No! Why would I be angry?”

“Because I slept with your brother,” Lauren said. “I was afraid to tell you at the time. I sort of thought I might get away with never bringing it up at all. It’s not like you and I see each other that often, and I wasn’t going to try to start a relationship with Wes.” She sighed. “Maybe fate’s punishing me for trying to keep things a secret.”

“I’m not mad,” Jessica assured her. “I don’t blame you.”

“Are you mad at Wes?” Lauren asked.

“I don’t know,” Jessica said. “Are *you* mad at him?”

“No, I’m not,” Lauren said. “I...well, I had a good time. I know it might be awkward to think about it.”

“It’s all right,” Jessica said. “I’m not thinking about it too much.” She grinned. “But he doesn’t know you’re pregnant,” she added, the grin fading ever so slightly from her face.

“No, he doesn’t,” Lauren said. “And I don’t want him to. You have to promise you won’t tell him, Jess.”

“I won’t tell him anything if you don’t want me to,” Jessica promised. “This is your business. But why don’t you

want him to know?”

“Like I said,” Lauren mumbled, “he’s not really the *dad* type.”

“He’s going to figure it out, isn’t he?” Jessica said. “When you give birth about five or six months from now, he’s going to notice.”

“He still doesn’t live here, right?” Lauren said. “Last time I was home, he told me that he was still living wild most of the time.”

“Yeah,” Jessica said. “He’s got a trailer a little way outside town in the woods, and that’s where he lives most of the time—when he’s not running around as a bear, of course. He checks in every few months.”

“So he might not even know exactly when my babies are born,” Lauren said. “He’ll probably notice that I have them eventually. But since I’m going to tell everyone that their father is a human, he’ll have no reason to think it has anything to do with him.”

Jessica’s mouth quirked. “It is pretty hard to picture Wes staying in one place long enough to do any fathering,” she said. “He’s always been distant. Even when we were growing up, he didn’t involve himself that much in my life. And ever since he’s gone off on his own—even if he says he’s going to be home on a certain day, it’s anyone’s guess as to whether he actually will. I hate to say it, but you really are better off not trying to rely on him.”

Lauren nodded. “I know,” she said. “You’re not offended that I’m leaving him out of his children’s lives, right?”

“No way,” Jessica said. “If he wanted to be involved with you, he knew how to make that happen.”

Lauren exhaled. “Thank you,” she said, relieved. She hadn’t been sure how her friend would take this news, but it seemed to be going all right.

“But you *will* need help,” Jessica said. “You can’t hope to raise your children all alone.”

“I’ll be fine,” Lauren said. She was used to doing things on her own. She had been alone since she had left the den as a twenty-year-old young woman.

“You came back to us because you wanted your children to understand den life,” Jessica said. “Didn’t you?”

“I did,” Lauren said, not sure where her friend was going with this.

“Part of den life is being involved in a community,” she said. “Letting the community participate in raising the children.”

“You just said Cody was a weak alpha,” Lauren argued. “Are you really suggesting that I let *him* have a direct hand in bringing up my children? Because that sounds worse than having Wes involved.”

“Of course not!” Jessica said, laughing. “Not *Cody*. I was talking about *me*, Lauren!”

“You?”

“I’ll be their aunt,” she said. “I want to be a part of their lives. I want to help raise my little nieces or nephews! You know I haven’t been able to have cubs of my own and this would be a blessing!”

“Oh!” Lauren said.

“What? You sound shocked.”

“It’s silly,” Lauren laughed. “It honestly never occurred to me you wouldn’t be mad at me, and you would want to be a part of their lives! But of course they’ll be your nieces and nephews.” Her heart filled at the thought of being able to share this experience with her best friend. She had planned on doing it all alone. But having Jessica by her side would be that much better.

“So?” Jessica pressed. “You’ll let me help with them?”

“Of course,” Lauren said. “They’ll need their cool Aunt Jessica, won’t they? I would never deprive my children of someone so wonderful.”

Jessica reached out and grabbed Lauren's hands. "I can't believe it. I'm going to be an aunt!"

"But you *can't* tell anyone," Lauren said again. "I know that sucks for you. I'm sure you want to tell everyone. But if anyone finds *that* out, they'll know who the father must be, and I don't want that. We're just going to have to act as though you're close to the babies because you're my best friend."

Jessica nodded. "I would want to be close to your babies regardless," she said. "It won't be a hard thing for people to believe."

"I'll be staying at my mother's house," Lauren said.

Jessica nodded. "I'll come by later and help you get moved in."

"Thanks," Lauren said. "That means a lot to me."

"Well, thank you for telling me," Jessica said. "I'm glad you're willing to trust me with your secret. And I promise, my lips are sealed."



Chapter Four

W^{ES} The clerk at the grocery store stared at Wes as she put his things in a brown paper bag and handed them across the counter to him. He nodded gruffly as he accepted the bag.

He didn't recognize her. He wasn't sure whether she was a member of the shifter community or just a random human who happened to have gotten a job at the grocery store they all used.

That's one of the drawbacks of being away all the time. You can't tell who's who anymore.

If Wes could have done things his way, he would have stopped coming back to town altogether. Every time he was here, he felt uncomfortable. He was much more at home in his little trailer a few miles outside of Chicagoland—or better yet, roaming free in the forest preserve that he had made his home when he chose to run wild.

“Thanks,” he murmured to the clerk.

She just stared. He knew how he must look to her.

Even when he was in his human form, Wes thought he looked like a bear. His height and his musculature definitely suggested *bear* more than *human*. His hair was long and wild, tangled in several places—he never combed through it with anything more sophisticated than his own fingers. His skin was dark and weathered from all the time he had spent outdoors.

And as he aged, the wildness in his features only seemed to increase. Nowadays, when he looked at himself in the mirror, he almost didn't recognize himself. It was as if, as he'd grown older, he had grown more into the bear that had always been inside him.

He liked that thought. But he could understand how it would be frightening to a teenage grocery clerk, especially if she was just a human.

This is why I hate being in town, he thought sourly. He was glad that this visit was only going to last a few hours. He had finished all the shopping he needed to do. Now he just had to stop by his sister's house and say hello to her—she'd be furious if she knew that he'd been in town and hadn't come by. Once he did that, he would be able to return to his sanctuary.

The grocery bag was probably heavy, but Wes didn't notice. He lifted heavier things every day—wood for his evening fires, the carcasses of animals he had killed in the wild. He liked to fend for himself.

Of course, there were some things you couldn't get for yourself in the wild. Wes tried to do without those things as much as he could, and for the most part, he was successful.

But he liked salt for his meat. He liked the occasional bottle of whiskey. And even now, after twenty years living away from the den, he was human enough to crave those indulgences.

As he stepped out of the store and onto the sidewalk, he was already bracing himself for the things Jessica would say.

She did the same thing every time he came home. She always tried to persuade him that he would be happier if he gave up the wild life and bought a house here in the city.

Wes knew for a fact that that wouldn't make him happy at all. It wasn't as if he had no experience with city life, after all. He'd grown up here. He knew what it was like. It wasn't for him.

But he knew that Jess missed him. It was bad enough that her best friend had taken off to live a human life the moment they'd all come of age. Losing her brother on top of that had been really hard for Jessica.

Wes was sorry about that.

But not sorry enough to want to come back home.

Suddenly, he came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the sidewalk.

Oh my God. It's her.

A part of him genuinely couldn't believe what he was seeing. He hadn't expected to see Lauren Wood again for years, and maybe not ever. After all, he had gone two solid decades without seeing her after she had moved away to join the human world. He'd almost forgotten her.

But there was no mistaking her. For one thing, nobody else in the den dressed the way Lauren did. Her clothes were clearly new, and they were tailored to fit her. Instead of cotton and denim and leather, which were the fabrics most of the den members wore all the time, Lauren was wearing something that looked softer and shinier.

There was also her haircut. It was so *deliberate*. The women of the den wore their hair pulled back most of the time because they tended toward shaggy looks.

That was how Lauren had been when they were younger. He could remember running around with her and Jessica as children, all of them in t-shirts and jeans, all of them with the same unkempt hair he and Jess still had.

Lauren looked *very* different.

And yet...at the same time, she looked very much the same.

He had noticed that when he had seen her at her mother's funeral a couple months ago. Twenty years had changed his own appearance in fundamental ways, but she looked much the same. Her hair was a bit lighter with a few slim silver streaks and her face was just the smallest bit lined, but other than that, she could have been the same woman he had watched drive away from the den twenty years ago dressed up in nicer clothes.

I should go say hello to her, he thought. That's the polite thing to do.

Of course, it would be incredibly awkward, given what had happened the last time they had seen each other.

For a moment, he considered turning away and acting as though he hadn't noticed her.

Then she turned and made eye contact, and the choice was no longer in his hands.

He steeled himself and crossed the street to say hello.



Chapter Five

W^{ES} “Lauren! Hey!”

She looked up. A look of shock crossed her face. “Wes? Wes Simms?”

He frowned. “Yeah,” he said. They had seen each other recently. He knew his appearance could be shocking to people who hadn’t seen him in a while, but Lauren shouldn’t be having that problem.

Maybe something else is wrong.

The last time he saw her, he had been walking away from her right after the two of them had sex.

Maybe she’s angry.

He thought back to that day. He had thought that they’d both had a good time. *He* certainly had. But he hadn’t stayed around to talk to her about it afterward.

Had that been a mistake?

“Is everything all right?” he asked her.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Her tone was a bit frosty. “Why wouldn’t everything be all right?”

“Well...” He faltered. “I just didn’t expect to see you back in town so quickly. I thought you went back to the suburbs after your mother’s funeral.”

“I did,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “But now I’m back. Is that a problem?”

“Of course it isn’t a problem.” He was taken aback.

“What are *you* doing here?” she asked. “You don’t live in the city.”

He hefted his bag of groceries slightly in answer. “I just came to pick up a few things.”

“I thought you lived off the land. Isn’t that, like, your whole deal?”

“Well, the land doesn’t have whiskey,” he said. “Are you mad at me or something?”

She sighed and ran a hand over her face. She looked exhausted all of a sudden.

“No,” she said. “I’m not mad at you.”

“I just came over to say hello,” he said. “I thought—I don’t know.”

“I’m being weird,” she said.

“A little!”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve just had a rough couple of weeks.”

Abruptly, he felt abashed. *Of course* she had had a rough couple of weeks. Her mother had died, and she had had to deal with the hassle of selling the house.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking. Of course you’re having a hard time right now.”

She looked up at him, a strange expression crossing her face. “Why do you say that?”

“I’m agreeing with you,” he said, bemused.

“Right.” Lauren shook her head. “Don’t pay any attention to me, Wes. Seriously. It was nice of you to come say hi, but... you don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t have to,” Wes said. “I was happy to see you. Is that hard to believe?”

“Don’t you have somewhere you need to be?” she asked.

“I’m going over to Jessica’s,” he said. “You want to come? I’m sure she’d be happy to see you.”

“No,” Lauren said, almost too quickly. “Thanks. No. I’m going home.”

“Home like...Palatine? That’s where your restaurant is, right?”

“You know that?”

“Sure I do. Jessica told me.”

“Not Palatine,” she said. “I’m staying with the den, in the city for a while.”

“Do you have a place here?”

“Yeah. My mother’s house never sold, so I’m just moving in there.”

Then she bit her lip, looking almost as if she regretted telling him that.

But it’s the absolute most likely place for her to go. Why would she regret telling me? Unless she just wants to be absolutely sure that I don’t pay her a visit...

Wes was starting to feel slightly offended by Lauren’s behavior. She had told him she’d *wanted* sex. She’d begged him for it. She had given him no indication that she’d been unhappy at any point in the proceedings.

And it wasn’t like he had come over here to ask for seconds. He was just saying *hello*, for God’s sake. What was so offensive to her about that?

“Well,” he said, “I’ll let you get back, then.”

Lauren turned on the spot and walked away from him so fast that she was almost running.

Jesus. That’s weird.

He stared after her for a few minutes, shaking his head, wondering what the hell her problem was.

Then he turned and headed down the sidewalk in the opposite direction, toward his sister’s house.

Maybe Jessica will be able to explain what’s up with her.

After all, Jessica and Lauren had been close friends all throughout their childhood. If Lauren was back in the city for an extended stay, Jessica would have been the first one she’d told. He had no doubt that his sister already knew that Lauren was here. She probably even knew what had compelled

Lauren to come back, Wes thought, realizing that he hadn't asked her.

Although, given how weird Lauren had been with him, there was every chance in the world that she had been equally weird with Jess.

At least that would prove that it isn't about me, and I could stop worrying that I did something to offend her.

He was probably overthinking it. He knew his social skills were kind of a mess. That was what happened when you spent most of your time living out in the woods, going months without speaking to another human being. Things were a *little* weird with everyone Wes encountered.

It's just that usually, I'm the one being weird.

But Lauren wouldn't have been accustomed to his wild ways. She would have been feeling awkward about the fact that they had slept together last time they'd seen one another. And, of course, she was still grieving for her mother.

There are plenty of explanations for the way she was acting. I didn't do anything to upset her.

So why didn't he feel reassured?

He turned onto Jessica's street, readjusting his grocery bag in his arms. Suddenly, he felt an urge to take out his bottle of whiskey and have a drink.

Maybe Jess will be up for a couple of shots. And she'll want to talk through all of this, of course. Jess loves talking.

He jogged up the steps to her front door and rang the bell, confident that his sister would have him feeling better about his strange encounter with Lauren in no time.



Chapter Six

W^{ES} “I brought you some of your favorite chips,” Wes said, setting his bag of groceries down on Jessica’s kitchen table. “And that white wine you like.”

Jessica rooted in the bag and pulled out the chips and wine. She tossed the chip bag on the table and went to get her corkscrew. “Perfect,” she said. “Can you stay and watch a movie?”

“I don’t know,” Wes hedged.

“Oh, come on,” Jessica said. “You can’t expect me to believe that you urgently need to get back to *the woods*, for God’s sake. You can stay for a while.”

“Isn’t Cody having one of those parties of his tonight?” Wes said. “I want to be gone before that starts up, or everyone will stop me and try to talk to me on my way out. I don’t need that shit.”

“That won’t be for hours,” Jessica said. “Come on. Stay and have some wine. I promise I’ll get you out of here before the party starts.”

“Fine,” Wes said. “Only because I want a drink.”

“I know, I know,” Jessica said. “It has nothing to do with wanting to spend time with me. Got it.”

“Aw, Jess, I never said that.”

“I’m teasing you.” She poured a glass of wine and handed it to him. “Come on. I’ll even let you pick the movie. But I get to drink from the bottle.”

“You have a problem.”

“Yeah. My problem is that my brother lives in the woods and I only see him three times a year—if I’m *lucky*.”

“You just saw me a couple of months ago.” He sat down on the couch.

“That doesn’t count. You were home for Lauren’s mother’s funeral.”

“It still counts,” he said. “Speaking of Lauren, you know she’s back in town?”

Jessica avoided his gaze. “Yeah, I know.”

“She’s moving into her mother’s house,” he prompted. “Seems like she’s sticking around for a while.”

“So...you saw her?”

“I just ran into her on my way over here.”

“Hmm.”

“She seemed kind of...I don’t know. Out of sorts, I guess. Did something happen? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” Jessica said. “Why wouldn’t she be?”

“I don’t know,” Wes said. “She seemed bothered about something. It was almost like she was mad at me.”

Jessica was definitely avoiding his gaze now. She picked up the TV remote and began flipping through the streaming service options. “What reason could she have to be mad at you?”

“Hey, turn the TV off,” Wes said.

“I thought we were going to watch a movie,” Jessica said. “You like this one, right? It’s the one with the race car driver.”

“Turn it off, Jess,” he said. “Seriously. I want to talk to you.”

She sighed and flipped the TV off. “What?”

“You know something. About Lauren. What is it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Please. You think I can’t tell when you’re being weird and evasive? I watched you pull this crap on Mom and Dad for years. There’s something you’re not telling me, and I want to know what it is.”

“What makes you think it’s any of your business?” she asked.

“If it wasn’t, you’d just say that and we’d move on. Come on, Jessica. I’m not falling for this. What’s going on with her?”

Jessica bit her lip. “I’m not getting involved in it,” she said.

“In what?”

“You and Lauren.”

“Me and Lauren *what*? There’s no me and Lauren.”

“If you’re going to play dumb with me, Wes, I don’t see why I should tell you anything at all.”

He closed his eyes. “She told you?”

“She mentioned it,” Jessica said dryly.

“And she’s...what? Mad at me about it?”

“I told you, I’m not getting involved in this. You can talk to her about it.”

“She didn’t want to talk to me. She practically ran away from me.”

“Okay, well, she has every right to do that,” Jessica said. “I’m not going to tell you what she says, Wes. She’s my best friend.”

“I’m your brother.”

“So I won’t tell her what you said either,” she said. “That seems fair.”

“How is that fair to anybody?”

“I don’t know. How is it fair to me that you two are putting me in the middle of whatever this is?” She shook her head.

“Talk to Lauren. Or don’t. Whatever. But leave me out of it.”

“All right, fine.” Wes held up his hands in surrender. “Put the movie on.”

Jessica did, and the two of them sat in silence, drinking the wine and watching.

It was a very familiar movie, so Wes didn't need to pay close attention. He found his mind wandering, again and again, back to Lauren.

So she had told Jessica that the two of them had slept together.

If he was honest with himself, he hadn't considered the possibility that his sister would find out. Lauren was her oldest friend, but she'd been living in Palatine. No one had seen or heard from her in the years leading up to her mother's funeral.

But if she's back to stay...it might be just a matter of time before the story gets out.

He wondered if that was something he cared about. Did it matter, really, if the rest of the den knew he had slept with Lauren? It mattered to the two of *them*, and it seemed to matter to Jessica. He guessed that was understandable. But nobody else was going to care, right?

I can't imagine why they would.

No, there was nothing to worry about. And it had been clear that Lauren hadn't wanted to talk to him.

So there was nothing Wes needed to do.

He would leave town as planned, as soon as this movie was over, and then he just wouldn't worry about whatever Lauren's problem was anymore.

In fact, I'll just stay away from the city for the next few months. That way, our paths won't cross. No reason to make things harder for either one of us.



Chapter Seven

L AUREN

The noise out on the street drew Lauren to her living room window. She looked out and saw that a party was happening below her.

This must be what Jessica was talking about. The den's nightly parties. She hadn't anticipated that they would be taking place on *her* street. She wondered if they were here every night, or if they moved around. It would be frustrating to have to put up with this noise and chaos every single night.

Still... maybe it was a good thing that she'd happened to look down on one of the den parties.

I really ought to go.

She was going to need to let everyone know that she was back. And, much as she dreaded it, she was going to need to let them know *why* she'd come back. The more she tried to cover up her pregnancy, the more it would be whispered about. Better to just face the friends she had left behind and get the news out there. That way, anyone who had questions would just ask her directly, and her version of events would be the one that was believed.

She dressed quickly in a casual sundress and a denim jacket. Then she hurried down the stairs and out onto the street below.

Someone had hooked a music player up to some speakers, and dance music was playing. Looking around, Lauren saw cars parked at either end of the street to block anyone from coming down. Members of the den were everywhere, dancing, drinking, and generally having a good time.

It made sense, she thought, that they had chosen this street for their party. There were a few streets in the city that were entirely shifter-owned, and this was one of them. No human would have any reason to come this way. The human police

tended to avoid it too, perhaps sensing that they were out of their depth here.

It was the perfect place to go a little wild.

Lauren wandered out into the street, looking for a familiar face. She couldn't help but be reminded, looking around, of just how long it had been since she had been back home. Everyone seemed younger than her, and she didn't recognize anyone.

Where are the people my age?

She spotted a couple of kegs lined up on the sidewalk and made her way over to them, thinking that this would be a good place to hang out and keep an eye out for anyone she knew.

And as she approached, she did see a familiar face at last.

“Lauren?” the blonde woman asked. “Is that really you?”

Lauren grinned. “Hi, Felicity. Nice to see you too.”

“I thought it would be another twenty years before I saw your face again,” Felicity gushed. “But you're back so soon! I can't believe it.”

Lauren nodded. It was a stroke of good luck that Felicity was the person she'd found first. Though the two of them had never been as close as Lauren and Jessica, they had been friends in childhood and in their teenage years. And Felicity had always been a bit of a gossip. She would be the perfect person to spread Lauren's story without twisting it or trying to make Lauren look bad in the process.

So she confided the truth in her friend. “Actually,” she said. “You'll never believe it, but I'm back because I'm pregnant.”

Felicity's jaw dropped. “You're *kidding*.”

“Nope,” Lauren said, laughing a little. “I know—at my age, it's pretty wild, right?”

“I mean—no offense! I just thought our generation was kind of done with the whole having kids thing!”

“So did I,” Lauren said. “It was unplanned. But I’m excited about it now that it’s happened.”

“I’ll bet!” Felicity said happily. “You’ll be an awesome mom, Lauren!”

“Thanks,” Lauren said, flattered.

“Who’s the father? Is it someone I know?”

“Nah,” Lauren said, doing her best to sound casual. “Just a human guy. He worked with me at the restaurant.” She had invented this detail earlier that afternoon, hoping that it would make her story seem a little more credible.

“Jeez, really?” Felicity said. “A *human*? I heard they’re terrible in bed. Is it true?”

Lauren laughed. That, at least, she could answer truthfully—she had plenty of experience to speak from. “Some are good and some are bad,” she said. “Just like with shifters.”

“And this mysterious father—is he your boyfriend? Will I get a chance to meet him?”

“No, nothing like that,” Lauren said. “He doesn’t even know I’m pregnant. He’s not going to be involved at all.”

“Yikes. Is that what you want?”

“I don’t see what choice I have. My babies will be shifters, after all. I don’t want to have to explain to a human man why his children are suddenly turning into bear cubs.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Felicity agreed. “I guess a human guy would be pretty messed up by that.”

It *did* make sense. It made so much sense that Lauren was almost starting to believe her own lie.

Which is probably a good thing. I’m going to have to keep repeating the same lie over and over for the next eighteen years. So I’d better start practicing it now. I need to get used to it. And it will be that much easier if it feels like the truth.

She looked at Felicity’s face, trying to read her. Her friend didn’t seem to suspect anything.

“Can I get you a beer?” Felicity said. Then she laughed and waved a hand. “No, of course I can’t! What am I thinking? You can’t have a drink if you’re pregnant!”

“It’s all right,” Lauren said. “It took me a little while to get used to it too. Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re pregnant?”

The voice came from behind them, and it sounded incredibly unhappy. In fact, it sounded borderline angry.

Lauren turned slowly.

She found herself face to face with someone she hadn’t thought about in a long time.

“Tina,” she said. “It’s...nice to see you again.”



Chapter Eight

LAUREN
“You’re pregnant?” Tina repeated, her eyes narrowing.

Lauren suppressed a sigh. It wasn’t really nice to see Tina again, not at all. She’d been unhappy when her childhood bully had married her cousin—though, of course, it was to be expected. Tina had always been a social climber. Of course she’d want to be linked to the man with the best chance of becoming alpha.

And now Cody *had* become alpha. Tina must be ecstatic.

She didn’t look ecstatic now, though. She looked angry.

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “I am.”

“And that’s what you’re doing back here?”

“That’s right,” Lauren said, wondering if Tina was going to try to make her feel as though she didn’t have a right to be among the den.

I do, she reminded herself. I might have been away for a long time, but this is my family just as much as it is Tina’s. I have as much right to be here as she does.

“Who’s the father?” Tina demanded.

“No one you know,” Lauren said. Answering these questions for Felicity was one thing, but she didn’t feel like explaining her life to Tina.

Unfortunately, Felicity spoke up. “It’s just some guy at the restaurant where she works,” she said. “Not a member of the den.”

Tina’s face twisted. “You mean, it’s a *human*?”

The way she said it, she might as well have been asking if Lauren had been eating dirt. She sounded utterly disgusted.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Lauren supposed she had known that some people would react this way. And it made sense that Tina

was one of them. She'd been one of the harshest critics of Lauren's decision to go and live in the human world when they had come of age. "He's human."

"You're a freak," Tina spat.

"What difference does it make to you?" Lauren asked. "It doesn't have anything to do with you."

"It does if you bring those half-human babies back to my city," Tina said. "Are you planning to give birth here?"

"I don't know that I need to explain my birthing plans to you, Tina."

"Uh-oh," Felicity murmured.

Apparently, Tina wasn't used to being talked back to. Her muscles tensed and her body sank into a crouch. She trembled all over, her eyes darkening.

She's going to shift. Right here in the middle of the street!

Lauren took several steps backward, but she ran into the kegs. Her mind raced. Should *she* shift? If a bear was about to spring at her, that would be the safest thing to do.

But right *here*? In the middle of the street?

The den had always been very careful about where they shifted. It was never done in the city, where humans might accidentally see. Even on a fully shifter-occupied street like this one, that wasn't acceptable.

Is she really going to do this?

"What's going on?" a voice asked.

Lauren turned and saw her cousin, Cody. He was shirtless, clad only in a pair of jeans. The sole concession he seemed to have made to his humanity was hair gel—he'd clearly used a lot of it, and his hair was sticking up in spikes.

The tension eased a bit. Tina, still glaring at Lauren, moved to stand by her husband's side.

"Lauren," Cody said. "I didn't realize you were back." He didn't seem angry about it, as Tina had, but he didn't sound

overjoyed either.

“She’s *pregnant*,” Tina informed him.

Cody’s eyebrows shot up. “You are?” he asked Lauren.

She nodded coolly. “And the father’s a human,” she said. Might as well get that piece of news out of the way before Tina had the chance to spill it. “I don’t think your wife is very happy about my life choices.”

“You can’t let her raise a half-human here, Cody,” Tina said. “A freak like that will never be a part of the den, and you know it. She should be exiled. Send her back to Palestine.”

“*Palatine*,” Lauren said irritably. “And my children will be shifters. You know the shifter gene is dominant. They’d be much more out of place in the human world than they will be here. That’s why I came back.”

“Get rid of her, Cody,” Tina said.

“I don’t know,” Cody mumbled. “She does have a point, right?”

“Are you serious?” Tina practically screeched. “You’re going to let her stay?”

“Felicity’s seen her,” Cody said. “I’m guessing other people know she’s back, too. And they know why. If we send her away now, everyone’s going to know why.”

“Nobody’s going to want half-human kids being raised among the den,” Tina hissed. “She doesn’t belong here, and you know that. You know what it could mean.”

What it could mean? Lauren frowned uneasily. She had no idea what Tina meant by that.

“You keep to yourself, that’s all,” Cody said to Lauren. “You can live in your mother’s house.”

“Thanks. That’s generous,” Lauren said sarcastically. She *owned* that house.

Cody didn’t seem to pick up on the sarcasm. “No involvement with any of the men in the den.”

“You have to make it an order,” Tina said. “It’s pretty obvious she’ll sleep with anybody.”

Cody nodded. When he spoke again, there was a new authority in his voice. “I forbid you from becoming romantically or physically involved with any of the den members in Chicago.”

Lauren felt the weight of the order wash over her and knew that she would be compelled to obey.

She resented it. She had always hated this part of belonging to the den. It was one of the reasons she’d left for the human world in the first place.

But at least in this instance he’s not ordering me against doing anything I actually wanted to do. She had no intention of getting herself into a relationship while she was here.

But I wonder why Cody and Tina don’t want me to?

“Fine,” she said. “I won’t get involved with anybody.”



Chapter Nine

LAUREN
Well, that was awful.

Lauren closed the door behind her and leaned against it, trying not to think about the glare on Tina's face and the dismissive look in Cody's eyes as he had turned away from her.

Why are they so unhappy to have me back?

Of course, Tina had never *liked* her. They'd been rivals as children, competing for attention from adults, and when they were older, for attention from the young men in their den.

But now Tina was married to the alpha, and Lauren was pregnant by a man who wasn't in her life. A man who, as far as everybody knew, was just a random human.

Tina should be *smug*, not angry. That was the reaction that Lauren had been expecting.

She went to the phone, bit her lip, and then dialed Jessica's number.

"Lauren?" Jessica picked up on the first ring. "Is everything all right?"

She sounded as if she knew that something had happened. Lauren was surprised. "I'm fine," she said. "Is everything all right with *you*?"

Jessica hesitated. "I heard you talked to Wes," she said.

"Ah," Lauren said.

"He came to my place right afterward."

"Oh, hell. I was totally weird when I saw him, too. Did he mention that?"

Jessica hesitated again, and Lauren had the distinct feeling that her friend was trying to figure out what to say. "I think he knows something's up," she said at last. "I thought he might

stop by your house after he left mine and try to talk to you again.”

“Well, he didn’t,” Lauren said. “I haven’t seen him all evening. Actually, I was outside. They’re having a party outside my house.”

“Oh, I know,” Jessica said. “Don’t think I can’t hear the noise.”

“Really?” Jessica lived two blocks away. “If you can hear it, that means there are humans who can.”

“Yeah,” Jessica said. “I don’t know how the police are never called on Cody’s parties. He’s probably bribing them.”

“How can he afford to do that?”

“He’s the alpha. He controls the den’s treasury.”

“You think he’s spending our money to bribe the cops not to shut down his parties?” Lauren asked, momentarily distracted.

“That’s what most people think,” Jessica said. “I mean, there’s no proof of it. But it makes a lot of sense, don’t you think?”

“I do,” Lauren murmured, wondering what her cousin was thinking. The den *needed* that money. It wasn’t supposed to be used for frivolous things.

Then she remembered why she’d called her friend in the first place. “Speaking of which, I saw Cody tonight. And Tina.”

“Oh, I bet *that* was fun,” Jessica said.

“Not exactly,” Lauren said wryly. “They weren’t happy to see me.”

“Tina’s a bitch,” Jessica said. “She’s always been a bitch. Don’t worry about her.”

“Cody forbade me from getting involved with any men in Chicago,” Lauren said. “Do you know why he might have done that? Have you ever heard of him giving an order like that before?”

“No, I haven’t,” Jessica said doubtfully. “Was it an actual order?”

“Oh yeah,” Lauren said. “It’s been twenty years since an alpha gave me a command. I couldn’t mistake that feeling.”

“Weird,” Jessica said. “I mean, not that Cody is being controlling. That’s normal for him. But I don’t know why he doesn’t want you to see any of the men in the den. Did he say anything about it?”

“No,” Lauren said. “The two of them were really just complaining about the fact that my babies’ father is a human. They have a real problem with that for some reason.”

“And you definitely don’t want to tell them who it really is?”

“Definitely not. I haven’t even told *him*. I’m certainly not going to tell *them*. I don’t need Tina to like me. I just wonder what her issue is.”

“Hmm,” Jessica said. “Well, they’ve both been pretty uptight about bloodlines, ever since Cody was called before the elders to justify his claim to the alpha role. Maybe they’re worried about you integrating yourself too much with the men of the den.”

“Why would they care about that?”

“I don’t know. If a guy gets caught up with you, it means his genetic path will be cut off. He won’t be able to mate with any of the other women of the den. And Tina thinks you’re... well—”

“A freak and a slut.”

“Jesus. Is that what she said?”

“Among other things.”

“Well, anyway, if that’s what she thinks you are, it means she won’t want the men of her den to waste their time with you. It wouldn’t be good for the strength of the den.”

“But I thought you said that she and Cody didn’t care that much about den strength anyway,” Lauren said. “You said they

were too busy with frivolous things to worry about what they should be worrying about.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Jessica said. “It *would* be out of character for them to make a decision based on what was best for the den. It would be much more like them to do something just because they were selfish.”

“What’s the selfish reason for wanting me not to get involved with a guy?”

“Just to hurt you, I guess,” Jessica said. “And to make you look weak. Maybe they want to see you struggle with pregnancy and parenthood by yourself. They don’t want you to have a partner.”

Lauren nodded. That sounded like the kind of bitchy thing Tina would do.

But the fact that Cody had gone along with what Tina had wanted, even when it had been something needlessly hurtful like that...

She’d never gotten along with her cousin. They had never been close, and she’d never thought highly of him.

But she hadn’t thought that he’d *hated* her.

Apparently, she had been wrong.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jessica said. “You don’t need a man. You have me. I’ll be by your side through this whole thing.”

“Thanks, Jess,” Lauren murmured. “I’m so lucky to have a friend like you.”



Chapter Ten

W^{ES} Wes had seriously considered not coming back into the city today at all. It was rare for him to visit two days in a row, and knowing that Lauren was here made it that much more difficult.

But he had promised to return his friend Barry's shovel quickly, and he didn't want to let Barry down. It wouldn't take long, he thought as he made his way through the streets. He would keep his head down, and he wouldn't have to worry about running into Lauren at all.

He knocked on Barry's door, hoping he would be able to make this quick.

The door opened. Barry's wife stood on the other side. "Hey, Wes," she said, sounding surprised. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Hey, Felicity." He held up the shovel. "I borrowed this from Barry a couple of months ago, and I just finished using it last night. Is he here?"

"No, he isn't," Felicity said. "But I can take it. Do you want to come in for a drink?"

"I should really be going..."

"One drink," Felicity said, smiling. "You and I haven't caught up in a while."

"All right," he conceded. "One drink."

He followed her into the house and sat down at the kitchen table. "Beer?" Felicity asked.

"Sounds good."

She grabbed a couple of cans and joined him. "How are things out in the wild?" she asked.

"About the same as always," he said. "The forest never really changes."

“Things were pretty wild here last night,” she said. “I’m guessing you weren’t at the block party? I didn’t see you.”

“No,” he said. “I really can’t stand those things, to be honest.”

She laughed. “That sounds like you.”

“So what happened?”

“You’ll never believe it. Lauren Wood is back in town.”

“Yeah, I knew that,” he said.

“You did?”

“I ran into her yesterday, actually.” He did his best not to feel frustrated. So he was going to have to think about Lauren after all—well, he could deal with it. Of course her homecoming would be big news. He should have anticipated that.

“Did you know she’s pregnant?” Felicity asked.

Wes felt as if he’d been punched in the stomach.

“She’s...she’s what?” he managed.

“Yeah, she told me,” Felicity said. “I don’t think it’s a secret. I hope not, anyway. I mean, everyone who was at the party knows. There was a whole big fight about it, actually.”

“A fight?” Wes repeated. His mind was still stuck on *Lauren is pregnant*. He couldn’t seem to process the information. It felt too momentous.

“Her baby’s father is a human man from the restaurant where she worked,” Felicity explained. “Cody and Tina weren’t happy about that—about her bringing mixed babies back to the den to raise. Tina wanted Cody to exile Lauren, but Cody ended up telling her that she could stay as long as she didn’t get involved with any of the men in the city.”

“Because she’s pregnant,” Wes repeated.

“Right,” Felicity said, looking at him with concern now. “You okay, Wes?”

“And the father is a human?”

“That’s what she said. But she doesn’t want him to know about the pregnancy, which makes sense because how would she explain the fact that the babies are going to be shifters without totally freaking him out?”

“I just saw her,” Wes said. He didn’t know how to believe what he was hearing. “She didn’t look pregnant when I saw her.”

“She’s not very far along,” Felicity said. “Two months, I think it was. So she wouldn’t be showing yet.”

Two months.

There it was.

That was how long it had been since Lauren’s mother’s funeral. That was how long it had been since Wes had been with her.

Two months.

And then they hadn’t seen each other—hadn’t spoken to each other—until now.

And now she was back.

And she was pregnant.

And she was acting weird when she ran into him in the street—as though she was angry with him, or uncomfortable around him.

It hadn’t made sense before. Now it did.

The father isn’t a human at all. I don’t know why she’s telling people that—but it’s not the truth.

“Felicity,” he said. “Are you sure about all this?”

“Sure I am,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“It just...seems unbelievable,” he said, knowing how weak that sounded.

Felicity laughed. “I know!” she agreed. “Pregnant at our age! And with a human’s babies! No wonder it’s causing so much drama. I don’t know what Tina’s so worked up about,

but honestly, knowing her, she would have found a reason to be upset with Lauren no matter what. She's always hated her."

Wes nodded, his mind already elsewhere.

Was it even *possible* that Lauren had been telling Felicity the truth? *Could* the father of her babies be someone other than him?

Of course it's possible. Just because he had slept with her, that didn't mean that nobody else had. Maybe she had a boyfriend back home. How would he know?

But his instincts had always been strong, and living in the wild, getting in touch with his animal side, had only strengthened them over the years.

He was right about this. He knew he was.

Why wouldn't she have told me? Why is she lying about it?

He chugged the last of his beer and stood up. "Thanks for hanging out, Felicity," he said. "It was fun."

"You're leaving already?" she asked.

"Yes, I need to get back home," he said. "But seriously, it was nice catching up. And thanks for sharing the gossip."

"Anytime," Felicity grinned.

Wes half wished he could tell her how much it meant to him. How much she had unwittingly revealed.

He wasn't planning on going home, of course. Not now. Not until he got some answers.

He was going to do what Jessica had suggested. He was going to go to Lauren directly and demand to know what was going on and why he was the last to know.



Chapter Eleven

W^{ES} By the time he'd made it to Lauren's, most of Wes's shock had faded. It had been replaced by anger.

How could she not have told me? We'd had history together? Sure we had a quick bang, but it still meant something to me.

He knew—or at least, some part of him knew—that he was just taking refuge in his anger. He was hiding from his true feelings about what was going on, which he had yet to process. It was easier, right now, to focus on the fact that he was mad at her.

The distance between Felicity's house and hers seemed to fly. Before he had worked out what he wanted to say, he was standing on her porch, knocking on her door.

And then she answered, and he felt his breath leave him.

She was just as hot as she had been the last time they'd seen one another. Her body called to him just as powerfully.

He'd known Lauren all her life, and he had never *wanted* her before. Not like this. He had convinced himself that his attraction to her a few months ago had been random, a one-time thing.

But now, seeing her again, he wasn't sure.

I'd take her again if I could have her.

And there was something else, too. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. A new fullness to her body, somehow.

She doesn't look pregnant. It's too soon for that. You're seeing what you want to see here.

Maybe. Maybe her waist wasn't a little thicker than he remembered. Maybe her face wasn't a little fuller. He would probably have to get his hands on her to be sure—

Don't get distracted.

“Lauren,” he said.

“Wes?” She looked confused, and a little uncomfortable.
“What are you doing here?”

“I think you know the answer to that,” he said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. “I thought you had left town. That’s what Jessica told me.”

“Well, I came back,” he said.

“And...can I help you with something?”

Was she really just going to play this like she was confused? Like she had no idea what he was talking about?

Well, that was fine. He would be the first one to say it if that was what she needed.

“You’re pregnant,” he said.

She sucked in a breath.

That reaction told him everything he needed to know.

He had been right. He *was* the father of her children. And she was trying to keep it from him.

Still, he needed to hear her say it. So he waited.

And she recovered herself. “What about it?” she asked.

“Seriously, Lauren? Come on.”

“Come on, what? I don’t know what you want from me here.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Damn it!” She was going to make him ask her directly.
“I’m the father, Lauren.”

She was shaking her head before he got the words out.
“You’re not.”

“Why are you lying?” He stepped over the threshold and into the house. Lauren stepped back quickly.

But she held her ground in what she was saying. “The father is a coworker of mine,” she said. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you, Wes.”

“Bullshit.”

Her eyebrows pulled together, and he could see that she was getting angry. “Do you think you know more about it than I do?” she demanded.

“I think you’re not telling me the truth, and I want to know why.”

“Get out of my house.”

He shook his head. “Not until you start being honest with me.”

“I don’t have to tell you *shit*, actually, Wes,” she said. “This doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Like hell,” he said. “You must think I’m an idiot.”

“I’m starting to, yeah.”

He hesitated.

Was it possible she was telling the truth? Maybe he had jumped to the wrong conclusion here. Maybe her pregnancy had nothing to do with him at all.

In which case, he wasn’t a wronged party, righteously demanding the information he was due.

He was just an angry guy barging into a pregnant woman’s house to harass her for no good reason.

Lauren put her hands on his chest and shoved at him. “Get out,” she said, emotion rising in her voice. “I don’t want you here. Go.”

He caught her wrists and moved them off of him.

She looked up at him, her eyes bright with anger.

And suddenly, as he looked into her eyes, he was overwhelmed by the urge to kiss her.

Her body was leaning into his. She was trembling with passion.

This was how it had felt right before he'd fucked her, right here in this very hallway.

But it wasn't the same. He took a breath and forced the tension to leave his body. She was angry now, not aroused. She didn't want him. The tears in her eyes weren't born of grief that he could help her forget. They were tears of rage at him.

"Get *out*," she said again, her voice barely above a whisper.

And Wes felt ashamed.

He shouldn't have done it this way. He shouldn't have barged into her house like this and acted as though he was owed an explanation.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I guess I had it wrong."

"Don't come back," she said. "I don't want to see you again."

That hurt more than Wes had imagined it would.

He turned and left the house. The door slammed shut behind him.

Now what am I going to do?

He didn't want to linger on her porch and risk upsetting her further, so he walked down to the sidewalk and set off, unsure of where he was going, his head a mess of questions.

Had she been telling the truth? Or was she lying?

Jessica would know. Jessica knows what's going on with her.

But would she tell him?

She wouldn't tell Lauren's secrets. Wes knew that. But she would at least be able to tell him if he was barking up the wrong tree with this.

He turned in the direction of his sister's house.



Chapter Twelve

W^{ES} “Jessica! Damn it! Let me in!”

He could hear her inside, moving toward the door, and he knew that he was causing her anxiety.

And he didn't care.

She had *known* what was going on with Lauren, and she had deliberately kept it from him.

Jessica opened the door, and Wes pushed past her. She trailed after him, into the kitchen, looking upset and alarmed. “What's going on, Wes?”

“Lauren's pregnant,” he said.

He heard Jessica's footsteps falter, so he turned to face her.

“You talked to her?” Jessica said.

“You told me to talk to her,” Wes pointed out.

“And what did she say?”

“She's been spreading some story around town about the father of her children being a human man.” He snorted.

Jessica stared at him, unfazed. “So?”

Of course. Since Lauren didn't want him to know the truth, she would have told Jessica to keep it a secret. If he was going to get his sister to confirm what he already believed in his heart, he was going to have to act as if he was certain of his facts.

“You don't need to lie for her anymore, Jess,” he said. “I know I'm the father.”

Jessica's whole body seemed to relax as if she was letting out a breath she had been holding for too long.

“She told you,” she said.

It wasn't a question, so Wes decided he wasn't obligated to answer. He went into the kitchen and kicked a chair out from beneath the table, collapsing into it as if he had been deboned.

Jessica followed him in. She leaned against the doorframe.

"You know I couldn't say anything," she said.

"No, I don't know that."

"She's my best friend. She asked me not to tell you."

"I'm your brother, Jessica. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Of course it does!" she said. "But it's her business, Wes."

"You don't think it's my business too? These are my children you're talking about. Try to see it from my perspective. If you had children out there somewhere, wouldn't you want to know about it?"

"That's not the same thing," Jessica protested.

"Why not? Because you're a woman and I'm a man?"

"No," she said hotly. "Because you've been running wild for twenty years, Wes. You don't want to start a family. You don't want to be a father."

He was quiet.

"Do you?" she challenged.

"I still have a right to *know*," he said. "And you should have told me."

"I should have broken my best friend's confidence for you?" Jessica shook her head despairingly. "You see the position you two have put me in? I didn't even know you'd slept together until she came back and told me, you know. Nobody felt like they needed to keep *me* informed about any of this. But I'm supposed to spill my guts?"

He sighed. She had a point. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're right. I know I put you in a bad spot. And if you want to yell at me for sleeping with Lauren, I get it."

“Sleep with who you want,” she said. “But it’s not fair to expect me to help you clean up the mess afterward.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Jessica went to the refrigerator and pulled out a couple of beers. She pushed one across the table toward him. Then she sat down and cracked the second one open.

They each took a long swig, saying nothing.

Then Jessica set her can down. “So,” she said. “Now you know the truth. What are you going to do about it?”

“Fuck if I know,” Wes admitted.

“You don’t want to be a father, do you?” Jessica asked.

“She’s not really giving me the choice,” Wes said. “She’s made it pretty clear she doesn’t want me around.”

“But what do *you* want?” Jessica pressed. “Say she left the choice in your hands. What would you choose?”

Wes thought about that.

She was right—he had never wanted to start a family of his own. He had never wanted to be a father. The idea of coming back from his little oasis out in the woods and moving into a house in the city, raising kids among the members of this den—it was entirely unappealing.

“I guess I don’t want to be a father,” he admitted.

“So then you don’t need to talk to her about it again,” Lauren said.

“But don’t I have...I don’t know. A responsibility or something?”

“If she wanted something from you, she would ask for it,” Jessica said. “It’s not like she doesn’t know how to get in touch with you. If she wanted you to be involved, she wouldn’t have told me not to tell you.”

“I guess that’s true,” Wes said.

“Trust me,” Jessica said. “The best thing you can do is stay out of her way.”

“So I can just never come into the city now because she lives here?”

“Sure you can,” Jessica said. “But maybe give it some time. Let her settle in. Let the story she’s telling about that human man being the father spread around a bit.”

Wes nodded, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He didn’t like that story. Even though he wasn’t interested in fatherhood, something about it made his blood boil.

They’re my babies.

He knew that wasn’t a fair thing to get hung up on. He didn’t plan on claiming them publicly as his own, and it only made sense for Lauren to spread a story about where they had come from.

But there was something deep and primal within him that resented the idea of the entire den thinking that another man had been responsible for Lauren’s pregnancy.

Set that aside. Do the right thing.

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll stay out of the city for a while. I won’t bother her.”

“If you need to come in for anything, come to my place,” she said. “I’ll get you what you need.”

He nodded and drained his beer.

It was the last cold beer he was likely to get for a while.



Chapter Thirteen

LAUREN

“So how *are* you?” Jessica asked.

Lauren sipped her tea. “I’m fine,” she said. “A little overwhelmed, being back with the den after so many years. But fine, for the most part.”

“Wes mentioned that altercation between you and Tina, you know,” Jessica said.

Lauren raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize you’d spoken to Wes again. I thought he had left town.”

“He’s left now,” Jessica said. “But he wanted to talk to me first.” She hesitated. “He’s a little overwhelmed too, you know.”

“What does he have to be overwhelmed about?” Lauren asked.

“Well, you know,” Jessica said. “Now that he knows he’s the father—”

Lauren spat out her tea. “Excuse me?”

“What?” Jessica asked.

“He *knows*?” Lauren’s head spun. How could she have lost control of the situation so quickly? “How the hell does he know?”

“You told him!” Jessica sounded confused.

“I most certainly did *not*.” Lauren couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “I told him that it was none of his business and to get out of my house!” That had only been a few hours ago. What on Earth had happened since then?

She could only think of one possibility.

“*You* told him,” she said to Jessica.

Jessica’s face was bright red. “But he already knew, Lauren! He came to my house and he said—”

She hesitated.

“He said what?” Lauren asked.

“He said that he’d spoken to you and that he knew he was the father,” Jessica said.

“But he didn’t say that I’d told him that,” Lauren surmised. “Because I *didn’t* tell him that.”

“Then why would he have said—”

“It was a trick,” Lauren said. “He played you, Jess. He acted like he already knew because he wanted to trick you into confirming it. And it worked.”

She felt sick. She had meant to take this secret to her grave. She had intended that he would *never* know the truth. And now, just a few days after her return to the city, he had found out.

This changed everything.

“I didn’t mean to,” Jessica whispered, burying her face in her hands. “Fuck. I’m so sorry, Lauren. I never meant to betray your trust.”

“You didn’t,” Lauren sighed. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have known he was up to something.”

Lauren shook her head. “You’ve been in a really bad spot because of all this,” she said. “I knew when I asked you to keep the secret from your brother that I was asking a lot. Maybe...maybe it’s better that it’s out in the open. At least you don’t have to deal with lying to him anymore.”

“But it’s not what you wanted,” Jessica protested.

“Yeah, well, I guess I should have thought of that before I slept with him, right?” Lauren smiled wryly.

She was putting on a brave face for her friend, but inside, she felt like going to pieces. This changed all her plans. What was she going to do now? What would she say to people?

“You still can’t let anybody else know,” she murmured. “I don’t want anyone else to know.”

“Are you sure?” Jessica asked. “Cody and Tina are giving you such a hard time because they think your babies’ father is human, right? Maybe they’d lay off if they knew the truth.”

“Maybe,” Lauren agreed. “But I don’t want them to know.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want everyone to know that I was involved with Wes,” Lauren admitted.

“Why not?” Jessica asked. “Are you embarrassed?”

“Of course I am,” Lauren said. She ran a hand through her hair. “No disrespect to Wes, of course. But everyone here knows him. Everyone knows that he doesn’t want to have kids or be part of a family. How are they going to look at me if they know I’m pregnant with *his* children?”

“I don’t know,” Jessica said. “It was weird even for me.”

“Exactly,” Lauren said. “At best, people will feel sorry for me, and at worst, they’ll think I’m a joke. As things are, they think I’m strange for having half-human babies, but it’s not like nobody’s ever done that before.”

“I’m sorry,” Jessica said again. “I really did mean to keep your secret, Lauren.”

“I know,” Lauren said. “I really don’t blame you. It was probably bound to get out eventually.”

“At least you know Wes will keep quiet,” Jessica said. “He isn’t going to want anyone to know that he’s involved in this.”

“You don’t think so?” Lauren asked.

“No way,” Jessica said. “Trust me. I bet you won’t see him again for months. You can forget that he knows anything about it.”

But Lauren couldn’t seem to put it from her mind. Even after Jessica had said her goodbyes and gone home, the thought stayed with her.

Wes knows.

It completely changed everything. How would she raise her children in the city knowing that their father—who *knew* that he was their father—was only a few miles away? What would she do when he came into town on one of his regular errands? Would she and her children have to walk right by him on the street, and would she and Wes both pretend that there was no awkwardness to that?

She was too restless to stay indoors. She had to go out and walk.

She made her way to the edge of town, thoughts racing through her mind about what it would look like to raise her children as part of the den now that Wes knew he was their father. She couldn't seem to slow the thoughts down. They were coming too fast, one on top of the other, so that she couldn't even process them.

And Lauren felt a sudden urge she hadn't felt in a long time.

She had been living in the human world for years. She had allowed this part of herself to fall away.

But tonight, she wanted to be a bear again.



Chapter Fourteen

L AUREN

How long had it been since she had experienced the world this way? How long had it been since she had been this in tune with the core of who—*what*—she was?

She had wondered if shifting would be a challenge, but it hadn't been. It had been easy, like riding a bike. It had been as natural as breathing.

She'd closed her eyes and reached deep within herself, remembering what it had felt like to be animal instead of human. How perfect and right it had felt when she'd shifted in her youth, allowing her instincts to take over, leaving the more rational part of her mind behind.

It was happening before she knew it.

She felt the familiar heat spreading from the core of her body, radiating outward into her limbs. She felt the sense of *growing*, expanding across her shoulder blades, around her torso, her arms and legs growing longer and thicker. Her back bowed forward automatically as it became more difficult to balance upright.

As her hands hit the dirt, she looked down and saw paws instead, and somehow that seemed exactly right. As if there had never been hands there at all.

The bear wasn't impressed at having found herself again. The bear didn't think about the fact that this could have been much more difficult. The bear was unconcerned about things like that.

She *definitely* wasn't thinking about Wes anymore.

Instead, she inhaled, getting the scent of the forest around her. It felt like coming home. She'd been living in the city for so long.

Too long.

Now she could smell the rich, mossy smell of the moist earth beneath her feet. She could smell the trees around her—they smelled of *life* in a way her human nose couldn't detect. She was aware of the movement of small animals in the brush around her, scurrying away, startled by the sudden appearance of a bear in their midst.

She was no threat to them. She had never been a hunter, even in her animal form. Her human side was far too dominant to allow her to do something like that.

But she had loved to run.

She wasn't particularly fast, of course. Much faster than she was as a human, but nowhere near the speed of some of the other animals who dwelt in these woods. Her body was too bulky for that. She wasn't built for speed.

But she was *strong*. Her human body would tire after a mile or two, but as a bear, she could run for hours without wanting to stop. And now her muscles were craving that exertion.

She pushed off, propelling herself into a slow run, enjoying the familiar sensations that had so long been absent from her life. The way the ground gave just a little bit beneath her weight, making the world seem softer than it did when she was human. The way she could hear animals scattering before her, fearing her, wanting nothing to do with her.

It was so easy to relax into these feelings of strength and power, and to forget altogether the things that had been troubling her before she had left home. A slight feeling of unease remained with her, but she ran harder, testing her muscles, pushing herself to the point of pain, and the thoughts were driven from her mind.

She was surprised to find that her bear body was acutely aware of being pregnant. As a human, it was possible to notice the changes that had occurred, the small amount of weight she had put on, but it was also possible to forget about what was happening inside her body much of the time.

As a bear, she didn't think she could possibly have forgotten.

How can I be so aware of the difference? I haven't been in this form in twenty years!

She didn't know. But she did know that she could feel something. A whole new set of instincts was awake within her. She had never been a fighter, but she knew now that she would tear the throat out of anyone or anything that posed a threat to her because that threat would also be a threat to her cubs.

Strange. But it made her feel more powerful even than her normal bear form did.

She liked it.

She wasn't sure how far she had run when at last, she came to a stop beside a stream. Without stopping to think about what she was doing, she waded in and submerged herself.

She came up human, water sluicing off her skin, tilting her head back so that her hair would be slicked out of her face.

Even in her youth, running around these woods as a bear, she had always been with other members of the den. Adults had taken her out with other shifters near her own age, or, when she was a bit older, she'd gone with groups of friends. She'd never run alone like this before.

The current of the stream was calm, and even in human form, Lauren was strong enough to swim against it. She paddled around for a while, enjoying the feel of the cool water against her skin and delaying the moment when she would have to turn and go back to town. She knew that once she did, she would have to start giving serious thought to the future. She would have to consider how she was going to raise her children with Wes, knowing the truth as he did, living so close by.

As long as she was out here, she could pretend that she didn't have that problem.

She floated on her back, letting the current push her downstream just a little. Finding her way back would be no problem—she would just follow her scent.

Then she heard a voice. “Hey.”

Badly startled, she jerked upright and looked around to see who had spoken.

Wes was standing at the edge of the stream, watching her.



Chapter Fifteen

L AUREN

“Are you *following* me?” Lauren demanded.

She ducked beneath the surface of the water up to her shoulders so that only her neck and head were visible, painfully aware as she did so that the water was fairly clear here. She wondered how well he could see her body. Part of her wanted to shift back to bear form and take a swipe at him.

“Of course I’m not following you,” Wes said, leaning idly against the trunk of a nearby tree. “What kind of person do you think I am?”

“I don’t know! You came to my house and I practically had to throw you out to get you to leave. And now you’re sneaking up on me in the middle of the woods. What am I supposed to think?”

“I’m not *sneaking up on you*,” Wes said, sounding exasperated. “It’s not my fault you didn’t hear me coming. I made plenty of noise.” He lifted a foot and pointed to the heavy boots he was wearing. “These aren’t quiet, you know.”

“What are you doing here in the first place?” she asked.

“I *live* here,” he reminded her. “You’re the one who’s supposed to be in the city. You *know* that I live in the woods. Maybe you’re following me.”

“Don’t be stupid.” She glared at him. “If I was following *you*, I wouldn’t be fucking naked in the middle of the water right now.”

He smirked. “I guess that’s true,” he said.

“Can you get out of here, please?”

“You’re twenty yards from my trailer. Where is it you want me to go?”

“I don’t know. How about *back to your trailer*?”

“I think you owe me a conversation,” he said.

“I don’t owe you shit, Wes.”

“Yeah, you do.” She could see the anger on his face now. “You’ve been lying to me. Those *are* my babies you’re carrying. Jessica told me the truth.”

“Yeah, I heard about how you tricked it out of her,” Lauren said acidly.

His face was unremorseful. “Neither of you was planning to tell me,” he pointed out. “If I didn’t find out the truth for myself, I would never have known.”

“I’m entitled to keep that kind of thing to myself if that’s what I want to do.” Almost unthinkingly, she brought her hand to rest on her stomach. She could feel the slight swelling between her hips, her body starting to change. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“And you really don’t think I have a right to know.”

“Maybe if we had a different kind of relationship,” Lauren said. “But we *don’t*, Wes. What happened between us was a one-time thing. You didn’t even stick around for a conversation afterward.”

“Did you want me to? You made it clear you were leaving back to Palentine right away!”

“That isn’t the point. The point is that we aren’t part of each other’s lives. I’m not going to tie myself to you just because you *happen* to be the one who knocked me up. And I don’t know why you’re being so weird about this, because you don’t want kids anyway. You should be thanking me for leaving you out of it.”

“Thanking you.”

“If you hadn’t insisted on prying, you wouldn’t be worrying about this at all.”

Wes sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “Can we have a civilized conversation about this?”

“You, civilized? I thought your whole thing was anti-civilization.”

“You don’t need to be like that,” he said. “I’m not asking for anything more than to talk with you.”

“Are you going to keep showing up at my house?”

“No,” he said. “I want *one* conversation.”

She hesitated. “I’m naked in here.”

“I’ll get you something to wear.”

“Fine.” Maybe giving in and speaking to him once would get him off her back. And it *would* make raising her children easier if they could come to some sort of agreement—if he would promise to stay away so that she didn’t always have to be on the lookout for him around town.

He turned and ran off, disappearing into the trees.

For a minute, Lauren considered taking advantage of his absence. She could shift and start running back toward the city.

But he was faster than she was. She was certain of that. He was more experienced with his bear form, and he was stronger too. Even with a head start, she wouldn’t be able to outrun him. He would catch up to her, and then they would be right back in this same predicament.

He returned after only a few minutes, carrying a t-shirt. He held it up, and Lauren could see that it would be big enough to fit her like a loose dress.

She nodded. “All right,” she said. “Hang it on that tree branch and turn around.”

“I’ve seen you naked, you know,” he said.

She waited, unwilling to bend.

He sighed theatrically and turned his back to her.

Lauren swam to the bank and came up out of the water. She went to the tree branch and pulled the shirt over her head. She was soaking wet, and it clung to the curves of her body in a way she didn’t love—this wasn’t much better than being naked.

Still, it was the best she was going to get. And he was right—he *had* seen her naked before.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s get this over with.”

He turned toward her, letting his eyes linger over her body for just a little bit too long. Lauren felt a strange combination of anger and heat, her body responding to the knowledge that he was drawn to her.

For a moment, she remembered how powerful that afternoon in her mother’s kitchen had been. How unable she had been to resist him, and how she hadn’t even wanted to.

I need to be careful not to let this go too far. The last thing I want is to start things up again.

He turned and led the way into the trees, and Lauren followed.



Chapter Sixteen

W^{ES} *Don't look at her. Don't.*

It was all but impossible. He felt as if he could *feel* the energy coming from her body, radiating toward him. Calling out to him.

Was she always this sexy?

He thought back. He remembered being taken aback by how drawn to her he'd been that day at her mother's house. But it wasn't *that* weird. She was a good-looking woman, and Wes had always had a weakness for that sort of thing.

But Lauren?

She'd always been pretty, of course. But when they were growing up together, he had never looked at her that way. Even when he had reached the age where girls had been at the forefront of his mind, he had never considered *her*.

Of course, he would never have consciously pursued Lauren, simply because of the fact that she was Jessica's best friend. There could be no cutting her out of his life. Even if she *hadn't* been carrying his children, she would always be connected to him through his sister.

But that shouldn't have mattered. She was going back to her job in the suburbs. We should never have had to see each other again.

She had accused him of following her. But in fact, wasn't *she* the one who had set the stage for this confrontation? She was the one who had moved back to the city, much closer to his territory than her own. She had to have known there was a chance of running into him here.

She was the one who had chosen to let Jessica—and the whole den—know that she was pregnant. Had she thought he would never hear about it? Had she thought he was incapable of doing the math?

And now she was the one in the forest, where she *knew* he lived. She must have realized he would be out here. If she really wanted to avoid him, why wouldn't she stick to the city?

They'd reached the trailer, and he reached out and tugged open the door.

"You don't keep that locked?" Lauren asked critically.

His temper flared. Who was she to criticize his life? "Don't get a lot of visitors out here," he said. "I'm more concerned about animals than people."

"Fair enough, I guess," she admitted.

He went inside, not bothering to hold the door for her, aware that he was being rude. To be honest, he was reveling in it a little bit. She might have been incredibly hot, but he was still angry at her for lying to him.

He strode to the fridge and pulled out a beer for himself. "Want one?" he asked Lauren, holding the bottle up.

Her eyes flashed. "Are you serious, Wes?"

"What?"

"I'm *pregnant*," she enunciated as if he might have somehow failed to understand the meaning of the word. "No, I don't want a fucking beer. What are you thinking?"

"Oh, right," he said. "Sorry."

"You forgot already." She folded her arms across her torso. "I don't know why I'm surprised, to be honest. I should never have worried about keeping this from you. It's no problem at all that you know. You're way too self-centered to even remember that this is happening from one day to the next."

"Okay, enough," Wes snapped. "Of course I didn't *forget*, Lauren, Jesus. I haven't had time to think through all the nuances of it yet, that's all. You've been walking around for at least two months, knowing that you're pregnant, knowing what it means for your life, thinking about what it's going to mean for your future. I've had a few *hours*. Lay the hell off."

"Sorry for inconveniencing you," she shot back.

“You inconvenienced me by not *being honest*,” he said. “What did you think was going to happen, exactly? Did you think I would try to force my way into your life if I knew the truth? Did you think I was going to steal your children away from you or something?”

She had the decency to look abashed. “Of course not,” she murmured. “I know you wouldn’t.”

“So then what? Why couldn’t you just tell me? Why couldn’t I be allowed to *know*?”

“Maybe that’s easier for me!” she cried. “Maybe I’d rather not give you the choice to be a part of this than watch you choose to run away!”

“And you’re so sure I would run away.”

“God, Wes. Of course you would. What in your life have you *not* run away from? You ran away right after we had sex.”

“I didn’t *run*; I *left*. You didn’t ask me to stay then, either.”

“You ran away from the den.”

“So did you! I come home a hell of a lot more often than you ever did, and you know that.”

“You ran away from Jessica,” Lauren said.

He fell silent. She had him on that one.

Lauren pressed on. “She’s your sister,” she said. “You’re the only family she has. “I know she was heartbroken when you left.”

“You’re her best friend,” Wes said. “You left her too. Don’t forget about that. You act like I’m the only one who ever puts what I want ahead of what other people might need. But we’ve *both* done that. We’ve both turned our back on den life and on the people we love.”

“Is this why you asked me to come in here?” Lauren demanded. “To call me out? To criticize my life choices?”

“No,” Wes said.

The conversation had gotten away from him. He had been angry, yes, but he hadn't intended to pick a fight.

But she was glaring at him from across the trailer, and his anger spiked.

She moved, and the shirt she was wearing shifted slightly. It clung to her breasts as her chest heaved with outrage.

Oh, hell.

He crossed the trailer in two short steps and pulled her into his arms.

He expected resistance. What he didn't anticipate was how quickly she submitted to his kiss. How quickly she leaned into his body, and how passionately she kissed him back.

What the fuck are we doing here?



Chapter Seventeen

W^{ES} Lauren panted, bowing her body against his so that they were as close as they could possibly be.

Wes's head was spinning. They had just been yelling at each other. How had they gotten from there to here?

He thought maybe he should stop things. Maybe he should talk to her, try to find out if she had thought this through.

But he knew the answer to that question, didn't he?

Of course she hasn't thought it through. How could she have? We didn't plan on this.

And he didn't want to stop.

He wasn't sure he even *could*. Not with Lauren pressed up against him like this. He could feel every inch of her body through the thin cotton of the t-shirt she was wearing.

There was no graceful way to remove the shirt—it stuck to her body—so they broke apart for a moment and worked together to peel it over her head. Even as they did so, her hand found its way to his cock, massaging, and he felt himself straining against his pants.

“You're killing me,” he moaned.

She tossed the wet shirt aside. It landed with a *slap* on the floor behind her. Then she climbed back into his arms. Sensing what she wanted, he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up, holding her so that she was sitting just above the bulge in his pants.

He could feel the heat of her right through the denim. He thought he was going to lose his mind.

Lauren caught his lips with hers again, and Wes gave himself over to the taste. After a moment, he noticed that she was grinding slowly, rolling her hips toward him and then away.

He broke the kiss and looked at her. Her eyes were closed and her face was shiny with sweat. She looked as though she had lost herself completely to impulse and instinct.

We'll do it in a bed this time. It was the most coherent thought his mind could put together.

He carried her to the little bed at the back of the trailer and sat down so that she was astride his lap. She groaned in relief at the better angle this gave her and began to rock her hips against him in earnest.

“Wait,” he said.

She shook her head, gripping his shoulders.

He rolled over, dumping her off of him, and she cried out in surprise and indignation.

Quickly, he unzipped his jeans and took them off. Then he was on top of her, between her legs, and now it was his turn to rub himself against her.

She was so hot. So wet. There was no mistaking her reaction.

Still, he had to be sure. He didn't want more unpleasantness between them later.

“You want me,” he said. It came out a growl.

She nodded quickly. “Yes.”

“Because I can stop.” It was difficult, but he forced himself to still, to put the slightest distance between them. “We don't have to do this.”

She moaned.

“I don't want you to have regrets.” He hesitated, and then he couldn't help being a little unkind. “I don't want you to wish you weren't involved with me.”

“Damn it, Wes.”

“What?”

“You know what you're doing to me.” She was actually reaching for his cock now. Her hand closed around him and

tried to pull him closer, to guide him into her, but he held himself back. “It hurts. I want you so bad it fucking hurts.”

He held out for a few moments longer, enjoying the fact that he was torturing her.

She deserves it.

Then, unable to resist anymore, he thrust his long shaft into her.

The noise she made in response was more animal than human. Her legs wound around his hips and her hands came up to grip him behind his neck, and Wes had the impression that even if he had tried to pull away, he probably wouldn't have been able to.

That was just as well. He had no desire at all to separate himself from her.

He bent down and tasted the skin at her neck, at her collarbone, at her breasts. She still tasted a bit like river water, but it was a taste he associated with pleasant, sunny days, and it just drove his enjoyment to new heights. He let his lower lip run over the underside of her nipple, and she whined and arched her back into his mouth.

Fuck. She is so insanely hot.

Then, suddenly, he remembered again that she was pregnant. She was carrying his children.

It should have taken him out of the moment. He would have expected it to. Half an hour ago, that fact had been a strange and disturbing distraction.

But now, with her body spread beneath him, it spurred his desire to new heights.

She was pregnant. He had made her pregnant. And he would get to watch her body swell and grow round as her babies grew—

The thought was enough to send him over the edge. He let out a satisfied roar as he came, his fingers digging into the flesh on her shoulders.

He rolled off of her and reached for the box of tissues he kept near the bed, meaning to offer it to her so that she could clean herself up if she wanted to.

But she was already on her feet, moving away from him.

“Hey,” he said, frowning. “What’s going on? You okay?”

“I’m fine.”

But she wasn’t looking at him.

She moved toward the discarded wet t-shirt, hesitated, and then apparently thought better of it and left it where it was.

“Hang on, Lauren.” Wes got to his feet. “Let’s talk.”

But her hand was on the doorknob. She opened the door, slipped outside, and slammed it closed behind her.

He stared in shock.

What’s up with her?

She had wanted this. He had been sure of that. He was still sure of that. And hadn’t she just finished upbraiding him for always running away from things?

Now *she* was running away.

“I was right about her,” he murmured. “She’s not any better than I am. She has no right to judge me.”



Chapter Eighteen

W^{ES} *I'm not going after her.*

That was the thought that ran through Wes's head on repeat as he ran. He had left the trailer moments after Lauren had, and he'd assumed his animal form. But he *wasn't* going to follow her.

Lauren had made it abundantly clear that she didn't want to be followed.

So now Wes was running in the opposite direction. Away from the city. Human life was too complicated right now.

As a bear, I won't have to deal with that.

He wouldn't have to face his sister and see the hurt and reproach she was no doubt feeling after the way he had used her to get information about her best friend.

And he wouldn't have to see Lauren. He wouldn't have to wonder, with every passing day, why she hadn't trusted him with the news of her pregnancy.

She would get her way. It would be as if he had never known about it at all. That would make her happy.

What about you? the human voice in the back of his head, which was never quite silent, asked. *Will it make you happy to be away like this?*

He hushed the voice, leaning into his bear instincts instead. He didn't want to think of that last moment with Lauren, of the primal satisfaction he had felt at the idea of her being pregnant with his children.

If he thought about that, he would have to admit the urge he'd felt to involve himself. He would have to admit how badly he had wanted to *see* her pregnancy progress.

It was an urge he didn't understand, and one that frightened him badly. It was so powerful. It felt stronger than

any compulsion he had ever faced before, as if he *needed* to be by her side.

The only sane thing to do was to get as far away as he could.

Fortunately, he was used to this life. He was as ready for this as anyone had ever been. It felt, suddenly, as if his entire existence had been leading up to this moment, conditioning him for the day he would need to go off on his own.

He dug his feet into the dirt and ran.

After the complexity of being with Lauren, being a bear was a relief. The things the bear wanted were simple. He wanted fresh air. He wanted food and water. He wanted to feel the slight pain in his muscles as his body worked hard, trying to run faster.

He had gone away before, lived wild for lengths of time. But this time would be different.

He didn't know when he would return to his little trailer.

Maybe he never would.

Maybe he would live as a bear forever. It would be so much simpler. So much more straightforward.

He didn't slow his run until he had crossed the big river that ran about twenty miles north of his trailer site. This river was much wider and more powerful than the little stream in which he'd found Lauren swimming, and even Wes didn't dare to try to face the current. Fortunately, a fallen tree spanned the breadth of the river, and he was able to make his way across.

Once on the far bank, he turned and looked back.

He would not be followed here. He knew that. It was extremely rare that anyone even came into the woods near his trailer. Jessica never visited him there—he always went to her—and the other members of the den tended to confine their runs to different parts of the woods.

But even if someone *was* looking for him, when they saw that the trailer was empty, they would give up. They wouldn't search further. Because Wes had built a reputation over the

years as someone who was unreliable, who was just as likely to be ranging around as a bear as he was to be at home. No one would be *surprised* that he was gone.

The only surprise would be when he didn't come back.

As he thought this, he felt a twinge of discomfort. *It serves me well that I'm so unreliable to them*, he thought. *It makes it easier for me to disappear without being followed. But isn't this really what Lauren was talking about when she said that I ran away from things? She didn't mean that I'd chosen a different life. She meant that nothing is ever powerful enough to make me stay in one place.*

And perhaps she'd been right.

After all, when she had learned she was pregnant, the knowledge had been enough to bring her back to the den, even after all her years away. It had drawn her home.

But even though Wes had felt that powerful urge to be near her during her pregnancy, he had run away.

He was exactly what she had accused him of. She'd been right.

Wes pushed the thought away and sniffed along the bank of the river, distracting himself with the smell of fish. His human nose wouldn't have been powerful enough to detect this, but as a bear, his senses were stronger. He breathed in deeply, savoring the briny scent, feeling his mouth start to water.

He submerged his head quickly, his jaws opening and then clamping down on something fat, juicy, and cold.

Wes pulled the fish from the river and held it with one paw as it flopped. When its movement had subsided a bit, he tore into it, enjoying the freshness of the meat, digging past the scaly exterior and spitting out the larger bones.

The fish was big enough to satisfy him for now, though he knew he would need to hunt again tonight. He moved away from the destroyed remains of the animal and found a large tree with thick hanging branches. Carefully, he nosed some leaves into a pile and settled his body on top of them.

He closed his eyes, not to sleep, but to enjoy the peace and calm of the forest in a way that only a bear really could.



Chapter Nineteen

Two Months Later

L AUREN

“Wow,” Felicity said. “You’re getting big.”

Lauren nodded, resting a hand on her stomach. She had religiously photographed her body in profile once a week, the way she had seen so many human acquaintances do over the past twenty years. It wasn’t something she’d ever known a shifter woman to do, but Lauren was glad she had. It was fun to line up all her pictures in chronological order and watch her body get bigger.

It had been a long time since she’d seen a shifter pregnancy up close. A human woman wouldn’t have been this big at four months. But then again, most human women carried only one baby at a time.

Lauren wondered, not for the first time, how many she was having.

It was for the sake of the babies that she’d continued to attend the regular block parties, getting out of the house to put in some face time at one at least once every week. She almost never enjoyed herself here.

For one thing, there was the reaction of Tina and Cody to concern herself with. They gave her dirty looks every time they saw her. Tina, especially, looked venomous with hate. Then they would turn and whisper to whoever was standing nearby, and Lauren would know that they were saying hurtful things, criticizing her, letting the rest of the den know that she didn’t belong here.

And I have to belong here.

If it had just been her, she wouldn’t have cared. She wouldn’t have put up this kind of fight. But this was for the sake of the babies. She couldn’t have them being born into a place where they were already despised.

She couldn't control what Tina and Cody thought of her, of course. But she needed as many people to like her—or tolerate her, at least—as was possible.

She was grateful for Felicity, whose feelings seemed so straightforward and cheerful. She was just glad to have Lauren around, to be able to pick up their friendship where they'd left off. She was aware of the tension between Lauren and some of the other members of the den, but she didn't seem to feel any need to involve herself in it on one side of the other.

But on the other side of the coin, there was Jessica.

Lauren glanced across the street to where her friend stood beside Tina. Their heads were bent together and they were talking. Every once in a while, one of them would glance in her direction.

Her stomach turned over.

It felt awful—wrong—to see Jessica siding with Tina like this. It was the biggest betrayal in the world. She'd never imagined anything could be so painful.

Of course, in a way, she understood.

After the day she had met up with Wes in the woods two months ago, he'd fallen off the map. Nobody had seen him in weeks. And though most of the members of the den had laughed it off, chalking it up to Wes being his usual mercurial self, Lauren had been fairly certain that she knew what was going on.

And, of course, Jessica would know too.

Her best friend had forgiven so much. She'd overlooked so much. She had sided with Lauren when Lauren had no right to expect any such thing, and she had pledged to help raise her nieces and nephews.

But now, Lauren's actions had driven Wes away.

Of course Jessica had finally had enough. She had lost her brother, thanks to Lauren's recklessness.

It was excruciating to watch her whispering with Tina. It was agony to know that they were talking about her, that they

both judged and disliked her, and that neither of them would tell her later what had been said.

She would just have to bear it.

She had driven her children's aunt, their only relative besides herself, away from them.

If only I'd been able to control myself around Wes!

"So listen," Felicity spoke again, interrupting her thoughts. "Do you need anything? Because I thought maybe we could do a baby shower. That's what human mothers do, right?"

"Did you see that on TV or something?" Lauren asked. "I've never known a shifter to have a baby shower."

"Well, shifter parents usually inherit everything they need from their own parents, or from older siblings, since shifter families are usually so big," Felicity pointed out. "But you won't be able to do that."

That was true. Lauren was unusual in that she was an only child, a rare single birth. Her father had died when she was young, and her mother had never found another mate.

Under different circumstances, she could have relied on her cousins to help her get the things she needed. But, of course, there was no chance of that happening now. Cody was alpha, and she was sure he would have told the others not to help her.

"No one would come to a baby shower for me," she told Felicity, smiling wryly.

"I'm sure some people would come," Felicity objected. "I would! And there are other people who don't necessarily agree with everything Tina's been saying."

"I don't want to put members of the den in a position to have to choose between me and the alpha," Lauren said. "I appreciate the offer, Felicity. But I don't think it's a good idea."

"Well, if that's how you feel," Felicity said.

Lauren felt a little bad about turning down her friend's generous offer. "I could use someone to go shopping with," she said. "If you're up for that."

Felicity's face lit up. "That sounds great," she said. "It's a date."

Lauren glanced over at Jessica again, just in time to catch her eyes before Jess pointedly looked away.

Felicity was nice. But she was no replacement for Lauren's *best* friend.

At least she hasn't told anyone who the real father of my babies is, she thought. No matter how angry Jessica might be, she was still protecting the secret.

And that meant there was still a chance that Lauren might be forgiven.



Chapter Twenty

L AUREN

There were aspects of Lauren's human life that she had managed to bring with her when she had come home to the den, and she clung to them like a lifeline. Some days, it felt as if her human rituals were the only things keeping her sane.

She couldn't doubt her decision to come back home. She wanted her children to understand the world that was their birthright. When they grew up, they could choose, as she had, whether or not to leave.

But even though she wanted her babies to have a place in the den, it wasn't *her* place. She yearned for the stability and normalcy of her human life.

She was pondering this as she left her house one morning and headed down the street to the neighborhood cafe. It was a human-owned establishment, and most of the shifters gave it a wide berth, but Lauren liked it. They had more variety there. They served things like mini-quiches and cake pops, and they offered little caramel drizzles on top of the cups of coffee they served. Sitting down with one made her feel human again.

And she had to admit that, as much as she missed her human life, there *were* certain advantages to being here. Living among the den, it wasn't necessary for her to work, because she didn't need to worry about paying rent. The allotment of cash she received from the den treasury each week wasn't large, but it was enough to pay for food. And not needing to hold down a job meant that she could spend hours at the cafe, relaxing and avoiding the mess that was the street she lived on.

The street really was a mess. It was littered with plastic cups from last night's party. An overturned keg lay half on and half off the sidewalk.

Isn't anyone going to clean this shit up?

It was a question she didn't really need to ask. After two months back among the den, she knew what the answer was. No, nobody was going to clean up.

Eventually, the cups would be dispersed. They would blow away and find their way into other parts of the city, and the shifters would stop thinking about them in time for the next party they wanted to have on this specific street. Since tonight's party was likely to be a few blocks away, they wouldn't have to worry about this mess until it had had time to dissipate.

As for the keg, someone would come and claim it when they were ready to take it back and have it exchanged for a new keg. That was the only thing that would motivate them to clean up after themselves—the promise of more alcohol.

What a disaster.

Not for the first time, she wondered how much money was being spent on these parties every night. It couldn't be cheap.

She reached the coffee shop and went inside, allowing the familiar aromas to wash over her. For a moment, she was able to forget her shifter worries. For a moment, she felt like just another woman out for her morning coffee.

She went to the counter and ordered a hot tea—she'd been doing her best to avoid highly caffeinated drinks, thanks to her pregnancy—and took it to a table by the window to drink. She was in a part of town that wasn't usually frequented by shifters, and it was a little bit calming to look out the window at the people walking by and know that they were regular humans, with regular human lives and regular human problems.

This is how I felt when I first left the den, all those years ago, she recalled. I was just glad to be away from everything.

Maybe she had made a mistake in coming back.

But could she really have raised shifter children in the human world? It would have been next to impossible. They could never have had a group of friends their own age—not while they were too young and emotional to control their

shifting. The risk would have been too great. And they would have been constantly aware of the fact that they were strange, that they didn't really fit into the world.

It was hard enough for me to be twenty years old and out on my own for the first time, knowing that I could never be honest with anyone about what I really was. How would it be for children to grow up that way?

No, she'd been right to bring them back here. It had been the only way.

She was so lost in thought that she almost didn't notice Tina standing across the street, staring into a shop window.

When Lauren realized what she was seeing, she pushed her chair quickly backward, hiding behind a tall plant that stood at the edge of the window. The last thing she wanted was for Tina to see her and decide to come over and give her a hard time. And she doubted Tina would be able to resist criticizing her for being in this human part of the city.

Then again...she's here too. What is she doing?

Lauren peered through the leaves of the plant, watching as Tina opened the door and disappeared into the shop.

It was a designer clothing store.

What the hell is she doing in there?

Shifters didn't wear designer clothes. Even Tina, who was uncommonly invested in her own appearance, only ever ran around in athletic shorts and t-shirts. Lauren's own nice clothes were one of the things that made her stand out most among the den.

She felt deeply frustrated. And suddenly, she wanted answers.

She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket, biting her lip. Would he be willing to see her? He hadn't spoken to her since she'd been back.

But he didn't attend Cody's block parties, either, and maybe that was a good sign.

She dialed the familiar number. A moment later, a voice answered. "Hello?"

"Matt?" Lauren said. "It's Lauren. I really need to see you."



Chapter Twenty-One

L AUREN

Matt was already at the table when Lauren arrived at the sandwich restaurant at the edge of town. She slid into the booth opposite him, wishing that she could feel surprised that he hadn't stood up to hug her hello.

The truth was, she was surprised that he'd bothered to show up at all.

A waiter dropped a couple of coasters on the table, a signal Lauren recognized from her own serving days as marking that he had come by to check on them. He took their drink orders and then retreated to the kitchen.

"I had a feeling you'd be calling me eventually," Matt said.

Lauren nodded. "I put it off as long as I could," she said. "I wanted to reach out as soon as I got back. But I didn't know how things would be between us."

"I'm not upset with you if that's what you mean," Matt said. "You know I wasn't wild about it when you left, but I never held a grudge or anything. You had to do what was right for you."

"Thanks, Matt." She was relieved. "I was worried this might be weird for you."

"Oh, it's completely weird for me," he said. "It's not like I enjoy going against Cody's orders."

"So he *has* ordered our family not to check in with me?"

"Ordered is the wrong word," Matt backtracked. "There was never an order. It's just been...made clear that we're not supposed to have anything to do with you."

"You're here anyway," she noted.

"Well, like I said, it's not an order."

"But I don't want to get you in trouble."

“Yeah, that’s why I wanted to meet here,” Matt said.
“We’re not likely to be seen.”

“I appreciate it,” Lauren said.

“Of course. You’re my cousin.”

“Yeah, but Cody’s your cousin too. I didn’t assume that your loyalty would be to me.”

“I don’t have any loyalty to Cody,” Matt said. “Not anymore.”

“That’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about,” Lauren said.

“Right. You mentioned that you’d seen Tina shopping in some high-end store.”

“That’s definitely what it looked like. But I’ve never seen her wearing clothes like that. Have you? You see her more than I do.”

“No way,” Matt said. “Tina wouldn’t dress human. She’d consider it disgraceful. She’s really proud of being mated to the alpha, you know.”

“Yeah, I’d gathered that,” Lauren said wryly. “She seems kind of obsessive about it.”

“It’s worse than that,” Matt said. “Did you hear about what happened to Emmett? Did anybody tell you?”

“No,” Lauren said, her eyes widening. Emmett was Cody’s younger brother. “I haven’t actually seen him since I’ve been back in the city.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” Matt said, his face darkening. “He isn’t here anymore.”

“What do you mean, he isn’t here? Where is he?”

“We don’t know,” Matt said. “None of us do. He just disappeared.”

“He just *disappeared*?”

“Well.” Matt’s lips pressed together in a grim line. “There was a little more to it than that.”

“Tell me.”

“Emmett challenged Cody.”

Lauren gasped. “He *did*?”

“You’ve seen the way Cody is running the den,” Matt said. “You’ve seen the kind of alpha he is. He’s running us into the ground. That’s another reason I know Tina definitely wasn’t buying designer clothes today. There’s no money in the treasury for anything like that.”

“How is the treasury? Have you seen it?”

Matt nodded. “It’s low,” he said. “Lower than it’s been in generations. Cody tells anyone who brings it up that it’s going to be fine, that we shouldn’t be worrying about it, but it’s hard to understand how he can just write it all off like that. We’re going to run out of money in less than a year if he keeps up the way he’s been going.”

Lauren exhaled slowly, trying to stay calm. *I can get a job, she reminded herself. I’ve worked for twenty years. I can support myself.*

But she had never had to work full time and be a single mother. She felt nauseous at the thought. If she didn’t have her weekly stipend from the den treasury, what was she going to do?

“So Emmett stood up to him,” Matt went on. “Even though he was Cody’s younger brother, he insisted he would be a more competent alpha. Some of us thought so too. They went out into the woods to fight for the position, and only Cody came back.”

“Oh my God,” Lauren whispered. “Do you think...?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Matt said. “Nobody does. It’s hard to believe that Cody could have killed his own brother. He’s callous and irresponsible, but would he really go that far? I don’t know.”

“But if not that, then what happened?” Lauren asked.

Matt leaned forward. “I’ll tell you my theory,” he said quietly.

“Please.”

“I don’t think it was Cody at all,” Matt said. “I think it was Tina.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tina’s always been the more *controlling* of the two of them,” Matt said. “Cody’s the muscle, of course, and as alpha, he has power that nobody else in the den has. But Tina’s the smart one, and she’s a master manipulator. I think she found some way to stop Emmett from coming home so that he wouldn’t be a threat to Cody.”

“Because she thought Emmett could defeat Cody if they fought?”

“Not exactly,” Matt said. “I think it’s because she didn’t want to risk Cody’s position as den alpha. She wants to be the alpha’s mate more than she wants anything else, and she’s not willing to tolerate anyone who might put that at risk.”

“That’s insane,” Lauren said. “You think she would actively hurt the den just to keep her status?”

“That’s exactly what I think,” Matt said. “Can you honestly tell me that doesn’t sound like the person she is?”

And there was nothing Lauren could say to that. Her cousin was right.

That was exactly who Tina was.



Chapter Twenty-Two

W^{ES} Today's lunch was rabbit. Wes gripped his quarry between his teeth, carrying it over to the shade of a tall oak to eat.

Eating raw became more and more natural as time went on, and after two months living wild, he found it very easy. It was a simple thing to let go of his human self entirely, to forget the mild revulsion he would have felt, as a man, at the blood dripping down his chin and soaking his fur. Things like that didn't matter to the bear. The bear only cared about taking nourishment from this meal.

He tore into the meat. Eating was very different when it was done in this form. As a human, he would have savored each bite. He would have stopped to appreciate things like flavor and consistency. As a bear, it was all about tearing and swallowing. He wanted the meat in his stomach much more than he wanted it in his mouth.

The rabbit disappeared quickly.

Only afterward, when his meal was gone, did he stop to think of his smaller human concerns.

He scraped away some dirt with his paw and buried the remnants of his meal carefully. It wouldn't completely remove the evidence of his kill, of course, but he wanted to make it as difficult as possible for other large predators in these woods to zero in on the fact that he was here. He could probably defend his claimed territory if he needed to, but he didn't want a fight.

That was his human side talking. The bear didn't really have that kind of complexity to his thoughts.

When the rabbit was buried, he made his way to the nearby stream and submerged his head, shaking it slowly back and forth. He allowed the current to clean the mess from his fur.

Again, that was a human concern. A true wild bear didn't think about things like *bathing*. A wild bear would allow his

fur to become matted with blood and dirt. But Wes couldn't give himself over *that* completely to his animal side. He didn't want to be smelling the dried blood of today's kill three days later.

The only problem with making these little concessions to his humanity was that it reminded him of the thing he had come here to forget.

Lauren.

As soon as he thought her name, an image of her swam to the forefront of his mind. He saw her the way she had looked when he had come upon her swimming in the woods near his home. Vulnerable, but happy. At least, until she had seen him.

He moved forward a bit in his memory. Now he was seeing her the way she had looked spread beneath him on his bed, her body writhing in pleasure, begging for his touch.

He dunked his head into the cold water of the stream again, trying to forget, trying to allow those thoughts to be carried away with the blood of the rabbit.

He didn't want to think about her. That was the whole point of being here.

He didn't want to think about the fact that her pregnancy must have progressed significantly since he had seen her last. The memories he had of her were wrong now, out of date. Her stomach would be swollen and curved.

What did it look like when a shifter woman was four months pregnant? He didn't know. He had seen the women of the den walking around with their pregnancies all his life, of course, but he had never paid attention to details like how far along they were. That hadn't seemed important.

Suddenly, though, he was obsessed.

When he started thinking about this, it actually became difficult to hold onto his animal form. It shouldn't have been. He had been in bear form for weeks now without shifting back. Even when he fell asleep, he woke up bear. The animal was his natural state.

But the bear didn't give a damn about what was going on with Lauren back in the city. And every time Wes thought about that, it allowed the human within him to rise to the surface.

He gritted his teeth and pushed the human away. He'd come here to escape all of that, for God's sake. He didn't want to spend his time thinking about Lauren. If he'd wanted to do *that*, he could have stayed near the city, stayed in his nice, comfortable trailer. He wouldn't be out here eating raw!

But she rose again to the surface of his mind, refusing to stay down. It was like trying to push a stick to the bottom of the stream. No matter how many times you pushed, no matter how much force you used, it kept bobbing to the surface.

He wasn't going to be able to forget her.

Maybe what I need is to get a look at her, he thought. *Maybe I just need to see her again*. It was a little counterintuitive, but maybe it would work, the way listening to a song sometimes helped to get that song out of your head. If he could see her, all the questions he had would be resolved. He would *know* how her body looked. He would know that she was healthy. Maybe he would even be able to see that she was happy.

And then he would be able to leave again. He would be able to leave for real.

He didn't want her to see him. That would create all kinds of unneeded drama.

But she didn't have to see him for him to see her. He knew the woods around the city like the back of his hand. He knew how to approach and how to find his way in without being noticed.

He would get a look at her. He would see what he had come to see. And then, finally, he would be able to move on from this obsession.

Satisfied that he knew the way forward, he set off at a run back toward the outskirts of Chicago.



Chapter Twenty-Three

W^{ES} Wes resumed his human form at his trailer. He grabbed a set of clothes and pulled them on.

He was still a few miles away from the city, of course—the forest didn't come right up to the Chicago city limits. But he would have to make his approach in human form rather than animal form.

It felt strange to be on two feet again. Even though he was uncommonly large as a bear, it felt weird to have his head so far from the ground for such a prolonged stretch of time. He felt ungainly, off balance.

The clothes were bizarre too. They caught in unfamiliar ways as he moved, and even though he knew it would be ridiculous to make his approach in the nude, a part of him wished he could do exactly that.

He left his feet bare. It was the only concession to his animal instincts that he dared to make.

If presenting himself as human had been awkward and uncomfortable, his first few minutes back in the city were that much worse.

There was so much noise! So many bright lights! He had always felt slightly overwhelmed in the city, given that he spent most of his life on the outskirts, but now that he had been living wild for two months, it was that much worse. It was almost painful to be back.

He made his way down the street, hugging the storefronts, trying not to get too close to the cars as they whizzed by. He was accustomed to feeling strong and powerful in his animal form, but a car could take him out so fast that he wouldn't even know what was coming.

He ached to shift back.

Of course, it was a terrible idea. He couldn't walk down the city streets as a bear. The humans would call animal control, and more to the point, Cody would take some kind of retaliatory action against him for exposing them all.

But he would feel so much *safer* in his animal form. How did everyone just walk around human all the time?

How did Lauren choose to go and live a human life when she had other options available to her?

He shook his head. He had *not* come back here to start obsessing over Lauren again. He was going to get a look at her, and then he was going to leave the city. That was all.

He turned onto the side street that would take him to Lauren's house. From here, he had to admit that he didn't really have a plan. It wasn't as if he could just walk up to her front door and knock.

He could look in her windows, maybe. But there was something really creepy about that. He wasn't sure why. He was already planning to spy on her, after all—was doing it through a window really so much worse?

He didn't know. But it felt worse.

Maybe he could catch her outside. If he lingered around, he might see her coming back to her house. Or maybe there would be a party tonight. He didn't want to have to go near one of *those*—if Cody saw him, there would probably be a whole scene, and then he wouldn't be able to keep his presence quiet. But on the other hand, maybe the hectic nature of the neighborhood parties was the best way to keep his presence quiet.

“Holy shit. *Wes?*”

Wes's stomach dropped. Had he really been seen already? He turned around to confront the person who had spoken his name.

It was Jessica.

His sister was standing with her hands on her hips, staring at him as though he had grown an extra head. Suddenly, he felt

as if he had shrunk a foot.

“Hey, Jess,” he said, offering a smile.

“What the fuck?” she asked. “I’ve been trying to find you.”

“I was out living wild—”

“Yeah,” she said acidly. “I fucking figured that out, thank you. We had an agreement, Wes. You promised you would always tell me before you disappeared like that. You promised you wouldn’t just go off the grid and leave me wondering what had happened to you. How could you do that?”

“Jessica, I didn’t mean—”

“You didn’t mean what?” She shook her head. “Do you know what it’s been like? You’re my family, Wes. You’re the only family I have. And you were just *gone*. You could have been dead for all I knew!”

“Of course I wasn’t dead.”

“You wouldn’t have been the first strong guy to disappear from this den,” she said quietly. “Remember what happened to Emmett?”

“Nobody knows what happened to Emmett.”

“Well, *exactly*.”

“But I’m not challenging Cody for the alpha position,” Wes pointed out. “I don’t *want* to be alpha. He has no reason to do anything to me.”

Jessica ran a hand through her hair.

“You don’t know what it was like,” she said quietly. “Being here for the past two months, with no idea what had happened to you. No idea if I was ever going to see you again.”

“Can we get off the street?” Wes asked. “I don’t want anyone to see me now.”

Jessica glared at him. “You were really going to sneak back into the city and then leave again without saying hello to

me, weren't you? Have you done that before now?"

"This is the first time I've been back," Wes said.

She gritted her teeth. "Come on. Back to my place."

"Not if it's just going to piss you off."

"It's not a fucking request, Wesley. I need to talk to you."

He raised his eyebrows.

But he didn't want an argument with his sister, so when she turned and stalked back up the street toward her own home, he followed behind her.

Maybe this would turn out to be the best way to get a look at Lauren. Maybe Jessica would be able to help him see the mother of his babies without her seeing him.



Chapter Twenty-Four

W^{ES} Jessica stormed through her front door and into the kitchen. Wesley followed behind her. There was no sense in trying to argue or negotiate with his sister when her temper was hot like this. His best bet was to simply wait until she had decided to speak to him.

She reached into a cupboard, pulled out a pan, and banged it down hard on the stove. Drizzling a little olive oil in, she turned on the heat.

His curiosity got the better of him. “What are you doing, Jess?”

“I’m making you a stir fry,” she snapped, sounding almost as if he should have been able to figure that out for himself.

“A stir fry?”

“I know you don’t eat any goddamn vegetables when you’re out there in the wild.” She went to her refrigerator, took out a bell pepper, slapped it down on a cutting board, and began to dice with a vengeance.

“Bears don’t need to eat vegetables,” Wes protested.

“Okay, and are you a bear right now?” Jessica demanded. “When was the last time you ate anything green?”

He didn’t answer. She was exactly right. It had been months. And now that he had returned to his human form, he *was* feeling the lack of nutrition. She was doing the right thing by feeding him.

They both remained quiet while she finished chopping and cooking. Wes thought about offering to help, but he knew her too well. She would tell him to shut up and sit down.

Finally, the food was prepared, and Jessica dumped the contents of the pan onto a couple of plates. She dropped one heavily in front of Wes and then sat down with her own.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

“Just eat it,” she said.

He sighed. “You don’t have to be like this, Jess.”

She slammed her fork down. “I don’t have to be like *what*, exactly?”

“Pissed off. I get why you’re mad, but—”

“You *promised* that you would always tell me before you disappeared like that, Wes. I mean, you promised.”

“I know that,” he said. “I get it.”

“So what happened? How could you just take off without telling me? Do you know what that was like for me? I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again.”

“Of course you were,” he said. “I always come back, don’t I?”

“For all I knew, this time was different. You always tell me before you leave, too, you know.”

Wes sighed. “You don’t understand.”

“Make me understand, then. What were you thinking?”

“Do you really want to hear this?”

“I need some kind of explanation.”

He sighed. “Fine. I ran into Lauren in the woods.”

Jessica groaned. “I knew it,” she said. “I knew it would have something to do with Lauren. What happened?”

Wes looked down at his feet.

“Oh, God,” Jessica said. “You didn’t. Tell me you didn’t.”

“I don’t actually have to account for myself to you, Jess,” Wes said, feeling a spark of anger. “It’s not actually your business who I do or don’t sleep with.”

“You’re making it my business,” Jessica said. “There are hundreds of women for you to choose from, Wes. You didn’t have to pick my best friend. And then, after you knocked her up, you decided to sleep with her again? And then you decided to run away from the problem.”

“Jessica—”

“Those kids aren’t just yours, you know,” Jessica said. “They’re also *my* nieces or nephews. This isn’t just your family. It’s my family too. So don’t act like you’re the only one who has a stake in this, all right? You can’t tell me that this isn’t my business. Not now, when it so clearly is.”

“Talk to your friend, then,” Wes said bitterly. “She’s the one who doesn’t want me involved in this. And by the way, she’s been sleeping with me too. It takes two people to do that.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Jessica demanded. “I’ve hardly spoken to her since you left. I’m furious with her.”

“Christ,” Wes said. “We really are in a jam.”

“You’re not,” Jessica said. “You don’t have to do anything. Just go back to your trailer and go on with your life. Stay away from Lauren.”

“Do you really think that’s fair?” Wes asked. “Her asking me to stay away from her?”

Jessica cocked her head at him. “I thought that was what you wanted.”

“It was,” he said.

“And now?”

“I don’t know,” he groaned. “I had to see her. You know? That’s why I came back. I just had to see how she was doing. How her pregnancy was going. Is she healthy?”

“She’s fine,” Jessica said. “I mean, like I said, I haven’t spoken to her. But I see her around.”

“How big is she?”

Jessica stood up and held an arm a little bit away from her own stomach to indicate.

Wes closed his eyes and tried to imagine what Lauren must look like right now. More than anything, he wanted to see her for himself.

“You have feelings for her,” Jessica said.

Her tone had changed. Whereas before, she had clearly been angry with him, now she seemed empathetic. Gentle.

“You really *care* about her,” she said. “I thought it was just physical.”

“I don’t know what it is,” Wes admitted.

“But she’s the reason you came back.

“Well, yeah.”

“I’ve never seen you like this before. I’ve never seen you have actual feelings for a woman.”

He nodded. “It’s new.”

“You need to tell her.”

“Jessica, you’ve heard her. She wants nothing to do with me. She didn’t even want me to know she was pregnant by me.”

“Because she thought she didn’t matter to you,” Jessica said. “This is going to change everything. You have to let her know.”

His sister seemed certain.

But Wes wasn’t.

What if he told Lauren the truth and she responded by shutting him down? What if she told him to leave her alone again?

He didn’t know if he would be able to stand that.



Chapter Twenty-Five

LAUREN

When the doorbell rang, Lauren was sure it was going to be Felicity. She didn't have any other real friends in the city. She knew that her cousin Matt was on her side, to an extent, but they'd been careful not to be seen together. Matt didn't want Cody to see him fraternizing with Lauren, and Lauren respected his desire to keep his distance. It was better for them both if Cody didn't realize that Matt thought badly of him.

When she opened the door, she was stunned to see Tina on the other side.

For a moment, she was genuinely afraid. Was it possible that Tina had figured out she'd been lying about her babies' father? Was she here to exact some kind of vengeance?

Tina held out a pan. "For you," she said sweetly.

Lauren blinked and accepted it.

"It's banana bread," Tina explained. "I baked it."

I wonder if it's poisoned.

"Thank you," Lauren managed.

Tina looked expectant. It took Lauren a moment to figure out what she must be after.

"Would you like to come in?" she asked.

"Oh, thanks," Tina said, stepping forward. "That would be great. I really feel like you and I haven't had a chance to catch up since you came back to town. Don't you agree?"

What the hell? "I guess not," Lauren said cautiously. "I have some lemonade if you'd like some."

"That sounds *amazing*," Tina said.

Lauren led the way to the kitchen and indicated a chair. Tina sat down and waited as Lauren poured two glasses of lemonade and took a seat opposite her.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot when you came back to town,” Tina said.

“Maybe we did,” Lauren said.

“I hope you’ll accept my apology,” Tina said.

Lauren wasn’t sure what to say. To avoid answering, she took the banana bread to the counter, cut a few slices, and arranged them on a plate. She brought it back to the table and placed it between herself and Tina before taking her seat again.

Tina picked up a piece of bread and turned it slowly in her hands. “I shouldn’t have tried to have you exiled,” she said. “That was a mistake.”

“You think so?” Lauren asked. She did her best not to sound bitter or sarcastic. There was always a chance that Tina was genuine in her desire to make up with Lauren, and if that was the case, Lauren didn’t want to antagonize her.

“Cody made me see that it wasn’t the best idea,” Tina said. “And I hope you can forgive me.”

“You’ve been angry with me for months,” Lauren pointed out. “What’s changed all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know,” Tina said. “Maybe it’s the fact that you’re getting so big.” She hesitated. “You’re sure your babies’ father is human?”

Lauren felt a chill. “What do you mean?” she asked. “I think I would have known if he wasn’t.”

“Maybe he was hiding his true nature from you,” Tina said. “*Could* he have been a shifter?”

“Why are you asking this?”

“Well, you’re just getting so big so fast,” Tina said. “That’s a trait of shifter pregnancies, not human ones.”

“Have you ever even seen a human pregnancy?” Lauren countered.

“I’ve seen them on TV, just like you,” Tina said. “I know how human women look at four months, and they don’t look

like that.” She gestured to Lauren’s body.

“I’m not a human woman, though,” Lauren pointed out. “I might have been with a human guy, but I’m still a shifter. My babies are still shifters. That’s why my pregnancy is progressing the way it is.”

“You’re absolutely sure?” Tina leaned across the table, her eyes bright.

She’s fishing for something. This is the real reason she came over.

Lauren couldn’t help thinking about all the time Jessica had spent hanging out with Tina recently. She truly didn’t believe her friend would have sold her out. But what if she had accidentally let something slip, something that had allowed Tina to guess that there was more to Lauren’s story than she was telling?

She’s angry at me. She’s not doing a great job of keeping that covered up. Maybe Tina’s starting to figure out what’s really going on.

She wasn’t sure why, exactly, she was so determined not to let Tina or anyone else know who the true father of her children was. Concealing the truth from Wes himself was one thing, but that ship had long since sailed. What was the point in keeping the truth hidden from anyone else?

She wasn’t sure. But she had a definite feeling that it wouldn’t be good if Tina found out the truth.

If she wanted to know for some harmless reason, she would just ask me outright. She wouldn’t fish around like this.

Lauren smiled. “Sure, I’m sure,” she said. “Like I told you, he’s just a guy I worked with at the restaurant in Palatine. I’ve known him for years. One night, we hooked up. That’s all there is to it.”

“It’s strange that you were able to get pregnant at all at your age,” Tina mused. “You’re, what, forty-five?”

“I’m forty-one, Tina,” Lauren said. “I’m the same age as you are. You know that.”

“Pretty late in life for a pregnancy,” Tina said.

“Well, it was a wonderful surprise,” Lauren said.

“But it’s that much harder for one of us to get pregnant by a human, isn’t it?” Tina said.

“No, I don’t think so,” Lauren said. “Shifter women are more fertile than human women, but I don’t think it actually matters who the man in question is.”

“I think you’re wrong about that,” Tina said. “Shifter men and women together are the most fertile pairing.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you,” Lauren said. “It worked with a human man in my case.”

Tina regarded her silently for several moments.

Then she picked up her glass of lemonade and drained it in a single swallow.

“You enjoy that banana bread,” she said. She got to her feet and walked out.



Chapter Twenty-Six

L AUREN

Lauren slammed her living room window shut, but the sounds of the evening's block party came through nonetheless.

She was not going out there, not on any account. She'd had more than enough of Tina for the day. She had no idea whether Tina would try to talk to her again or ignore her in favor of Jessica, but she wasn't interested in finding out.

Wes wouldn't be in the area. It was a good night to go for a walk in the woods.

As before, it felt wonderful to resume her bear form. It was like flexing a muscle that hadn't been used in years, and she was surprised and gratified to find that it hadn't atrophied at all. As a bear, she felt nothing but powerful. She left the lights and sounds of the city behind her, surrounding herself with nature. It was only when she was able to look back and see nothing but forest around her that she felt peaceful at last.

I hate to admit it, she thought, but I can sort of see why Wes would want to come and live in the wild like this.

She'd never thought that she would be able to understand his desire to live in the woods. But the two months she'd spent with the den had reminded her of everything she had been running from when she'd left.

The only difference between us is that I went the other direction. I went to the suburbs, where I could be fully human, and Wes left his humanity behind him altogether.

She'd never been able to relate to that. But as she roamed around out here now, she felt as though she could really relate to his desire to be among the trees.

And maybe that was what had driven him to leave for good. Maybe that was why he hadn't been seen in the city in weeks. The den had simply become too much for him.

*Jessica blames me, but maybe it isn't my fault at all.
Maybe he just needed a little peace.*

Then again, maybe that was just wishful thinking.

She decided to make her way to the stream she'd been swimming in the last time she'd gone into the woods. She wouldn't have to worry about Wes sneaking up on her this time. No one had seen him in this area in a long time. She would have the woods to herself.

She was just thinking this—how good it would be to be alone out here—when she heard voices.

“We have to make our move soon,” a voice was saying. “The longer we wait, the lower it gets.”

“We've already been waiting years,” another voice countered. “What difference could a few more weeks make?”

“Every day makes a difference now,” the first voice said. “Those parties are escalating. And if anyone tries to stop Cody from within, they'll just be kicked out like I was. You all know that. We can't afford to wait around.”

“Having more people thrown out might be a good thing,” someone said. “We could scoop them up. Use them. And they'll be able to tell us just how bad things are. How low the treasury really is. You told us when you arrived, Emmett. That's part of what convinced us that the time was right to attack in the first place.”

Emmett? Lauren was stunned. She moved closer, listening harder.

“We still haven't made a move, though,” the first voice spoke again. “You say you're ready. But how can I believe that you are? I want us to move on this. I'm ready to start the fight.”

It was Emmett, all right. Lauren recognized her cousin's voice, even though she hadn't heard from him in decades.

It was startling. She hadn't expected to see him anywhere near the den. Matt had told her that he'd been run off, possibly

even killed. She had assumed that even if he *was* alive, he would be miles away.

But he was here. And to judge by the conversation, he was planning to take Cody on for control of the den.

My God. How many people does he have with him? It sounds like he's planning a war.

She sat back slowly, lowering herself onto her belly, settling her head between her paws.

It wasn't typical for her to feel this kind of anxiety while in her animal form. It was much easier for the bear to turn off nervousness and focus on the moment, on what was going on in the here and now.

But she couldn't help visualizing what was going on just a few yards away from her.

She didn't like her den. She didn't trust or respect Cody and Tina. But that was her home. And now it sounded as though they had enemies. Possibly mortal enemies.

What was Emmett trying to provoke them to do? Would they go along with his ideas? How many people did he have with him? How long had they been planning this?

And when would the attack come?

Was it safe for her to go back? Would it be safe for her children?

Emmett would never hurt my babies...would he?

She had been away so long that she had to admit she no longer had any idea what he might do.

The only thing she knew for sure was that he seemed dedicated to the idea of overthrowing Cody. And while that was something she agreed with in theory, the actual act of doing it seemed too dangerous to consider.

She didn't want to stand here and listen anymore. She didn't want to hear anything else they might have to say.

Slowly, she slunk backward, putting as much distance as she dared between herself and her cousin. She stepped

carefully. If she so much as snapped a twig, he might be alerted to her presence.

Finally, when their voices had faded to a distant hum, she turned and ran as fast as she could.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

L AUREN

For what felt like a very long time, Lauren ran without knowing where she was going.

Her animal body had not been built for speed or stealth, and her confusion added to that fact. She felt like she was lumbering rather than fleeing. She felt sure that at any moment, the men who had been behind her would close on her and take her down.

No, not Emmett. He'd never do anything to hurt me.

Emmett had been one of her favorite cousins when they were young. He was a few years older than her, but he had never left her out of whatever the others were doing. He had picked her first for games of kickball in the street, even when she'd been too young to be a good player, just to show that he wanted her around.

She had looked up to him in those days. She'd admired him.

She had never imagined that things might end up like this.

Could he really be planning to go to war against the den? And what would that entail?

It would be normal for a man who wasn't content with an alpha's leadership to challenge him to a fight for dominance. That was the way these things were supposed to go. There would be a public battle, and the winner would be alpha. The loser would be exiled.

But in Emmett's case, there had been no public battle. That was what Matt had told her. Something else had happened instead. Something terrible.

She was glad her cousin wasn't dead. But now, she found herself wondering if she knew him as well as she thought she did. After all, it had been decades since she had seen him.

Maybe he had left the den deliberately. Maybe that was the reason there had never been a fight. But instead of fleeing to the suburbs, the way she had, maybe he had set up his own little den in the wild and prepared for the day he would come back to the city and take over.

I don't understand, though. If they've been out here all this time, how come Wes never knew about it? He should have seen them, right? He should have known they were here.

Maybe he hadn't been close by. Maybe he'd gone deep into the woods and had only come back recently.

She had to tell someone what she had seen. She had to let someone know that the den was in danger.

But who?

Not Cody, obviously. If there was going to be a war, she didn't think she was even on his side. She wanted to keep the people she loved safe, but she had no interest in protecting his dominance.

Jessica? Jessica wasn't even talking to her. If anything would get her to break her embargo, it would be something like this. But would Jessica even let Lauren through her front door to report on what she had seen?

It was questionable.

Nor did she want to bother Matt. He was too close to Cody. She knew he would take Emmett's side if it came down to it. But Matt might be ordered to make some kind of report to Cody that would lead to Emmett's whereabouts being outed. If it was an order to give information, he wouldn't be able to resist.

There was always Felicity. But the problem was that Felicity was a gossip. She would hear what Lauren had to say, and she would gasp in all the right places. Then she would run off and repeat it to ten other people. Nothing would be solved, and the news would inevitably make its way back to Tina or Cody.

So she couldn't tell Felicity.

But who else was there?

She slowed her pace, walking now, trying her best to move quietly through the brush. If Emmett and the men with him could have been hiding out here, who could say what else might be in these woods?

Looking around, she drew to a standstill.

She didn't know where she was.

That wasn't a tremendous surprise, of course, since it had been so long since she had spent time in these woods. Everything was unfamiliar now. The woods were a living thing, and these trees were different from the ones she remembered. They were twenty years older. Some had fallen down, and some had grown much taller. The familiar landmarks of childhood were gone.

Still, it was anxiety-inducing to be out here with no idea of where she was or how to get home.

She knew she could follow her own scent back the way she had come. But tracking her own scent was always more complicated than tracking someone else's because she carried it with her. It was all around her all the time.

She closed her eyes and breathed in, testing the air.

There *was* a familiar aroma on the breeze. And it wasn't her own scent. It was something else.

Wes.

It couldn't be *him*, of course. He'd been gone for a long time. But maybe...

She turned and followed the scent.

Sure enough, less than ten minutes later, she found herself standing in front of Wes's trailer. She settled to the ground, staring at it, remembering the last time she had been here.

And suddenly, she knew that despite everything else that had gone on between the two of them, Wes was someone she could have confided in today. She could have told him about Emmett, about what she had heard.

Because he was the one person who was in the same situation she was in—detached enough from the den that he wouldn't run to Cody, but still invested enough that there were people in the city he would want to protect.

He could have helped her decide what to do.

It's too bad he's gone.

But just as she was thinking it, the door to the trailer opened, and Wes stepped out.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

W^{ES} Wes froze in his tracks. There was a massive bear fifteen feet from his front door.

It could only be a shifter. It was too *big* to be a normal bear, and the way it was staring at him was incredibly human.

“Show yourself,” he demanded, taking a step forward, preparing to shift himself if the situation called for it. He didn’t want a fight, but he’d fight if he had to.

The bear stepped backward.

Then it seemed to collapse in on itself, shifting, resuming human form, until finally, she rose to her feet before him.

“Lauren.”

She was shaking, stark naked. He stared at her for a minute, taking in her body. She looked just the way he’d imagined—her stomach beginning to swell, her breasts slightly larger than he remembered.

And I did that.

He realized he was staring and pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to her. She struggled into it.

“It’s okay if you want to come to my place wearing clothes sometimes, you know,” Wes said.

Lauren didn’t laugh. “I thought you took off.”

“I did.”

“You came back?”

“I don’t know. Maybe temporarily.”

“Right.” Her hands came to rest on her stomach. She seemed to do that without thinking about it, and he wondered if it had become habit for her. Seeing her holding her children like that made him want to stay and watch her even more.

Pregnancy is really kind of beautiful on her.

“Do you want to come inside?” he asked.

She hesitated. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Just to talk,” he said. She must have come out here for a reason, after all.

She nodded slowly.

He led the way in and gestured to a seat, turning to the fridge to grab a couple of soft drinks. He handed her one.

She took it and raised an eyebrow. “Not a beer this time?”

“You’re pregnant.”

“I know I am.”

“Well, so you can’t very well drink beer.”

“I’m just impressed you remembered, that’s all.”

He grinned. “What brings you out here, Lauren?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“I live here.”

“You haven’t been here in weeks. In months. And you know that.”

“Have you been looking for me?”

“Knock it off.”

He laughed and took a sip of his soda. “Seriously, what’s up?”

“Did you know my cousin Emmett is living in these woods?”

Wes stared. “No, he isn’t.”

“I’m telling you, I just saw him. He’s keeping a whole den of his own out here.”

“Lauren, he can’t be. If there were other bears in this area, I would have noticed.”

“Maybe something’s wrong with your senses, then.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my senses. You’re the one who’s spent twenty years walking around human. Maybe you don’t know what you’re smelling.”

“No,” Lauren insisted. “I didn’t smell them, Wes. I *heard* them. They were talking.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Why would I kid about it? There’s nothing funny about this.” She shook her head. “If you had been there—if you’d heard the things they were saying—”

“What do you mean? What were they saying?”

“They were talking about attacking the den.” Lauren shuddered again. “I think Emmett wants to overthrow Cody.”

“It’s about time someone took that fucker out,” Wes said.

“Wes!”

“What?”

“You’re talking about the den where Jessica lives! Where I live! Where *our children* are going to be born!”

It was the first time she’d really acknowledged that they were his children as well as hers. Wes felt a pang of something like longing.

And then Lauren burst into tears.

“Whoa.” Wes dropped into the seat beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Hey, it’s okay. What’s wrong?”

“It’s just been so much,” she sobbed. “I came back here thinking it would be a safe place to raise my babies, Wes. I thought that they’d be able to be part of the den, that they’d grow up surrounded by family, like we did. We had happy childhoods, didn’t we?”

“For the most part,” he said, rubbing her back. “But it was a different time. We were under a different alpha then.”

She nodded. “It’s been so awful since I got back. Cody is terrible. Maybe Emmett is right to try to take him out! But

how can I even think such a thing? How can I be hoping for war in my own community? Oh my God, if anything happens to these babies—”

“Hey, slow down,” Wes said. “You’re breathing too fast, Lauren. I think you’re panicking.”

She gasped for air.

“Look at me,” he said. “Breathe with me.”

Her eyes met his, and he saw her trying to bring her breathing under control.

“You’re good,” he whispered. “You’ve got this. You’re fine.”

“The babies—”

“No, honey. Nothing’s going to happen to the babies. I promise.”

She looked up at him, and he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

He’d called her *honey*. He’d said it out loud. And she had noticed. She knew, now, the way he felt about her.

He removed his arm from around her shoulders in case she wanted to run, the way she had last time. The way he had the time before.

But she didn’t run.

She reached out and took his hand instead.

“You’ll keep us safe,” she said quietly. “I know you’ll keep us safe.”

He nodded. “I will. I care what happens to them too, you know. I’m not going to let them get hurt.”

Lauren closed her eyes and shuddered.

He scooped her up in his arms, gratified to find that he could still lift her easily, despite her growing pregnancy. She curled into him and allowed him to carry her over to the bed.

He laid her down gently. “You need to rest,” he murmured. “Take a moment.”

She clung to his hand. “Stay with me?”

Wes hesitated for only a moment before lying down beside her and taking her in his arms.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

W^{ES} Her body felt entirely different this time. That was the first thing he noticed.

It had been one thing to look at her, to see the growth and change in her. But now, feeling her pressed up against him, it was almost more than he could stand.

He was used to the bear within him reacting out of anger, bursting forth in times of stress or when a fight was close at hand. He had never felt the bear make his satisfaction known like this before. It was almost as if the animal was purring—a deep, satisfied rumble from within.

It emerged from his lips in a soft growl. Lauren stared up at him wonderingly.

He had brought her to bed to let her rest after her panic attack. He hadn't brought her here to sleep with her. But now, his body was reacting to hers in ways he hadn't anticipated.

I probably should have anticipated it. This happens every time I see her!

Her breathing was fast and erratic. Carefully, he reached out and placed a hand on the side of her face.

“Are you all right?” he murmured. He didn't want her to panic again.

“I don't know what's happening,” she whispered.

“Nothing is happening,” he said. “Nothing has to happen. We're just lying here.”

His body ached in protest. He wanted so much more from this moment! But he wouldn't be the one to push for it. Not this time. She would come to him, or nothing would happen at all.

Lauren drew a breath and leaned into him, resting her head against his chest.

“What if I want something to happen?” she asked.

“You can have whatever you want.”

She looked up at him. “Don’t say that to me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t have whatever I want, can I?” she asked. “Not when it comes to these babies of yours. Not when it comes to you, and whether you’re in our lives or not.”

Was she trying to tell him she wanted him around? Or was she reiterating that she *didn’t* want him?

It didn’t matter. “You can have whatever you want in that way, too,” he said. He brought his hand to rest on her swollen belly. “You’re their mother. You’re the one who’s giving them life. I should never have tried to fight with you about this.”

“Then...if I want you to...you’d stay with us? You’d be a father to them?”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You’d let me?”

“I never thought you’d want to.”

“I never thought I would either,” he admitted. “Not until... not until now.”

Her lips met his crushingly, silencing whatever he might have said next.

Their bodies strained for one another now, and their clothing was an obstacle to be overcome. Wes lifted his hips, allowing her to shimmy his pants down while at the same time easing the shirt she had borrowed from him up over her head. When they were fully naked, skin against skin, they stopped for a moment.

“God,” Wes whispered. “You’re beautiful.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Really?”

“Have you seen yourself lately? You’re *glowing*.” She was so full and lush, like ripe fruit, and God, he wanted a taste...

He slid down her body, taking her ankles in his hands and bending her legs, planting her feet. Then he positioned himself

between her legs and wrapped his arms beneath her thighs, pulling her close.

He exhaled.

She shuddered and moaned.

Fuck, she smells amazing.

He licked her slowly, tightening his arms around her, letting his tongue explore every inch of her, and she writhed against his face. He could actually feel her pulse against his mouth. It was strange and intoxicating.

“Wes,” she sobbed. “Wes, God, this is so good.”

He didn’t want to pull away from her, to stop what he was doing, but he did. Propping himself up on his elbows, he looked up at her.

She was panting, her eyelids fluttering, but when he stopped, she looked down at him.

“You can have whatever you want,” he said firmly. “I’ll take care of you, Lauren. I promise.”

She managed a nod. “Keep going, okay?”

He returned to licking her. He pressed his tongue slowly into her, feeling her heat and softness—

Her thighs shuddered around his ears, and she made a noise that was half moan and half whine.

God, I want to taste it when she comes.

He rolled onto his side, taking her with him so that his head was pillowed on her thigh. The angle was better this way. He could get closer. He could get *more* of her. He inched his way in, pressing his whole face against her, fucking her slowly with his tongue.

She rode his face, soaking him. The scent of her was the only thing he could smell, and it was like a drug. He wanted it to seep into his pores and never leave him.

He was hard. He was so hard. He wanted so badly to be inside her, especially since they hadn’t discussed what was

going to happen when this was over. Was this the last time they would be together so intimately? If he knew he'd have a chance to really fuck her later, it would be different...

But he wanted to give her everything. He wanted to show her that he would put her first, so that she wouldn't have to doubt.

She shuddered around him, and he felt her whole body begin to tense up. It drove all other thoughts from his mind. It felt as if he was a part of her.

God, I fucking love her.

He had no time to process that thought, to wonder what he had meant by it or where it had come from. Moments later, she was screaming his name.



Chapter Thirty

W^{ES} He crawled up the bed and lay down beside her, pulling her sweaty body into his arms.

Lauren started to rise.

“Wait,” Wes murmured.

She looked over at him.

“Don’t go,” he said. “Stay with me. Stay here.”

“You don’t want that.”

“Is that why you ran off so fast after the last time we had sex?” he asked. “Because you thought I didn’t want you here?”

She looked away from him and didn’t answer.

He turned her face gently back to him. “Because I *do* want you here,” he said. “That’s why I keep inviting you here. Every time I see you in my woods, I invite you in.”

“You’re not just being polite?”

“I’m not a polite person,” he pointed out.

She chuckled. “I guess that’s true,” she admitted. “But, Wes...what’s going on with us? I don’t understand. I can’t tell if you hate me, or—”

“Hate you? Of course I don’t hate you. I could never hate you.”

“You were so angry with me when you found out that I was pregnant,” she said softly. “I thought you resented the fact that...”

“That what? That you got pregnant?”

“Well, yes.”

“Lauren. Don’t you hear how that sounds? We both decided to have sex. We’re both responsible for what

happened.”

“But I thought—” She took a breath. “I thought that you might blame me because of my age. Maybe you assumed that I couldn’t have children because we’re past the fertile times in our lives. And maybe I should have been more responsible, somehow. I should have known that I could still conceive. I should have protected against this.”

“I could have asked you if you were using any birth control,” Wes pointed out. “I could have used a condom. I made choices too.” He looked her in the eyes. “Are you sorry you’re pregnant? Do you wish you weren’t?”

“No,” she said. “It was a surprise, but I’m glad it happened. I’m glad I’m going to be a mother.”

“You’re going to be a good one.” He caught her hand and squeezed it.

“And you’re not upset about it either? You really did seem angry.”

“I wasn’t angry because you were pregnant, though,” he said. “I was angry because...well, to be honest with you, I was humiliated.”

“Humiliated? Why?”

“I was the last to know,” he said simply.

“You’re not the last to know. Almost *no one* knows you’re the father.”

“The last to know that you were pregnant,” he rephrased.

“Well, maybe,” she conceded. “But why did that make you mad? I didn’t think you wanted to be a father. I thought I was doing you a favor by not telling you, to be honest.”

“It took me a while to figure out why it bothered me so much,” he said. Then he laughed. “That time I spent living as a bear really helped me to clear my head, I guess.”

“What did you figure out?” she asked.

“It wasn’t about wanting to be a father,” he said. “It wasn’t about *not* wanting to be a father. It doesn’t feel like that’s a

choice that needs to be made. I *am* going to be a father. Those babies...they're *me*. They're a part of me." He shook his head. "That probably doesn't make any sense."

"That makes a lot of sense," Lauren said softly. "That's exactly the way I feel about them, Wes. They're a part of me."

He threaded his fingers through hers. "This part of me," he said, bringing their joined hands to rest on her naked stomach, "had just been out there in the world for weeks—months—without my knowing about it."

She nodded.

He squeezed her hand. "Anything could have happened," he said. "You could have lost the babies, or something could have happened to you, and I would never have known. I would never have known that they had existed at all."

"Oh," she breathed.

"It took me a while to understand that fear, because...well, because it's not something I've ever had to worry about before. I've never cared this much about something I didn't even know I had."

"You're right," she said. "God, you're right. I should have told you. Of course I should have. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," he said. "We're in unfamiliar territory here."

"And I spent all this time thinking you hated me."

"I definitely don't hate you," he said. "I shouldn't have run out after that first time we had sex, but I thought *you* might not be happy with *me*. You'd just lost your mother, and maybe you were too vulnerable. Maybe I shouldn't have—"

"No, I wanted it," she assured him. "I'm the one who shouldn't have run away the last time we were together. You were right about me. I run from things."

"We don't have to do that to each other anymore," Wes said.

She gazed into his eyes, clinging to his hand. It felt to Wes as if she was holding onto him like a lifeline.

“Let’s not run away from each other this time,” he said.
“This time, I want you to stay.”

“Stay here?”

“In the trailer with me,” he confirmed.

“For how long?”

“All night. Let me make you breakfast in the morning.”

Then he grinned. “Let me at least help feed those babies of mine,” he said. “It’s the least I can do.”

She smiled. “I’d love to stay the night,” she said.



Chapter Thirty-One

L AUREN

Awareness stole over Lauren slowly.

The first thing that broke through the fog of sleep was the sensation of fingers on her bare skin. Wes's fingers, strong and sturdy. She was surprised by her instant recognition of those fingers—she knew it was him even before she had fully remembered the night before, and everything that had happened between them.

He confined his explorations to her arm, stroking from her shoulder down to her wrist, circling the back of her hand, then working his way back up. Though she was still naked in his arms from their lovemaking the night before, he did not touch her anywhere else.

Lovemaking! It was such a strange word to use, particularly about Wes. But it fit. He had *loved* her last night. He had shown her that so eloquently that she couldn't possibly question it.

She sighed and shifted a little in his arms. She would have expected to feel uncomfortable here, sleeping in this trailer, on this bed that was harder than the one she had in her home in the city and much less luxurious than the one she'd left behind in Palatine. But to her surprise, she didn't have any of the body aches or soreness that usually came from sleeping in a new place.

It was as if she was twenty years younger.

Wes moved a little behind her, and then his lips were against the back of her neck, warm and soft. She sighed at the touch and adjusted herself in his arms so that they were as close as they could be, so that he was wrapped around her with no room left between them.

"You're awake," he murmured.

"Mmm." She squirmed a little in his arms, enjoying the sensation of warmth and sturdiness behind her. "How long

have you been watching me sleep?”

“A while.” He kissed her neck again. “Didn’t want to disturb you. You’ve been through a lot lately.”

“Well, you’re turning me on.”

“Am I?” She could feel his lips curving up into a smile. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No,” he agreed. “Unless you want me to stop?”

“God, you know I don’t.” She sighed. “When have I ever been able to say no to you?”

“You’re not alone there,” He told her. “I’ve never been able to say no to you either.”

His hand stroked down her arm again, but this time when he came to her wrist, he moved to palm the swell of her stomach instead. Gently, he pulled her back against him, and she felt how hard he was already.

“I wanted to fuck you so badly last night,” he murmured in her ear, rolling his hips. “I’ve never wanted anything as badly as I wanted you.”

“You could have had me,” she said.

“I wanted you to feel taken care of, though.”

“Mmm...I did.”

His hand slid slowly up to her breast. It was heavier than normal, fuller already in preparation for the arrival of her children. She wondered if Wes could feel the difference in her body.

He stroked her nipple with his thumb and she arched into his hand, her whole body lighting up with desire. Was it possible that she had been asleep only minutes ago? Every inch of her felt acutely awake now.

“I hoped you might still want me this morning,” he said. “I hoped I’d have a chance to finish what we started.”

“God,” she breathed. “Do you even have to ask?”

“I want you to say it.”

“Wes...”

“I want to hear you say it,” he said. “Say the words, Lauren.”

Her whole body grew hot with embarrassment, with desire. “I want you,” she said.

“You want me what?”

“I want you to fuck me. Please.”

He didn't make her ask twice. *Thank God*. A moment later, he was curving around her just so, and then he was pressing into her, filling her perfectly. She groaned and rocked her hips back to meet him.

His hand tightened on her breast. It was just short of painful. It was exquisite. “You're so beautiful,” he said. “I can't stand it. You're *so* beautiful.”

She felt beautiful. She felt utterly at his mercy, soft and fragile. He could take her apart if he wanted to.

It was exhilarating to give herself to someone so powerful. It was thrilling to put her body in his hands, in his control, like this.

He thrust into her slowly, establishing a rhythm. “I could do this all day,” he said, his voice a little lower than it usually was. “We could stay here all day like this.”

Lauren was beyond words. She moaned, the tension inside her ratcheting up a notch. She was dizzy with her own arousal.

“You need to come, baby?”

She managed a nod. A tremor wracked her body.

He found her hand with his. “Show me what you want.”

She squeezed his hand.

“Show me,” he insisted.

She was too desperate to be shy. She dragged his hand down and pressed his palm between her legs. She placed her fingers on top of his and began to rub, teaching him the way

she touched herself. After a moment, she took her hand away and he kept going without her.

Fuck, he's a fast learner.

It felt as if he had been designed perfectly to give her pleasure. He knew exactly how she wanted to be touched. He knew exactly how she wanted to be fucked. He knew—

Her orgasm came out of nowhere, rolling over her like a wave. She screamed, her thighs clamping down around his hand. Wes groaned and thrust into her hard. She felt him come, and fuck, it was the hottest thing she'd ever experienced in her life.

He stayed wrapped around her for a moment, clinging to her. Then he slowly rolled away.

Lauren turned onto her back and stared at the ceiling, recovering her breath.

Wes kept finding new ways to surprise her.

She was very glad she'd stayed the night.



Chapter Thirty-Two

LAUREN
“Breakfast,” Wes announced.

He got off the bed and went over to the trailer’s little kitchen area. “What do you want?” he called over his shoulder.

“I don’t know,” Lauren said with some trepidation. “What do you eat out here in the woods?”

Wes laughed. “My fridge isn’t full of raw meat if that’s what you mean. I have some normal human stuff.”

“You do?”

“Dry goods, mostly, but yeah.” He opened a cabinet and pulled down a box of cereal. “How’s this look to you?”

“Very human.” She grinned.

He tossed it to her. “You want a bowl or something? I usually eat it out of the box.”

“This is fine.” She popped it open and grabbed a handful. “This is what you usually eat when you’re off the grid like this? Dry cereal?”

“Well, no,” he said. “Usually, I hunt. But I got the feeling you might not be up for that.”

“I’m guessing you don’t mean hunting with a rifle.”

“Would you have been up for hunting with a rifle?”

“Definitely not.” She shuddered. “In bear form...maybe?”

“Yeah? You’d eat raw?”

“I mean, I’m not in love with the idea,” she said. “I’m used to restaurants.”

“Yeah, that box of cereal is already pretty rough living for you, isn’t it?” he asked with a smirk.

“Oh, knock it off, Wes,” she said. “It’s not like I was some princess in the city, you know. I worked hard. Managing a

restaurant is a tough job.”

“I kind of wish I could have seen your restaurant,” Wes said.

“It’s still there,” Lauren said. “Maybe we can go sometime.” The thought of taking Wes into the suburbs was strange, but she had to admit it would be exciting to show him all her old haunts. The house she’d lived in, her favorite little boutiques... and the restaurant, of course. She would serve him a five-star dinner.

“I’ve been thinking,” Wes said, interrupting her daydream.

“About what?” Lauren fished out another handful of cereal.

“About the things you told me you’d heard last night,” he said. “Emmett and the others talking in the woods about attacking the city. Attacking Cole and the den.”

Lauren dropped her handful of cereal. In the excitement of last night and this morning, she had all but forgotten about that. How could she have forgotten? How could such a thing have escaped her mind even for a moment?

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Wes said. “Don’t freak out. I had an idea.”

“What kind of idea? If you’re thinking about getting involved—”

She wouldn’t be able to bear it. It wouldn’t matter which side of the conflict he was on. If Wes joined a war like that so soon after the two of them had realized their feelings for each other, it would wreck her.

“Don’t be upset,” he said. “I’m not going to get involved. Definitely not. I don’t want any part of some alpha squabble.”

Calling it a *squabble*, as if it was something petty and essentially harmless, did settle Lauren’s nerves a little. Maybe Wes was right. Maybe it wasn’t anything to get that worked up about. “What idea did you have, then?” she asked.

“I want you to stay here in the trailer with me,” he said.

She blinked. She hadn't been expecting that. "What?"

"You're right that the city isn't the safest place to be," he said. "And I can't stop thinking about those babies you're carrying. It's my job to protect them and provide for them. I can't send them back there, not knowing that there's a den war brewing."

He came over to the bed, sat down beside her, and wrapped an arm around her waist.

"I can't send you back there either," he said.

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't *want* to be there," she agreed. "I thought about going home to Palatine, actually."

She felt him tense. "Oh?" he asked.

"I decided against it," she said.

His body relaxed.

He was worried that I would leave him. Her heart ached with sympathy, but she also felt a thrill of pleasure. He hadn't wanted her to go.

"I can't raise the babies in the suburbs," she explained. "It's the reason I came home in the first place. Even though I'm worried about den violence now, that part hasn't changed."

He nodded. "The best place for you and the babies is here," he said. "It's wild territory, so they'll be able to explore their animal natures as children without worrying about exposure to the human world."

"But living in the woods?" Lauren bit her lip. "Even being back with the pack has been so hard after twenty years away. To come and live out here...I don't know if I could do it."

"You could," Wes said. "You can. I'll help you. We can make this work, Lauren. I know we can."

She closed her eyes. "I wouldn't do this with anybody else," she said. "There's no one in the world I trust enough to

keep me alive in the middle of the woods. I hope you get that. You're the only person I have that much faith in."

"You're saying you'll do it?" She could hear the hope in his voice, and it touched her.

"I think you're right," she said. "I think it's the best idea for our babies and for us."

He leaned in and kissed her. "Lauren, that's great. I'm so glad. I know it's the right decision."

"Only until the threat of den violence dies down," she said. "One way or the other. I don't want to live this wild life forever. When the fighting's over, I'm going to want to go back to the city, and I'm going to take my children with me, whether you come or not."

He nodded. "I understand."

She hoped he did. She cared for Wes, and she wanted to be with him. But she didn't want to live the way he did.

I hope he'll come back to the city with me when the time comes.



Chapter Thirty-Three

LAUREN

“All right,” Wes said. “If you and I are both going to be living here, we do need a few more supplies than we have on hand at the moment.”

Lauren nodded. “If you want to stay out of the city, I know a decent shop in the eastern suburbs that isn’t too far from here,” she said. “We can get all the basics there.”

“Oh, shit, no,” Wes said. “I don’t mean shopping.”

“You don’t?” She felt a swell of nervous anxiety in the pit of her stomach.

“No, we hunt for supplies,” Wes said.

“But you were just showing off all your human stuff!” Lauren protested. “That’s what got me to agree to staying out here—seeing how prepared you were. All your dry goods—”

“Well, sure,” Wes said. “Those things are good *on occasion*. But we need fresh meat too. We can’t just keep eating dry cereal three meals a day. And we need stores of water—”

“You don’t have bottled water?”

He laughed. “Lauren, come on. I go into town every couple of months for supplies. I bring back what I can carry with me. Do you think I’m lugging crates of water back and forth?”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said. “This is just...”

“No, hey, don’t apologize.” He moved to her side and wrapped an arm around her. “It was wrong of me to laugh about it. This is new to you. I get it.”

She nodded. “So you have to hunt?”

“Yeah. Just for our lunch and dinner, for now.”

“Should I...do you want me to come with you?” she asked, feeling some trepidation.

“Do you want to come with me?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“Don’t feel like you have to,” he said. “Why don’t you stay here and get acclimated to the trailer? You haven’t spent much time in here before.”

She shook her head. “Not with my clothes on.”

“My clothes, you mean.”

It was true. She didn’t have any clothes. That was something they were going to have to remedy at some point. She couldn’t keep walking around in his boxers and t-shirts forever. “Your clothes, then.”

He laughed. “That’s the spirit. Don’t feel obligated to wear those clothes if you don’t want to, by the way. No one ever comes out this way.”

“I’ve come out this way twice!”

“You’re the exception.” He grinned. “Just do me a favor and don’t shift inside the trailer.”

“I know better than to do that.”

“All right,” he said. “Take care. Lock the door behind me if you want to. I’ll holler at you from outside when I need to be let back in. But you’ll be able to see me from the windows, anyway.”

“How long are you going to be gone?” she asked, nervous about being left alone out here for the first time.

“Shouldn’t take too long,” he said. “I’m a good hunter, and there’s a lot of small game in this area. That’s why I park the trailer here. You won’t even have time to miss me.”

He pulled her to his feet, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her passionately. It left her gasping.

He pulled away, winked, and hurried out the door, pulling it closed behind him.

Lauren ran to the window in time to see Wes strip off his clothes and toss them over his shoulder toward the trailer. He

took off toward the trees at a run, his body surging forward into the shape of a bear. It was beautiful to watch.

She went outside, gathered up the clothes he'd left on the ground, and brought them inside. Just because they were living wild didn't mean they needed to be complete savages. He would come back to clothes full of dust and possibly even insects if they just lay on the ground out there.

She shook out his pants and shirt, spread them out on the bed, and then looked around the trailer for what to do next.

How was she going to fill her time?

There was plenty to do when Wes was here, of course. Just the pleasures of his body could keep her occupied for hours of every day. But alone like this, she couldn't think how she was going to pass the time. At home, she would have picked up a book or turned on the TV, but Wes didn't have any of those things. What did he do for fun?

How does he live out in the wild like this without completely losing his mind?

With a sigh, she began opening and closing cupboards, looking for something—anything—to occupy her.

She stopped when she found a few bottles of cleaning product. They were old and looked as if they hadn't been used in a long time, but they were something. She pulled out a spray bottle. A little more exploration unearthed a tattered old rag.

She sprayed down the countertop and scrubbed it.

Quickly, it became apparent that Wes hadn't cleaned his counters in a very long time. As she worked, her efforts revealed a brighter, shinier shade of wood. It had gotten so dirty that it had been hidden from view.

I wonder if Wes even remembers what this is supposed to look like.

Well, she had found her project. She stoppered the sink, poured in a bit of dish soap, and put every dish she could find—which only amounted to a very few—in to soak. She

stripped the sheets off his bed—she would take them to the stream to wash. Then she got down on her hands and knees with the spray bottle and began to polish the kitchen floor.

She had never been wild about cleaning. But until she was ready to go out and help Wes with the hunting—and she had no idea when that time might come—this was how she could contribute. This was how she could best help her family get by out here in the wild.



Chapter Thirty-Four

W^{ES} “Do you want to light it?” Wes asked.

“I don’t know how.” Lauren stared down at the structure of tinder he’d helped her build. She looked completely spooked, and Wes was torn between feeling amused at the fact that she was so overwhelmed by a simple fire and wanting to go and help her.

“You should learn,” he said. “It’s a skill you’re going to need, living out here.” He handed her the lighter. “You know how to use *that*, I assume.”

She gave him a withering look. “I’m not an imbecile, Wes. They have lighters in the suburbs. Humans use lighters.”

“Humans start fires!” Wes said. “They do it on campouts and stuff.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t go on a lot of campouts.”

“Light it right there.” He pointed. “Those dry leaves and grass. That stuff will catch easily, but it’s going to burn really fast, so make sure you get it under the pyramid of sticks so that they can catch too.”

He watched her as she leaned over and carefully lit the tinder. Once it caught, she pushed it into position and watched the sticks begin to burn.

“All right,” he said. “That’s good. Now we just keep adding bigger pieces of wood. Slowly. Gradually.” He picked up a slightly larger stick and put it on the flames. “Don’t collapse that structure. That’ll smother it.”

She nodded and added a small stick. “Is it okay that I cleaned the trailer while you were gone?”

“Hell yeah, it’s okay!” He grinned. “Do you know how long it’s been since *anyone* cleaned that place?”

“I have some idea,” she said wryly.

“Just don’t feel like you *have* to do that or anything,” he said. “It’s not like I expected it of you. And just because you did it today, that doesn’t mean you need to do it again. That’s not your job.”

“But it won’t bother you if I do?”

“As long as it’s not bothering you.” He shrugged. “I’m into it.”

“I got bored, that’s all,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I was afraid you might. Next time I’ll bring you hunting with me.”

“Do you think I’m ready for that?”

“Sure. We won’t be hunting elk or anything. We’ll get fish or rabbits.”

She nodded and stared pensively into the fire.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked her.

“It’s just been a big day,” she said. “I never thought this would be my life, you know?”

“You’re not unhappy, are you?”

“No,” she assured him. “Just overwhelmed.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “For what it’s worth.”

“What has it been like for you?” she asked suddenly. “Living out here all alone, I mean? Away from the den for so long?”

“I think I always wanted to get away,” he said. “I never felt like myself with the den. I’m guessing you can relate to that.”

“That’s how I thought I felt,” Lauren said. “I’ve always been so much more in tune with my human side. I thought that getting myself established in the human world would feel like coming home.”

“It didn’t?”

“Not the way I expected it to,” she said. “There are things about the den I don’t like—particularly the way the alpha can force people to submit to his will—and I was glad not to have

that in my life anymore. But there were things I missed about belonging to the pack as well. I never realized I would miss those things until they were gone.”

“What kinds of things?” he asked.

“The sense of community,” she said. “The way it feels like everybody is part of the same big family. Even the people you don’t like very much are like your cousins. Everyone is paying attention to the same things. One person’s drama is everybody’s drama.”

“And it wasn’t like that in the human world?”

“Definitely not,” she said. “Even the people I was close to—the people at my restaurant, who I worked with every day for years and years—I had no idea what some of their lives were like when they went home at the end of the day. And, of course, none of them ever knew that I was a shifter. We hardly knew each other at all.”

“Which world is better?” Wes asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “They both have their drawbacks.”

“Maybe you’ll find that you like it best here,” he said with a grin. “Out in the wild with me.”

She laughed. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to living in the wild,” she said. “But I think I could get used to being with you, Wes.”

I think I could get used to being with you too.

“Do you think Jessica will be very angry with us?” Lauren asked.

Wes sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “I got the feeling when I spoke to her last that she wasn’t delighted with the way either one of us has handled this whole thing.”

“I can’t really blame her,” Lauren admitted. “We’ve put her in a position of having to choose between the two of us more than once. We need to talk to her. We’ve got to let her know we’re sorry and that it isn’t going to be like that anymore.”

“Which of us do you think should do it?” Wes asked.
“Who’s she more likely to listen to?”

“I don’t know,” Lauren said. “Maybe we should plan on telling her together. You think?”

“I think that sounds about right,” Wes said. “But we’ll take our time. I think, given everything we’ve been through in the past few months, we deserve some time for ourselves.”

“Like a honeymoon?” Lauren asked with a little laugh.

Wes joined in her laughter. “Sure. Why not?”

And besides, I don’t want you anywhere near the city. Not while there’s still a chance of pack warfare.

He would make things right with his sister. But he was going to protect his babies. He would keep Lauren out of Chicago until he was sure that she would be safe.



Chapter Thirty-Five

WES Eventually, Wes scooted back away from the fire. “That should keep going for a while now,” he said.

“We don’t have to keep tending it?”

“Nah. Lie down with me?”

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her down into the grass. She came with him, though reluctantly.

“Are we sleeping outside?” she asked.

“It’s an awfully nice night to be cooped up indoors. Don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I haven’t slept outside since I was a teenager and we did those campouts.”

Wes laughed at the memory. “You never liked it much back then either,” he recalled, thinking back on the way she had dressed herself in long sleeves and pants—protective gear—while most of the other shifters had happily slept in tank tops and shorts in the dirt. He and Jessica had laughed teasingly at Lauren in those days, never imagining that in a few short years, she would be leaving the den for a human life.

Now he pulled her body close to his. “You should get used to being in nature like this,” he said.

“Right,” she sighed. “It’s all part of living wild, right?”

“In a sense,” he said. “You’re not *really* living wild, though.”

“Seems pretty wild to me.”

“It’s not as wild as it is when I go out as a bear for months at a time,” he pointed out. “I’m not asking you to do that. I’m not asking you to give up your humanity altogether.”

She shuddered delicately. “You’d better not ever,” she said.

“You’d surprise yourself.”

“This just feels so unnatural.”

“Forget about trying to be natural,” he said. “Don’t think. Let your instincts take over.”

She looked up at him. He saw nothing but absolute trust in her eyes.

“Come here,” he said quietly, sitting upright and pulling her into his lap so that she sat astride him. He threaded his fingers into her hair gently, noticing the soft silver streaks starting to emerge. “What do you want? What does your body tell you?”

She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly. “I think you know the answer to that, Wes.”

He nodded. “I do. But the point is that *you* know. You’re having trouble connecting to the natural impulses of your body. You’ve been human too long. You’ve been living in your mind instead of your body.”

He ran his hands slowly up her back, beneath her shirt, and pulled it over her head.

“Close your eyes,” he murmured.

She did so, breathing deeply.

“Listen to your body,” he said, bringing his hands to rest on her waist now. “What does your body want?”

“I—”

“Shh. Don’t answer. Do what feels natural.” He was glad he’d never gotten dressed again after his day of hunting. It was second nature to him to run around the forest naked. Now he didn’t have to worry about any clothes coming between them.

Lauren took a deep breath. He was mesmerized, momentarily, by the rise of her breasts. Her head bowed toward him.

Her hips began to rock slowly.

She was wet already, and he loved it. He groaned with pleasure as she pulled herself closer and closer to him. He was growing harder, and he knew that at any moment, their bodies

were going to connect effortlessly. He was going to slip inside her—

Then Lauren lifted her hips slightly, somehow finding the perfect angle, and Wes gasped in surprise as he felt her slide down on him.

Her rhythm didn't falter for even a moment. She circled her hips enticingly, grinding closer, throwing her head back in bliss. He wrapped his arms around her lower back to support her as she rode him.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “Wes. Fuck.”

“I knew you knew what to do,” he said, his voice raspy with pleasure. “I knew your instincts were in there.”

She fucked him faster, letting out a little cry.

“You're perfect,” he said. “You're amazing. Keep going, baby. You're an animal.”

She leaned forward so that her breasts were right up against his face, and for a moment, he thought he had died and gone to heaven. They were so big and full, swaying and bouncing so enticingly. He buried his face in their softness for a minute and inhaled her scent, feeling as if he was being lifted right off the ground.

He had to be closer to her. It was all he could think about.

This had been about connecting her with her instincts. But at the moment, Wes felt lost in his own instincts as well. He was submersed in the purely animal desire to claim her, to bring their bodies together. It wasn't like before, when he had thought about bringing her pleasure. He wasn't even chasing his own pleasure. He was lost in the perfection of moving with her.

They might have gone on that way for hours. Later, Wes would never be able to say. He knew only that the fire was still burning beside them when Lauren let out a guttural cry and tensed around him, flinging her arms around his neck, rolling her hips as close to his as possible. He felt her shudder helplessly. Then she went limp in his arms.

He rolled them both over, laying her on her back on the ground without disentangling his body from hers. A few quick strokes had him coming as well, and he collapsed on top of her, suddenly aware of his own bone-deep exhaustion.

“Love you,” Lauren murmured, sounding barely conscious.

He rolled toward her instinctively, keeping them skin to skin. “Love you too.”

It was the first time he’d said those words to a woman, and it felt strange and wonderful. He was suffused with pleasure from the sex and the warmth of the fire’s glow. In this moment, everything felt absolutely perfect.

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift, keeping one arm firmly around Lauren to reassure himself, even in sleep, that she was there with him. He had no intention of letting her go.



Chapter Thirty-Six

W^{ES} “Wes! *Wesley!*”

The sound of screams jerked Wes awake. He was on his feet before Lauren had opened her eyes, looking all around for the danger.

Something was crashing through the foliage. Something much too big to be a rabbit and much too clumsy to be a deer.

Lauren scrambled to her feet. Wes positioned his body between her and the approaching threat, defending her. He fell into a crouch, ready to shift if the situation called for it.

“Wes!”

Something clicked into place in his mind. What kind of threat would be screaming his name?

Then she appeared between the trees, running toward him as if her life depended on it.

“Jessica?” He hurried toward her. “What’s going on? Are you okay?”

She seemed not to notice or care about the fact that he and Lauren were both naked. “You need to get back to your trailer,” she said. “Right now. I’ve been looking for you.”

“Why?” Wes looked in the direction of his trailer. They were only about a half-mile away. “What’s the big deal?”

“It’s Tina. She left town this morning saying all kinds of crazy things about finding you and spilling your secrets. Does she know about you two? Is there any way she could?”

“I didn’t tell her,” Lauren said shakily, struggling into the t-shirt she’d been wearing last night. She grabbed a pair of shorts she had brought out to the campfire—a pair Wes had laughed gently at her for thinking he would need—and tossed them to him.

“Thanks,” he said. He would have to remember to apologize to her for that. She’d been right all along.

“I didn’t tell her either,” Jessica said.

Then she looked from Wes to Lauren. “Wait a minute,” she said. “What are you two doing together? You’re not—you know—*together*, are you?”

“Is this the time, Jess?” Wes asked in consternation.

She shook her head. “Right. I guess it isn’t. Sorry.”

“What happened with Tina?” Lauren said anxiously.

“Well, there was a party last night, and she and Cody got into a big fight,” Jessica said. “I don’t know what it was about. I didn’t even know it was going on until they were pretty deep into it, to tell you the truth. Once I saw what was up, I went over there to see if I could do anything to help, but as I was walking up, Tina shouted that if Cody wasn’t going to do anything, she would have to do it herself.”

“Do what?” Wes asked urgently.

“She didn’t say,” Jessica said. “Then Cody said that it wasn’t her place to do anything—that he was the alpha, and he would make the decisions for the den. She asked him if he was going to order her. They stared at each other for a moment, and then she turned and ran off.”

“Wild,” Wes said. “But what does that have to do with me?”

“This morning, I woke up and looked out my window to see her running down the street,” Jessica said. “I watched, and Felicity came out of her house and asked her where she was going so early. Tina said that Cody wasn’t going to deal with *the problem*, so she was going into the woods to do it herself. She told Felicity not to tell anybody she’d seen her, and then she ran off.”

“And you followed.”

“She could only have been talking about you, Wes,” Jessica said. “Who else is in the woods? I think she’s on her way to your trailer right now. You have to get there and

intercept her. Whatever she wants, it's not going to be anything good."

Wes shook his head. "Why should I go back?" he asked. "I don't want to talk to her. I don't have any interest in whatever it is she wants."

"Wes, she's crazy," Jessica said. "You don't know what she'll do."

"Do you?" Lauren cut in. "You've been spending an awful lot of time with her lately. Do you know what this is about?"

Jessica looked abashed. "Look, Lauren—"

"You don't have to explain anything to me," Lauren said. "We don't have to have some big reconciliation right now. I just need to know whether you have any idea what Tina's problem is and what she might be out here to do."

"She's been obsessed with your pregnancy," Jessica admitted. "She says the most horrible, crude things about you. I haven't joined in, of course," Jessica added. "But I haven't argued with her either." She blushed crimson. "I was angry with you."

"It's fine," Lauren said. "I get it."

"But why is she so obsessed with Lauren?" Wes asked. "What's that all about?"

"I don't know," Jessica said. "At first, I thought she was just upset that a bunch of half-human babies would be joining the den, but that made less and less sense as time went on. Why wouldn't she be getting over it, you know? And how could that really be such a big problem?"

"You don't think that's what it's about anymore?" Lauren asked.

"No," Jessica said. "I think she's guessed that you lied about who the real father is."

"But why does she care?" Wes demanded. "What difference does it make to her?"

“That’s the part I can’t figure out,” Jessica said. “But I’m telling you, she’s on her way here right now, and you don’t want to let her catch you like *this* if that’s what she’s angry about.”

Wes nodded. His sister’s words made sense, and like it or not, he was going to have to confront Tina.

“Stay with Lauren,” he told her.

“No way,” Jessica said. “I’m going with you.”

“You can’t go alone,” Lauren protested.

“I’m not leaving you on your own in the woods,” Wes told her. “Jess, stay with her. Please.”

Before his sister could argue any further, Wes turned and set off at a run back toward the trailer.



Chapter Thirty-Seven

LAUREN

“I’m not staying here,” Jessica said.

She was staring at the place where Wes had disappeared, and her whole body was trembling. Lauren would have been willing to place a bet that she was barely containing herself from shifting.

And, though her inner bear wasn’t quite as close to the surface, she felt exactly the same way. “We can’t let him go alone,” she agreed. “We need to follow him.”

“We nothing,” Jessica said, not even looking at her. “He’s right about you. You can’t be anywhere near this.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s going to confirm all of Tina’s suspicions. Is that what you want?”

“Of course not,” Lauren said. “But I’m not going to just sit here while you two deal with this alone.”

“The minute she sees you, she’ll know she was right to question who your baby’s father was.”

“Well, maybe that’s okay,” Lauren said. “Maybe I’ve been too worried about keeping that covered up.”

“But it obviously upsets her. And she’s *violent*, Lauren!”

Lauren strode forward. “I’m going after him,” she said firmly. “You can come with me, or you can stay here.”

“Oh, for—” Jessica hurried after her. “Wes is absolutely going to kill me.”

“Wes knows I’m responsible for myself.” Lauren broke into a jog. She longed to shift—to feel the power of the bear within her. She wanted to know that she had the strength to protect Wes if it came to that.

Is Tina really violent?

She couldn't shift. She needed to be able to talk. She needed to have the ability to reason with Tina, to explain herself if it came to that.

Jessica was in better shape than Lauren was, and she quickly pulled even. Lauren was relieved that her friend didn't try to stop her or hold her back. Maybe she'd decided that the matter of getting to Wes was urgent enough that they couldn't afford that kind of delay.

"There's the trailer," Lauren said.

They broke through the trees.

Tina was standing in front of the trailer. Wes was facing her, holding his hands out as if to stop her from approaching. Tina turned slightly, focusing her attention on Lauren. She narrowed her eyes.

"So," she said. "Mother of the year."

"Tina," Lauren said.

"You've been lying to everyone," Tina said.

"Lauren, stay back," Wes said.

But Lauren stepped forward. "What are you doing here?" she demanded. "What do you want with me?"

"You lied to everyone," Tina said. "You told us that your babies' father was human, but he isn't. Wes is the father of your babies!"

"What makes you say that?"

"Please. It's so obvious. You come back to town, he disappears. Then *you* disappear! Don't even bother to deny it. You've been about as subtle as a freight train."

"So what?" Lauren demanded, hot with rage. "What business is it of yours? I don't have to tell you anything about my pregnancy or my children."

"It's my husband who's the den alpha," Tina said. "You owe allegiance to your alpha, Lauren. You have to tell him *everything*."

“I have to tell him everything he orders me to tell him. No one ordered me to tell them anything about this.”

“I told him he needed to pay attention to you. To keep you under his thumb. He’s been far too lenient.” Tina’s face twisted into a sneer. “That stops now.”

“What makes you think I’m coming back to the city at all?” Lauren asked. “I’m not going to place myself under Cody’s control, Tina. He didn’t come out here to deal with this—you did. And you don’t have any power or authority at all. You can’t tell me what to do.”

“You don’t think so?” The look on Tina’s face was positively malevolent.

Wes stepped forward. “Lauren,” he said.

“Back off, Wes,” Lauren said.

“This isn’t safe.”

“I’m fine. She can’t do anything to me. She’s high on her own power. She thinks she’s so important because she’s mated to the alpha. Well, you know what?” she asked, turning to Tina. “Cody is a shit alpha, and everybody thinks so.”

“I knew it!” Tina shrieked. “I knew it! That’s what this has really all been about, isn’t it! Coming back here after all your years away, pregnant with *full shifter babies*. You’re trying to challenge Cody for dominance!”

Lauren stared. “What?” she asked. “What the hell are you talking about, Tina? I can’t challenge for dominance.”

Jessica clapped a hand over her mouth. “Cody’s your cousin,” she said.

“So?”

“He doesn’t have any children,” Jessica said.

“Oh,” Wes said, his eyes going wide. He looked from Jessica to Tina. “Oh, man. You’re right. That’s exactly what this is.”

“Shut up,” Tina growled.

“It’s because you can’t conceive, isn’t it?” Lauren realized. “That’s why Cody doesn’t have an heir.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“If Cody doesn’t have any heirs, the next alpha would be the oldest male heir of our grandfather’s,” Lauren said. “That would be Matt. But Matt doesn’t have any children either. The oldest male child of the next generation in my grandfather’s line would be my son, if I have one.”

“And if your children had been half-human, that might have disqualified them,” Jessica said. “But because they’re full shifter—”

“Your bastards will never get near the alpha position,” Tina said through her teeth. “I won’t allow it.”

She turned her hand, and Lauren saw that she was holding a lighter. She flicked it and tossed it toward the trailer.

The fire caught. In seconds, the whole thing was burning.

Wes let out a moan.

For the first time, Lauren noticed the gas canisters on the ground. Tina must have doused the trailer before they’d showed up.

“This is just the beginning,” she said. “Get out of here, Wes, And you too, Lauren. Go back to your life in the suburbs and be a happy little human. But don’t ever come near our den again, or this trailer won’t be the last thing that burns.”



Chapter Thirty-Eight

L AUREN

The rage that blossomed inside Lauren was even hotter and higher than the flames in front of her.

“How dare you!” she screamed, launching herself at Tina. She felt a wild urge to scratch, claw, tear—to utterly destroy the other woman. It was like nothing she had ever felt before in her life.

It wasn't *her*.

It was animal. Feral.

The bear within her gnashed its teeth, imagining the taste of blood and the satisfying feeling of Tina's skin shredding beneath her claws—

“Wes, stop her!”

Wes's thick arms were all the way around her. She strained against him, her body heaving, but he was so strong that it was impossible to imagine breaking free. Even the bear was somehow contained.

Jessica's face was inches from hers. “Calm down,” she said urgently. “You can't shift. We don't want a fight right here.”

Lauren's vision blurred, steadied, blurred, steadied.

“No,” Jessica barked. “You hear me, Lauren? You can't shift. Hang onto yourself.”

Lauren inhaled, her thoughts resolving. She was still a human woman. She could stay that way. The bear had never gotten the best of her before. It wouldn't happen now.

“You're pathetic,” Tina jeered.

Lauren shuddered in Wes's arms.

“We need to get her out of here, Wes,” Jessica said.

Wes nodded. In one quick motion, he had picked Lauren up and held her cradled against his body. She didn't resist. She knew they were right. Getting her away from here was the best thing they could do.

She focused on her breathing while Wes and Jessica ran side by side. Eventually, when she thought she had recovered enough to keep herself under control, she squirmed in Wes's arms.

"Put me down," she said. "I'm all right now."

Wes eased her down slowly onto the ground, keeping one hand on her shoulder. "You sure?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Sorry for losing it back there."

"I don't blame you," Wes said. "I almost lost it too."

Lauren's eyes filled with tears. "All your things, Wes. Your home."

"She's a bitch," Wes said. "But they're only things. The important part is that nobody got hurt."

"But she did that because of me," Lauren said. "She burned your home because of me. Because of who I am and who my grandfather is. It's awful."

"It's stupid," Jessica said furiously. "Anybody with a brain would know that you two were never planning to try to take over the den."

"Of course we weren't," Wes said. "We weren't planning any of this, for God's sake."

"But why is it so terrible?" Lauren asked. "Cody isn't going to be alpha forever. Eventually, he's going to have to hand it off to somebody else."

Jessica shrugged. "If you want my opinion, the den has been living like there's no tomorrow for a while now," she said. "I don't think Cody's planning on the den living to be stable and functional beyond his reign. If he had to think about the idea of a long-term future, he wouldn't be free to party and spend up all our money like he has been."

“That’s what this is about?” Wes said. “They’re mad that there’s an heir because they want to run the den into the ground?”

“It’s just a guess,” Jessica said. “But doesn’t that sound like the way Cody’s been living? If people start thinking about the future, they’re going to realize he hasn’t provided for one.”

“I think it’s more than that,” Lauren said. “Did you see the way Tina reacted when we mentioned that she hadn’t been able to conceive? She’s sensitive about it. She *wanted* to give him an heir.”

Wes nodded. “That makes sense,” he said. “You’ve always told me how intense she is about the fact that she’s mated to the alpha. It’s a big deal to her. Of course she would want to be the *mother* to the next alpha. She’d want to keep it in her family as much as possible.”

“And people have challenged Cody’s claim,” Jessica said. “And they’ve disappeared.”

Lauren sucked in a breath. “That’s what happened to Emmett.”

“You know about that?” Jessica asked.

“Emmett’s alive,” Lauren said. “He’s here in the woods. He has allies, and they’re talking about going back to the city and overthrowing the den. Taking power away from Cody.”

Jessica gaped. “You’re serious?”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of rustling in the woods. All three of them spun around to look. Lauren’s heart hammered. Had Tina followed them?

She wouldn’t. After how close it came to violence back there, she wouldn’t dare. If it actually did come to a fight, she wouldn’t stand a chance. There are three of us and only one of her!

“We shouldn’t stay here,” Wes said, his voice low. “Come on. Let’s move.”

He set off at a jog. Lauren was hard-pressed to keep up, but she didn’t want to complain or ask him to stop.

Fortunately, Jessica spoke up. “Where are we going, Wes?” she said.

“The trailer’s trashed. Emmett’s in the woods, and maybe Tina’s still out here too. We need to find a safe place to live.”

Lauren jerked to a stop. Beside her, Jessica did the same thing.

“What do you mean, a place to live?” Lauren demanded.

“I’m not living out here,” Jessica said. “I have my own place already!”

Wes looked at them, exasperation etched across his face.

“Can we get somewhere quiet before we start arguing about this, please?” he asked. “I just want to make sure you two are safe.”

“I can take care of myself, Wes,” Jessica snapped.

“Jessica,” Lauren said. “Please. Let’s just all go somewhere and talk.” Wes was making sense. She didn’t want to think about what would happen if Tina found them here. She didn’t want to risk the bear rising up in her again.

“Fine,” Jessica said reluctantly.

Wes set off again—slower this time, thankfully—and Lauren and Jessica followed behind.



Chapter Thirty-Nine

LAUREN

“The thing is,” Wes said, “we can’t fight Tina.”

They had run for about three miles, and now they were sitting on flat rocks on the far side of a stream. The trailer—and the city—seemed very far away right now. Lauren felt as if she’d entered another world.

“There are three of us,” Lauren said. “She can’t beat all three of us in a fight, no matter how good she is.”

“She doesn’t have to beat all three of us,” Wes said. “All she would need to do is take one good swipe at you.”

Jessica sighed and nodded. “He’s right, Lauren,” she said. “The babies could get hurt.”

Lauren rested a hand on her growing belly. Of course they were right. God, what had she almost done? If Wes and Jessica hadn’t gotten her away from there, she would have shifted. And if she had, Tina surely would have shifted too.

She could have lost these babies. She’d let her anger get the best of her, and she had put them in terrible danger.

She shuddered. “You’re right, Wes. I should have stayed away. I should never have confronted her.”

“You *were* kind of a badass, though,” Jessica said. “Standing up to her like that.”

“Don’t encourage her,” Wes said. “Badassery isn’t what she needs.”

Jessica pulled off her shoes and dangled her feet in the stream. “But you want her to live out in the woods,” she pointed out. “Is that what she needs?”

“I think it might be,” Wes said.

“Lauren’s not like you, Wes. She’s not *wild* the way you are.”

“I was going to live in his trailer with him,” Lauren said quietly.

Jessica’s eyes widened. “You were? Seriously?”

“I wanted to.” She bit her lip. “I really wanted it. I knew it was going to be hard, but I was ready to try.” She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’m so sorry, Wes. She burned your home because of me. I’ve ruined everything.”

“Wait, hey, no, you haven’t.” Wes reached out and took her hand. “It isn’t like that.”

“Yes, it is. She did that because she was angry with me. I was the one she wanted to punish. She should have burned my home, not yours. I don’t know why she didn’t.”

“Because you aren’t there,” Jessica said. “She wants you run out of town. She had to hit you where you live.”

“So if I’d just stayed at my own house—”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Wes said. “She knew I was the father. She pieced it together. She would have come for me too.”

“You were never going to be able to keep it a secret forever, Lauren,” Jessica said quietly. “Eventually, someone was going to find out. You know secrets don’t stay secret for long in the den.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lauren whispered again, feeling absolutely wretched.

“You see why I can’t take you back to the city, though, right?” Wes said. “If we try to live in your mother’s house, she’ll come for us there.”

“He’s right,” Lauren said to Jessica. “We can’t go there. We can’t take our babies there.”

“You’re really going to live out in the wilderness?” Jessica asked.

“I don’t think I have another choice,” Lauren said. She felt shaky and uncertain. Living in the trailer had been difficult enough to consider, but this was something else entirely.

And yet, what else could she do? Going back to the suburbs didn't feel like a reasonable option either.

Staying here was what was best. Best for her and Wes, and best for the babies she was carrying.

"You should stay too," Wes said.

"Oh, God," Jessica said. She was already shaking her head. "I should have known you'd do this."

"I don't want you in the city."

"It's my home. Tina isn't after *me*." She got to her feet, waded into the water, and set her sneakers on the rock beside Lauren. "You keep these, all right?"

"You need them." Lauren tried to hand them back. "I can't take them from you."

"Yes, you can. I have twenty pairs of shoes at home. You don't have any, and you're going to be living in a god-forsaken cave somewhere. I want you to have shoes on your feet. And once we figure out where you two are going to be staying, I'll come back and drop off some clothes and blankets for you."

"Jess," Wes began.

"Not for *you*," she said. "For my nieces and nephews. I want them to be warm and safe."

Wes nodded. "Okay," he said. "Thank you, Jess."

"How long do you think you'll be away from the city this time?"

"Until something changes," he said. "We're not going to be able to come back while Tina's on this rampage. We'll have to wait until it's safe."

"There's no way of knowing how long that will be," Jessica said quietly.

"But you'll know where we are," Lauren pointed out. "You can come out and see us whenever you want."

Brother and sister were shaking their heads. "She can't," Wes said. "We don't want her to leave a trail from the city to

us. If she's consistently traveling the same path, it'll be easy for Tina to figure out where we've gone."

"God." Lauren buried her head in her hands. This was such a mess. She wished there was some way out of it, some way she could just convince Tina that she didn't want to take the alpha position away from Cody.

But I guess it doesn't really matter what I want. If I have a son, he'll be the blood heir. He'll be Cody's successor.

Wes squeezed her hand. "It's going to be all right."

"At least you're letting me know first this time," Jessica said. "At least I won't have to just wonder why you've disappeared."

Wes looked guilty, but he said nothing.

Jessica waded up onto the bank. "Come on," she said. "Let's look for a place for the two of you to stay. We should try to find something by nightfall."



Chapter Forty

W^{ES} “Is she asleep?” Jessica asked.

“Yeah.” Wes sat down and leaned back against the rock face of the cave’s exterior. “She was exhausted.”

“After the day we’ve had, I’m not surprised,” Jessica said. “I’m exhausted myself.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay here for the night?” Wes asked. “You can go back in the morning.”

“No, I can’t,” Jessica said. “We need to know what’s going on in the city. For all we know, Tina might be whipping the other members of the den into a frenzy against the two of you right now. We can’t let that happen.”

Wes sighed. “What are you going to do if she is?” he asked. “I don’t see how you can hope to stop her.”

“But it’s better if I *know*,” Jessica said. “If it isn’t safe, I can come and let you and Lauren know. If you have to, you can take off for Canada or something.”

“Fuck, I hope it doesn’t come to that,” Wes said.

Jessica nodded. “I hope so too. I’m used to you disappearing, but I don’t want those kids vanishing from my life. I want to get to know them.”

“Jess...” Wes hesitated. “You’re pretty pissed at me, aren’t you?”

She glanced at him. “We doing this again?”

“It didn’t feel resolved before,” he said. “It’s not just about Lauren. You’re upset that I live out here on my own.”

“You’ve lived wild for half our lives, Wes,” Jessica said. “I can’t just suddenly be mad about that now.”

“You’ve always been mad about it.”

“Not *mad*,” she said.

“Then what?”

“I don’t know. You were my brother. When we were growing up, I thought you’d always be around. You were like my other half. And then one day, you just announced you were leaving. I don’t think anything could have prepared me for it.”

“It’s not like I left because of you,” he said guiltily.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s that you didn’t *stay* because of me.”

“Oh.”

She shook her head. “I’m not saying you should have. It’s not your job to build your whole life around me. It was just... a wake-up call, I guess. It was the first time I realized people could actually leave me. And then, right after that, Lauren left.”

“You have other people in the city, don’t you?” he asked.

“Sure I do,” she said. “It’s been twenty years, Wes. Of course I have a life without the two of you now.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” he said.

She softened. “I know you didn’t,” she said. “And I know you both care about me. I owe you an apology too.”

“You do?”

“I shouldn’t have been so hard on you when I found out you and Lauren were... whatever you are. What are you, by the way?”

He hesitated. “I think I’m in love with her.”

She let out a low whistle. “That’s something I never thought I’d hear you say.”

“Yeah. I never thought I would say it.”

“Does she feel the same way?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.” He dug his fingernails into his palms. It would break his heart, he knew, if she didn’t feel the way he did.

But there was no way the sex between them could have been as powerful and overwhelming as it had been lately if it

hadn't been based on love. Wes had hooked up with his share of women, but it had never been like that.

I love her. She loves me.

"I guess you guys are going to be a real family, then," Jessica said.

"And you're going to be a part of it," Wes said. "What's going on now is shitty, but Jess...I've stayed away from you for too long."

"No, it's not just your fault," Jessica said. "We've *both* pushed each other away. When I found out about you and Lauren, my first instinct was to pick a side. I could have tried to help bring you together."

"We found our way together in the end."

Jessica grinned at him. "Are we really going to be family again? See each other more than three times a year?"

"My kids are going to need their aunt," he said. "It wouldn't be right for me to keep them away."

"Damn right," Jessica said. "Someone's going to have to teach them how to cook, and it sure isn't going to be you."

He hugged her. "You be safe in the city, Jess," he said. "Tina's going to put the screws to you. She'll assume you know where Lauren and I went."

"I'll tell her you took her threats seriously and split for Canada," Jessica said with a shrug. "That's what she wanted. When she doesn't see any sign of you for a few weeks, she'll give up and move on."

"I hope you're right," Wes said. Something made him feel as though he hadn't heard the last of Tina.

"Trust me," Jessica said. "She didn't even have Cody's support for what she did today. He's going to put her on lockdown over this. She's going to have much bigger problems than you."

"Hey, Jess, you can't tell anyone she burned my trailer," Wes said. "You can't mention it to Cody or to anybody else."

“Why the hell not? She’s crazy. People should know.”

“Because I don’t want her to see you as a threat,” Wes said. “I don’t want her coming after you. It’s hard enough that I’m sending you back—”

“You’re not *sending* me anywhere.”

“But if I have to worry about her throwing rocks through your windows, or whatever she does to people, I’m going to lose my mind.” He placed his hands on her shoulders. “I need you to stay safe, Jess. I can’t focus on Lauren if I don’t know you’re going to be okay.”

She nodded. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “Take care of her. She’s going to need you.”



Chapter Forty-One

Two Months Later

W^{ES} He found Lauren squatting beside the fire and tending to it. “What are you doing?” he demanded, hurrying to her side. “Didn’t I tell you not to get up?”

“The fire was dying,” she said. Then she winced. “And actually, now I *can’t* get up. Can you help me?”

He slid his hands under her elbows and raised her up out of her crouch. She winced and rubbed her lower back. “Damn. These kids are heavy.”

He could believe that. At six months into her pregnancy, her belly was massive. “That’s why I don’t want you on your feet,” he said, guiding her back over to the nest of grass and leaves they’d made under one of the thickest trees.

She made a face. “I can’t just lie on my back all the time, Wes.”

“Well, you can when I’m out hunting.” He eased her down. “I worry about you when I can’t see you, and then I come back and find you climbing all over the place.”

“I walked ten feet over to the fire.”

He laid down beside her. “How are you feeling?”

She laughed. “How am I ever feeling?” She reached down to cup him. “You know you’re all I think about.”

“You’re wild for it.”

“It’s all the hormones.” She squeezed, and he throbbed against her palm. The truth was, seeing her like this had him feeling pretty aroused most of the time too. It was like walking through a fog of sex.

He rolled onto his back and guided her into position. She slid down onto him easily, closing her eyes in ecstasy. Once seated, she sighed deeply, her need finally being met.

Wes traced his fingers slowly up and down the tops of her thighs.

She didn't move, but she contracted slowly around him, and he could feel his cock pulse inside her. They held absolutely still otherwise.

"I couldn't wait for you to get back," Lauren whispered. "I've been wanting you inside me all day, Wes."

He nodded, stroking the lines where her thighs folded into her hips with his thumbs. "Me too."

"I wish you never had to go hunting. I wish you could stay inside me all the time."

"We'd get hungry," he chuckled.

"I get hungry when you're gone," she said. "Hungry for you. I need you, Wes."

He trailed his fingers inward, running them over her inner thighs now. "You have me now," he said. "We have as long as you want. We can just stay here like this all day if you want."

"Yes," she breathed. "Fuck, please, yes."

She began to move, rolling her hips slowly, grinding her body against his. Wes let out a sigh. Having Lauren on top like this was almost meditative. She would go on for hours, he knew, and what she liked best was for him to lie still and let her use him, let her fuck herself on him like a toy.

He *loved* it.

As her pregnancy progressed, these lazy afternoons only grew more and more enjoyable. He worshipped her changing shape, running his hands over her swollen belly, reaching up to cup her massive breasts. She looked and felt so different from the woman he had had a quick tryst with six months ago in her mother's kitchen. That woman had been hardened by anger and grief, and by twenty years spent in the human world. He had enjoyed their interlude, but it hadn't stayed with him.

But this...this was *transcendent*.

She was ripe. Glowing. Being inside her felt as natural as breathing, and Wes could hardly believe there were whole hours of his day that *weren't* composed of this. She was right, really. Why bother to go hunting? Why eat or sleep or do anything but this?

She was riding him more aggressively now. She found his hands and threaded her fingers through his, leaning against his palms. Wes was thankful that he had the strength to hold her up, giving her the leverage to push against.

She circled her hips, and he thought he might cry out with pleasure.

Lauren did cry out. She was loud when they made love now. She'd never been silent, but out here in the wilderness, she could make as much noise as she liked. A few yards away, a startled flock of birds took wing.

The sun sank low in the sky, and the two of them went on and on. Wes stared up at the beauty above him, taking her pleasure from his body. He would give her anything, he knew. Anything she asked for, anything she wanted, she had only to name it and it was hers. Fuck, he loved her so much.

Darkness was around them, and the cool night air had begun to dry the sweat on their bodies when Wes felt her grow tense around him.

Her head fell back, and the light from the fire lit up her face. She was in ecstasy.

The sight of it was enough to push him over the edge. He let out a roar as he came, no longer able to keep silent, and heard a dozen little beasts of the forest go scurrying away from him.

Lauren went limp. Wes sat up quickly and caught her in his arms, easing her off of him and laying her down beside him on the ground.

"Mmm," she murmured, eyes closed, smiling. "That was amazing. That was exactly what I needed."

"I'm yours," he whispered, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm so yours, Lauren."

A log snapped in the fire. Wes pulled himself closer to Lauren, grabbing one of the worn blankets Jessica had brought them during their first week in the wild. He spread it over their bodies.

Lauren kissed him, her lips moving as she murmured something he couldn't hear.

Wes was already drifting away. He gripped her hand, holding her close, and let exhaustion claim him.



Chapter Forty-Two

W^{ES} The next morning, Wes awoke to find Lauren on her feet again.

He jumped up and hurried over to her. “Are you all right?” he asked. “You’re not sick, are you?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” she said, casting an exasperated look at him. “You worry too much; did you know that?”

“You should be resting.”

“Wes, I’m only six months pregnant. And I’m healthy enough.”

“But you’re huge,” he said. “It must hurt you to walk around. I see how you’re always holding your back.”

She nodded. “I want to shift today,” she said.

He blinked. “You do?”

She hadn’t shifted since they’d come to live in the wild. Even when the nights had been cold, she’d slept human, buried in blankets, sometimes nestled against Wes’s own bear self for extra warmth.

“I want to hunt,” Lauren said.

This was unexpected. “You don’t need to do that,” he said. “I’m bringing in enough food for both of us.”

“But I want to,” she said. “Please?”

“You could get hurt.”

“No, I couldn’t,” she said. “Wild bears hunt when they’re pregnant all the time. This isn’t like fighting. Nothing’s going to happen to me. And if this is what my life is going to be like for the foreseeable future, I want to be able to fend for myself.”

“You don’t need to fend for yourself,” Wes said. “You have me. I’ll always take care of you.”

“I know that,” Lauren said gently. “But this is my *life*, Wes. I’m not going to spend the next ten years lying under this tree while you do everything. I need to learn how to live every aspect of this life.”

“Is this your way of saying you’re willing to live out here in the wild long term?”

“It’s already been two months,” she said. “We don’t know when it’ll be safe to go back to the city. We don’t know if it ever will. This is one thing we need to prepare ourselves for.”

“You’re right.” He was impressed by how practical she was being and how well she was handling the idea of a permanent life in the wild. Lauren had always been the suburban woman, with her well-tended hair and her high-heeled shoes. He’d never imagined he would see her really embracing this life.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll take you hunting.”

“Great,” she said.

He laughed.

“What?”

“Just imagining what the Lauren of twenty years ago would have said to this. I remember the day you left the city, you know.”

“You weren’t there the day I left the city. You’d already left for the woods.”

“No, I was there,” he said. “I came back to get a few things. When you came to the house to say goodbye to Jessica, I was upstairs.”

“I never knew that.”

“Yeah, I didn’t come down,” he said. “But I watched you from the window as you were leaving. You were all dressed up in that three-piece suit, with the little skirt...you really looked like a proper human that day.”

“And now?”

“Now you’re my wild woman.” He grabbed her and pulled her close, kissing her deeply, briefly. “Ready to hunt?”

“Hell yes.”

“Follow me, then.”

Shifting was a matter of reaching into his senses, which he needed to use in order to track prey. By the time he was fully bear, he had already caught the scent of a rabbit, hot and tender.

He glanced over his shoulder. Lauren was on his flank, watching him, following.

He moved slowly, knowing that this exertion would be difficult for her. It was easier for the bear’s body to carry a pregnancy than it was for a human, but still, she was far from unburdened.

But she was so graceful. Even after all his years of living wild, he had trouble moving through the brush without making noise. Lauren, though, was light on her feet, stepping with ease. She seemed to instinctively know where to place her feet to avoid making a sound.

I haven’t spent enough time with her like this, he realized. Even now that we live in the wild, I haven’t gotten to know this side of her.

He wanted to.

He spotted the rabbit, and glancing at her again, saw that she had seen it too. She hung back, waiting for his guidance.

He nodded to her. *You take it.*

She cocked her head. *Me?*

He nodded again.

He saw her gather her strength, preparing—

She lunged forward out of the trees. The rabbit’s head darted up, but it had no time to react before Lauren was upon it, her jaws closing around its neck. She gave her head a firm shake, then pawed back to Wes and laid the body carefully at his feet as if she was making an offering of her kill.

Wes stepped forward and nuzzled the side of her face, then pressed his shoulder to hers. He hoped she could feel how proud he was of her in that moment, and how impressed he was with the woman she had become. She was miles away from the twenty-year-old in the three-piece suit who had turned her back on her animal self and walked away to join the human world. She was shifter, like him.

He picked up the rabbit carefully, turned, and made his way back toward their little camp.

Lauren followed, not bothering with quiet now. Their dinner had been caught. The rabbit was plenty fat enough to serve as a meal for them both. Already, Wes could imagine the juicy taste of warm meat in his mouth after it had been cooked over their fire.

We're good at this life. We can handle this. And if we never feel safe going back, we'll teach our children to be good at this too.

He felt full of hope. It wasn't the life he or Lauren had dreamed of for themselves. It wasn't anything he had ever imagined. But it was working.



Chapter Forty-Three

LAUREN

As always, Lauren fell asleep quickly after their big meal. A full belly had always been the perfect thing to send her to sleep, and as her pregnancy developed, that became more and more true. She supposed her children must be like her in that way—worn out by the need to digest their dinners. It felt as if she was five times as tired these days.

When she opened her eyes, the moon was high overhead, and the world around her was dark. It was still night.

This wasn't her normal pattern. She had been sleeping through the night lately. For a moment, she wondered whether something was wrong. She sat up and placed a hand on her stomach, assessing her body, scanning for pain or trouble.

There was nothing. One of the babies moved slightly, but it didn't hurt. She was used to that sensation. It wouldn't have woken her.

What had?

She felt deeply uneasy, and she couldn't put her finger on the reason for that feeling.

Carefully, she extracted herself from a sleeping Wes's embrace and got to her feet. She went to the fire and sat down beside it. It was burning low, barely more than embers.

She added a bit more tinder, building it up carefully. Having something to do was good. It made for a distraction from her worry.

But she couldn't distract herself forever. Soon the fire was blazing again, and Lauren had no choice but to sit back and think.

She looked over at Wes. His dark, curly hair was splayed out on the ground like a fan around his head. As the firelight flickered, she could see the sun damage to his skin. Living

outdoors had made him look wild in a way that was permanent.

She looked at herself.

Everything that had made her who she was had disappeared. Her fashionable clothes were long gone. Her hair, which she'd taken such pride in during her twenty years living human, was a tangled mess.

She recalled what Wes had said before their hunt. *Now you're my wild woman.*

She loved being his wild woman. It was the sexiest thing she could imagine, knowing that he thought of her that way. She loved the possessiveness in his voice and in his look when he'd said it. She was *his*. And she was *wild*.

So why did she feel as if she was losing something she couldn't live without?

Leaving the suburbs had been intimidating, but it wasn't that. She didn't miss her home in Palatine. She no longer wanted to go back to her restaurant job. Coming home had been the right move. She needed to be in touch with her animal side in order to go through this pregnancy. She needed to be her true self, to feel the instincts of the bear guiding her as she prepared for motherhood.

But that wasn't why she had originally come back. Her original motivation had been to rejoin the den, to raise her babies as a part of that community. That wasn't happening now.

In a way, Tina won, didn't she? When she ran us out of town, she sent us into exile. It's the thing she wanted from the moment she knew I was back.

It was awful to think that she had gotten her way after all, even though Lauren knew she and Wes had had no other choice.

She had come back because she'd wanted her children to be brought up as part of a den. She had wanted them to know that side of their identity, their history and their culture. She'd

wanted to give that to them. Tina was taking that away from her family by claiming the city for herself.

We have to go back. We have to find a way to reestablish ourselves in the city.

But how could they? Tina was frightening. Violent. She had already set fire to Wes's trailer. The moment she found out they were in the city, Lauren was sure she would act against them.

The thought of Emmett came to her. Emmett was somewhere in these woods, too, planning to act against Cody. Lauren was sure that hadn't happened already because if it had, Jessica would have told them.

But what if it did? Would that make the den a safe place to live? Would they be able to go home? Or would they simply be trading one dangerous leader for another?

I haven't seen or spoken to Emmett in over twenty years. I have no idea what he's like now. For all she knew, he was just as bad as Cody. For all she knew, he was worse. He was planning an attack on the city, after all. That was dangerous. Could she really trust him?

Yes. I do trust him.

She didn't know what that little voice deep inside was, but it felt like instinct. And if there was one thing the past two months had taught Lauren, it was that her instincts were good and worth trusting.

She added another stick to the fire, even though it didn't really need replenishing. She enjoyed watching the way the flames seemed to take the wood from her hands, consuming it, as if they were a hungry animal and she was their keeper.

Somehow, she told herself firmly, we are going to find a way back into the den. I like living wild. I'm good at it, and that's gratifying. But it's not the life I want for my family. We're going to figure out a way to go back, and we're going to raise our children in a community, the way I imagined.

That was easier promised to herself than done, though, and sitting here under the light of the moon, it was hard to imagine

how she would ever be able to safely bring her family back into the city.



Chapter Forty-Four

LAUREN

A twig snapped behind Lauren.

She spun around, her heart in her throat.

Wes held up his hands. “Just me,” he said. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Did I wake you up?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “I mean, not directly. I think I sensed in my sleep that you weren’t there, and that woke me up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Are you okay?”

“Just thinking,” she said.

He sat down beside her. “You were really great on the hunt today,” he said. “You impressed the hell out of me. I hope you know that.”

She cracked a smile, but it felt forced. “Thanks.”

“What are you thinking about?”

She hesitated. They hadn’t spoken much about this in all their time out here together, and she was hesitant to cause an argument. “Do you think we’ll ever be able to go back to the city? Be part of the den again?”

“You want to, huh?” he said.

“It’s how I want to raise my kids,” she said. “Do you remember what it was like, growing up as part of the den?”

“Sure I do,” he said. “But I always had the feeling you didn’t like it very much.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You left.”

“So did you.”

“True enough.” He sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her, and she leaned in to rest her head on his shoulders. “I have good memories from when we were growing up. You’re right.”

“I wanted to get away from the shifter life,” she said. “I always felt more comfortable being human. But it wasn’t because I didn’t like the den. It was about *me*, not the community.”

“Do you still feel like that? Like you’d rather be human?”

“No,” she said. “I feel like I wasted twenty good years thinking that way, actually. I’m glad I came back when I did. I just wish we could go home. I wish we could be a part of the den.”

“Raising our kids out here wouldn’t be the end of the world, would it?” Wes asked.

“No,” she said. “But think about what they’d miss out on. Knowing other shifters. Going on runs with groups of kids their own age. The way the den feels like one big family. I want that for them.”

“Doesn’t really feel like one big family lately,” Wes murmured, stroking her hair.

Lauren nodded. “I don’t know how Cody and Tina can care so little about the welfare of their own denmates.”

“Tina’s always only cared about herself,” Wes pointed out. “She was like that when we were young, too.”

“That’s true,” Lauren said. Tina’s meanness had been a cornerstone of her childhood. It wasn’t surprising that she would be so hateful now that Lauren had returned. “How did she end up mated to Cody? Do you know?”

“I don’t,” Wes said. “But I bet there’s a lot of truth to what you said about her feeling insecure that she can’t have children. She’s past childbearing age, probably.”

“We thought that too,” Lauren reminded him with a small smile.

“Yeah,” Wes agreed. “But I bet in her case it’s actually true. That’s probably why she hates you so much right now. You got the miracle and she didn’t.”

“In a way, I can relate,” Lauren admitted.

“How so?”

“I spent years thinking I’d missed my chance to have a family,” Lauren said. “I threw myself into my work in the suburbs because that meant I wouldn’t have to think about it. And I think there was a part of me that clung to the idea of being human because I wouldn’t have to miss the big shifter family I was never going to have. That was too difficult to let myself think about.”

“Maybe that’s why I was so sure I didn’t want kids for so long,” Wes said. “I can’t imagine not wanting our babies now. I guess I wouldn’t let myself consider the option because if I did, I would have to admit that I was making all the wrong choices.”

“If Tina had gotten the miracle we did,” Lauren mused, “she would be able to watch her own son become the new alpha of the den. As Cody’s child, he’d have the best claim.”

Wes nodded. “I bet it kills her that their line is going to end with Cody. In the den history, he’s going to be written off as a footnote.”

“Of course, if they run the den into the ground with all their partying and carrying on, there won’t be a den history to speak of,” Lauren said.

“You know what I wish?” Wes asked.

“What’s that?”

“I wish our kids could grow up in the den we grew up in,” Wes said. “Not under Cody’s leadership, but under Arthur’s.”

“If only,” Lauren said.

But for the second time that night, Emmett’s face sprang to mind.

Would he be more like Arthur?

He had left the den after challenging Cody's authority. Matt had told her that. If Cody were to be removed from power, Emmett would be the oldest male descendant. He would be the next choice for the role of alpha.

Maybe that would be better.

She had dreaded the idea of den violence. It had terrified her. But now, for the first time since she had come across Emmett and his friends in the woods, she felt hopeful that they would act on their words. She wanted them to do what they had said they would.

They could remove Cody and Tina from power and turn the den into a good place.

She glanced at Wes. Would he agree with her if she told him what she was thinking?

When I told him Emmett was in the woods, his first response was to get me away from the city. He doesn't trust Emmett's plans.

For now, she decided, she wouldn't tell Wes what she was thinking. Unless there was a change in leadership, they wouldn't need to make a decision.



Chapter Forty-Five

L AUREN

“Come back to bed,” Wes said.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep,” Lauren said. Her thoughts were still racing.

“Well, I didn’t say sleep, did I?” Wes pointed out.

She looked up at him. He was staring at her in that way that made her feel as if her insides were melting.

“Okay,” she whispered, held completely captive by his eyes.

He helped her to her feet and led her over to the nest where they slept. He took her hands and braced them against the trunk of their tree. Then he eased her feet apart gently.

“When you’re worried about things, you can just wake me up,” he whispered, wrapping his body around hers, hitching his hips so that she could feel how hard he already was. “I can distract you from whatever’s on your mind.”

“Didn’t want to bother you.” It was more breath than actual words.

“You’re not bothering me,” he murmured. “You’re never bothering me. You want this?”

“You know I do. When do I not want it?”

He chuckled. “I’m just asking if you’re ready.”

“Wes, I am constantly ready. Any time, day or night, you could just grab me, and—*ohhh*,” she broke off with a moan as he slid into her. “Fuck. Yeah, there you go.”

“You weren’t kidding.” Wes kissed the back of her neck. “Didn’t take much to get your motor running.”

“I’m so wet all the time, Wes.”

“I know, babe.” He took her hands and moved them slightly lower on the tree trunk so that her hips were tilted

backward at a better angle. Then he leaned over her, took her breasts in his hands, and kneaded gently as he fucked her.

Lauren closed her eyes. She loved losing herself in his touch. Nothing in the world felt as good as this.

“I want you to come first,” he said, slowing his rhythm, giving her deep, steady strokes. His thumbs circled her nipples. “This is how I want it. I want to do this, right here, until you come on me, and then I want to fuck you hard until I can’t stand up anymore.”

“Yeah,” she moaned.

“You want that?”

“You know I want that.”

He rolled her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. “I’m going to make you come,” he said. “Just like this. I know how fucking sensitive you are. This is going to be enough. I’m going to get you there, baby.”

“Mmm,” she said. “I know you will. You—” She gasped as he reversed directions. “You always do.”

Wes cupped his fingers loosely around her breasts and stroked up slowly, bringing them to meet at her nipples. She shuddered with pleasure.

He opened his hands and traced his fingers back down.

“You like that?” he asked.

“Don’t stop. Please.”

He pressed his forehead against her shoulder blade, and she felt the heavy heat of his breath. He was enjoying this every bit as much as she was.

Lauren knew how much Wes loved her body. He never left her in any doubt about it. He was worshipful of her, and she loved him in return. She loved his masterful, thick fingers that knew where to touch her as surely as if he’d had a map. She loved his thick cock and how entirely he filled her. She loved the roughness of his skin against hers, the wildness she could feel in him when he fucked her.

For as much as they loved one another emotionally, Lauren was deeply grateful that they needed each other physically just as much. She couldn't imagine a life without Wes's body.

Maybe it was his steady touches or the way he throbbed within her with each thrust, or maybe it was the fact that she had been thinking about him in such detail, but suddenly she felt her orgasm building.

There was no time to tell him. It was coming on too powerfully, too rapidly. She writhed in his arms, letting out a rapturous scream, her vision obscured by stars.

As the pleasure began to fade, she became aware of his arms around her, guiding her slowly down. "Hands and knees," he murmured, still fucking into her.

She managed to get her knees beneath her. Hands were too much to ask for. She flattened her cheek against the ground, eyes closed, imagining that she could feel the earth trembling beneath them.

She reached her hands back for Wes's, and he caught them, pulling against her arms so that he could fuck her harder.

She sobbed with pleasure. "That's so deep. You're so fucking deep. I can't—"

Then she was coming again, all sense of what she might have been about to say lost in the waves of pleasure that crashed over her body. Dimly, she was aware of Wes gasping behind her, his hand letting go of hers to grip the globe of her ass so tightly that she was sure she would have bruises there later. She didn't care. She wanted them. She wanted his marks all over her body.

He helped her ease herself down onto her side so that her belly wouldn't be harmed. Then he lay down beside her.

For several long minutes, Lauren was aware only of the sounds of the two of them gasping for air, trying to recover from the exertion.

"You were right," she murmured at last.

"Hmm?"

“That was better than sitting awake and worrying.”

He chuckled. “So you’ll wake me up next time?”

“Yeah.”

“Think you can sleep?”

“I do.”

He reached over and took her hand, and Lauren felt warm all over, even though the night air was a little bit chilly. “Sleep well,” he said, curling up behind her so that their bodies were pressed together.



Chapter Forty-Six

W^{ES} Wes took Lauren hunting with him again the following day. She moved more easily when she was in bear form, and she was more comfortable that way. Besides, it made him feel more relaxed to have her by his side, not to have to worry that something had gone wrong back at the camp.

He let Lauren take the lead today. She was hunkered down, watching a squirrel, waiting for it to move closer so that she could attack. He was impressed anew that she was willing to go for squirrel. The meat wouldn't be as tender as the rabbit had been, and she knew that—they'd eaten squirrel plenty of times over the past couple of months.

Lauren had never complained about it. Not once.

She really is getting good at living out in the wild like this.

Suddenly, without any warning sign that Wes could detect, Lauren darted out and caught the squirrel's neck in her mouth. She gave it a quick shake, then brought it back to Wes.

He loved the way she laid her kills down at his feet. There was something insanely hot about that, as if she was paying him respect.

He was about to pick up the squirrel and turn for home when the sound of something much larger moving through the trees stopped him cold.

He glanced at Lauren. She was also frozen, listening.

Whatever it was, it was too heavy to be a deer. It was too heavy to be a human.

He wanted to tell Lauren to run back, that he would cover her retreat, but he didn't dare shift back to human form so that he could speak. He might need to fight. When that thing emerged from the trees, he was going to have to be ready.

The leaves parted, and a large brown bear emerged.

Automatically, Wes fell backward several paces.

It had been trained into them from the moment they had been old enough to start controlling their shifting. *Wild bears aren't like us. You never approach a wild bear. They can't be reasoned with.* It was the very first lesson every shifter child learned.

The wild bear wasn't approaching Wes either. It was standing still, sizing him up.

Wondering whether or not it should attack?

Wes couldn't be sure. He couldn't read the bear's body language. It wasn't showing its teeth, which would definitely have presaged an attack. But its shoulders were tense, and it was staring directly at Wes.

Go home! Wes thought desperately to Lauren, wishing she could pick up on his thoughts. *Walk away!* Surely, she would know enough to walk rather than run, wouldn't she? She would know that running from a wild bear was too dangerous.

Right?

They had all been taught that as children. But she had been away for so long. Would she remember that lesson?

He maneuvered himself slowly in between the wild bear and Lauren. He would have to keep his body between the two of them. If the bear decided to become violent, he would make sure the attack didn't reach Lauren. He remembered what he had said the day Tina had burned down his trailer, the day Lauren had wanted so badly to fight. Even one bad hit from an enemy could seriously harm their babies.

God, Lauren likes to fight. She'll try to get involved if it comes to that.

He ached to shift. He would have given anything in the world to be able to talk to her, to tell her that she needed to get away from here and leave this to him.

In his peripheral vision, he saw Lauren take a step forward.

No!

He moved to block her, growling a little. It was against his nature to growl at Lauren, but it was the only way he could think of to communicate to her just how serious this situation was. She couldn't approach a wild bear!

Now the wild bear growled, its eyes still fixed on Wes. Rather than being put off by Lauren's movement, it seemed to be angry at something Wes had done.

What the hell is going on here?

To Wes's horror, Lauren shifted.

He felt as if he had fallen into a nightmare. There she was, purely human, completely defenseless, one hand cradling her swollen belly, the other hand held out defensively.

Not held out to the wild bear.

Held out to *him*. As if *he* were the threat here.

"Wes," she said. "Stop. Stop."

He felt as if he was about to have a panic attack. He stepped forward, intending to put himself between her and the wild bear once again.

A snarl ripped through the wild bear's teeth.

Wes felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up in agitation.

"Both of you, stop it!" Lauren said.

Both of you?

She was talking to the wild bear as if it could understand her. As if...

Wes looked into the bear's eyes.

Oh.

There was reason there. Thought. Understanding. A human mind behind those teeth.

This wasn't a wild bear at all. It was a shifter.

Well, that didn't necessarily mean they were safe. He crouched low, ready to spring, ready to defend his family.

Being shifter didn't mean being trustworthy, especially after this bear had growled at him. *Who the hell does he think he is?*

“Wes, wait,” Lauren said. “Stand down, okay?”

She turned and faced the stranger now, both hands held out to him. To Wes, it looked more like she was showing empty palms—displaying that she wasn't a threat—than fending off a foe.

“Emmett?” she asked quietly. Wonderingly. “Is that you?”



Chapter Forty-Seven

W^{ES} Wes wasn't wild about the idea of bringing Emmett back to their shared nest. He didn't want any outsiders anywhere near their home. The last time he'd allowed an outsider to get close to his home, she'd burned it down.

But Lauren didn't seem to have any such reservations. She had dressed and was digging through Wes's small pile of clothes, pulling things out for Emmett. She hadn't even asked his permission.

"Here," she said, handing Emmett a pair of pants. "These'll fit you well enough."

"Thanks." Emmett took the pants and stepped into them. Wes felt his blood boil, but he said nothing.

Emmett stretched his arms over his head. "Have you got anything to eat?" he asked, looking around.

That was a bridge too far. "Hang on," Wes said. "You're not just coming into our house and eating our food."

"House?" Emmett raised his eyebrows.

"Fuck's sake. It's an expression. We know you're living wild too, by the way, so don't get all high and mighty."

"I don't know where you get off telling me how to act," Emmett said mildly. "Not that I mind, necessarily, but it looks to me like you've knocked up my cousin. Is that about the size of it?"

"Not that you *mind*?" Wes repeated incredulously. "I don't think that's any of your business, actually."

"Wes, stop it," Lauren said.

"He was exiled from the den, Lauren. He's violent."

Emmett laughed. "Oh, give me a break. Is he serious with this?"

“He was exiled because he challenged Cody,” Lauren said. “It didn’t have anything to do with being violent.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Wes said.

“What did you hear?” Emmett said.

“I heard you were threatening women.”

“Bullshit,” Emmett scoffed. “I wouldn’t do that. Lauren, have you ever seen me threaten a woman?”

“Lauren hasn’t lived here for twenty years,” Wes interrupted. “She doesn’t have any idea what you’re capable of, so don’t make her try to defend you.”

“Wes,” Lauren said. “You haven’t lived in the city for twenty years either. You’re talking about gossip. How can you be sure?”

“Well, what do you think happened?” Wes demanded.

“From what Matt told me, it sounds like no one knows,” Lauren said. She turned to Emmett. “But he seemed to think Tina had set you up somehow, to get rid of a threat to Cody’s power.”

Emmett nodded. “That’s exactly what happened,” he said. “Those rumors about me—it’s part of her plan to make sure I’ll always be unwelcome among the den.”

“And we’re just supposed to take your word for that?” Wes asked.

“Wes,” Lauren said. “It’s his word against Cody and Tina’s. You can’t tell me you’re more inclined to believe *them*.”

She had a point. Still, Wes wasn’t used to putting his trust in others.

“The thing is,” Emmett said, “Cody was right to see me as a threat. And Tina was right to be afraid of what I might do. Because I’ve never stopped looking for a way to take their power away from them. I’m not going to rest until the alpha position is out of Cody’s hands.”

Lauren nodded. “I know,” she said.

“Do you? How?”

“I heard you talking in the woods a few months ago. I didn’t know who you were talking to, though.”

Emmett laughed. “You got close enough to hear us and we didn’t even realize it? Damn, little cousin. I didn’t realize you were that stealthy.”

“She’s a natural at living wild,” Wes said, his voice coming out a bit more darkly than he had intended. He could see that Lauren was happy to be reunited with her cousin, and he wanted to put his trust in Emmett too. But that was hard to do. He barely knew Emmett at all—he was a few years older than Lauren and Wes were, so they hadn’t spent that much time together while they were growing up.

“I see that,” Emmett said coolly. “So you two are together, are you?”

“That’s right,” Lauren said.

“How long until the babies are born?”

“Ought to be another two months, I guess,” Lauren said. “We’re looking forward to it.”

“And you’re going to raise them out here? In the wild?”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Wes said. “Worry about yourself, Emmett.”

“No, I’ll worry about my cousin, thank you,” Emmett said. “The woods are a hell of a place to raise a family, Lauren. It’s hard enough living out here when you *don’t* have children.”

“I know,” Lauren said with a sigh. “It’s not my first choice. But Cody and Tina aren’t going to welcome us back with open arms anytime soon.”

She caught Emmett up on their recent encounter with Tina and their theories as to why she disliked them so intensely. Emmett nodded along.

“It makes sense,” he said. “She loves being mated to the alpha so much; it’s hard to imagine her relinquishing her hold on that in any way, for any reason. Of course she would

perceive a future alpha in someone else's bloodline as a threat to her dominance."

"And Cody?" Lauren said. "How would he feel about it?"

"Honestly, I don't know," Emmett said. "Cody has been so checked out in the past few years. He's drunk half the time, and when he isn't drunk, he's asleep."

"He's destroying the den," Lauren said. "I saw enough of it while I was with them. It was awful. I can't believe this is what Cody's come to."

Emmett nodded. "That's why my crew and I are planning to take control away from them," he said. "Will you come back with me and meet everyone?"

"Sure," Lauren said.

"No," Wes said.

Lauren looked at him.

"Lauren, I need to speak to you," he said. "Privately."

He turned and strode off into the woods before she could object, not bothering to look over his shoulder to see whether she was following him or not.

She had better be. We need to have this out immediately.



Chapter Forty-Eight

W^{ES} When he turned back, he was relieved to see that Lauren was hurrying up behind him.

Almost immediately, though, he felt guilty. Because of his long stride, she had been forced to run to keep up. She was waddling more than she was actually running, but the sight of her exerting herself at all was more than he could take. He was back at her side in two steps.

“Take it easy,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have rushed out ahead like that. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, looking up at him anxiously. “Are *you*? You seem...”

“I seem what?”

“Upset. Angry? I can’t tell if you’re angry.” She frowned. “Aren’t you happy that we found Emmett?”

“Lauren, we’ve spent the past two months *avoiding* Emmett.”

“That’s not what we were doing,” she protested. “We’ve been avoiding Tina and Cody, not him.”

“No,” he said. “Think back. This is why you left the den and moved out here with me in the first place. Before Tina burned the trailer. You were out here because you heard Emmett talking in the woods, and you knew there was going to be a war.”

Lauren looked down at her feet.

“I mean, has something changed?” Wes prodded her. “Are you fine with war now? Are you fine with him attacking the city where my sister lives? Where your best friend lives?”

“Wes...” She drew a breath. “You saw what Tina did to your home.”

“Of course I saw it. You don’t think I could ever forget about such a thing, do you?”

“Definitely not. Of course not. But think about it. Who’s the bigger threat here? Emmett isn’t going to go into the city burning and pillaging. He isn’t going to set fire to people’s homes. He isn’t going to harm civilians. He’s going to find Cody and challenge him directly.”

“It’s still a shifter fight in the middle of the city,” Wes said. “There could be casualties. Collateral damage. People could get hurt, Lauren. You’re really okay with taking that chance?”

“Wes, I think we have to,” she said. “Cody is going to destroy the den.”

“We don’t need the den.”

“We do need it. It’s where I grew up. It’s where you grew up. I want our children to grow up there.” She hesitated, then went on. “I don’t want to raise them out here in the wild.”

“Are you just saying that because your cousin suggested that living in the wild wasn’t good enough?”

“No. You and I were talking about it, remember? We were saying that we wished we could raise our children in the den we grew up in. When Arthur was alpha.”

“Emmett isn’t Arthur,” Wes said. It seemed almost blasphemous to compare anyone at all to the strong, capable leader they had had in his youth.

“Maybe he’s not,” Lauren agreed. “But he’s a damn sight better than Cody, and you know it.”

Wes looked away.

She was right. He did know it. Things would be infinitely better if Emmett were in charge instead of Cody. Anybody would be better than Cody.

“The den could get their financial affairs in order,” Lauren said. “You want to protect Jessica? I’m sure she’s not getting the weekly stipend she’s due as a den member. I wasn’t getting the full amount when I lived there. I was going to have to take a job outside the den to support the babies.”

Wes nodded. Jessica had told him that her income had gone down lately. She had been considering seeking employment herself.

“Wes,” Lauren said.

He looked at her.

“We could go home,” she said. “If Cody was out of power, we could take our babies home.”

“You really want that,” he said quietly. “Don’t you?”

“I want it more than anything,” she admitted. “It took me a while to realize it, but I do. I don’t want to live a human life in the suburbs, and I don’t want to live out here in the wild. I’m not a human. I’m not a bear. I’m a shifter, and I want a foot in both worlds. I want to be a part of the den.”

He caressed her cheek. “You know, I never would have imagined it could be so hot to hear you say that.”

“Me saying that I want to go home is hot?”

“Not that part. The part about how you’re part human and part bear.” He grinned. “When we were young, it felt like you and I were going our separate ways. I didn’t think there was anyone in the world I understood less than I did you. How could anyone go and live in the human world full time? How could you give up your birthright as a bear?”

She chuckled. “When I found out you were going to live in the woods, I thought you were insane. I thought you’d come crawling back in a week.”

“I thought the same about you,” he admitted.

“It took us both a little bit longer than that.”

“Yeah, it did.”

“But I think it’s time now,” Lauren said. “I’m ready to go home. I want to be a part of the den again. And I think that following Emmett is the best way for us to do that.”

Wes took her in his arms. *I can’t live without her. I can’t stand it if anything happens to her, or to those babies.*

“I just want what’s best for you,” he said quietly. “You know that’s all I want.”

“I know,” she said. “I think this is what’s best.”

“We can’t be sure.”

“We can go with him,” Lauren said. “Meet his people. Find out more about his plans. And then we can decide.”

He couldn’t deny her anything. He had never been able to. From the very start, he’d been wrapped around her finger.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll go with him.”



Chapter Forty-Nine

LAUREN
“Everyone,” Emmett said, “this is my cousin, Lauren, and her mate, Wes.”

Lauren glanced around the clearing at the men assembled there, feeling vaguely shaken for two wildly different reasons.

First of all, that was the first time anyone had ever referred aloud to Wes as her *mate*. Even when they discussed their relationship among themselves, they had never used that term. She found she rather liked hearing it.

But much more overwhelming was the fact that she didn't know a single man standing in this clearing.

She had expected that they would all be outcasts from the den, like Emmett was. But if that was the case, why didn't she know them?

Then one of the men spoke up. “Sure,” he said. “I remember Lauren. You're back, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, feeling utterly disoriented.

“Jack Wilson.” He held out a hand. She shook it, glancing at Emmett in search of an explanation.

“He would have been just a kid when you left,” Emmett explained. “Twelve or thirteen.”

“Oh.” Lauren took a second look around. With that context, it was clear that all the men in the clearing were much younger than she, Emmett, and Wes were.

“Cody exiles anyone he thinks might grow up to be a threat,” Wes surmised.

“Right,” Emmett said. “Most of these guys have been on their own, away from the den, a lot longer than I have. Some of them since they were kids.”

“Jesus,” Lauren breathed. She'd had no idea Cody had been doing this—sending away so many of his own people,

just because there was a chance his authority might be called into question. “Wouldn’t most alphas welcome a challenge from a kid? They could win handily and remove any doubt that they ought to be in charge.”

“We weren’t idiots,” one of the men spoke up. “We weren’t going to challenge him while we were children. We were going to wait until we were fully grown.”

“But at least we would have asked him for a fair fight,” another man said. “Now, we’re not going to do that. We’re going to find him when he’s sleeping and slit his throat.”

A third man was watching Lauren suspiciously. “If she’s your cousin,” he said to Emmett, “isn’t she Cody’s cousin too? How do we know she’s not going to run back and tell him everything we’re saying here?”

Lauren shook her head. “I wouldn’t.”

“You’re a den deserter. You ran out on us for twenty years. Why should we believe you’re going to put the best interests of the den first now?”

“It’s about her own best interests, too,” Wes spoke up. He was standing so close behind Lauren that she could feel every inch of his body pressed up against her. It was comforting. “She’s pregnant, and she’s from Arthur’s direct line. Cody sees that as a threat to his power. He’s never going to let her go home. She’s not on his side.”

“Lauren, can I speak to you?” Emmett asked. He glanced at Wes, then added, “Privately?”

“You can speak to her here,” Wes said.

“Wes, no, it’s okay.” Lauren pulled free of his hold. “I’ll be fine. I want to go talk to him.”

“Lauren—”

“He’s my cousin, Wes.”

“Yeah. Cody’s your cousin too.”

She sighed in exasperation. “Don’t do that. Emmett is harmless. We’re just going to talk.” She pulled free of Wes’s

protective grip and walked off, knowing that Emmett would follow her, knowing that Wes would be hurt but that he would let her go.

I'll apologize to him later.

She turned after she'd covered a few yards of ground and faced her cousin. "What's up?" she asked.

"Is he always like that?" Emmett asked.

"Like what?"

"Overbearing."

"Don't judge him, Emmett. I'm carrying his children. Of course he's going to be protective. Wouldn't you be?"

"I don't know," Emmett admitted. He pushed his long hair back away from his face. "I've never been mated. Never had children. I guess maybe I would. But it's hard to imagine any of it, to tell you the truth."

"Sure," Lauren said.

"But that's what I wanted to talk to you about," Emmett said.

"Wes being overprotective?"

"No, your children. The possibility that you might be carrying a boy."

"Odds are pretty good there." She cradled her belly, wondering, not for the first time, how many she was about to become mother to.

"It's worth considering," Emmett said.

"What is?"

"Well, Cody and Tina are right, aren't they?" Emmett said. "If you give birth to a son, he'll be the most apparent heir to the alpha position."

"So? He'll be a baby. Not a threat to them."

"Babies grow up," Emmett said sagely.

"Emmett, what is your point?"

“My point is that we’ve been looking for a catalyst for this revolution we’re trying to have. Now maybe we’ve got one.”

“My child?”

“It’s something to rally around,” Emmett said. “We’re deposing Cody in order to install a new alpha. And it gives us a bit of time pressure because we don’t want to wait until he’s grown up. We want to have time for the den to rebuild so that when he’s an adult, he can inherit a stable family.”

“He isn’t even born yet.” Lauren stepped back, wrapping her arms protectively around herself. “And you’ve already got him leading the den? I don’t know if I want that for him.”

“It’s his rightful place, Lauren,” Emmett said. “You and Wes are planning on going back to the city if Cody is overthrown, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, we are,” Lauren said. “But I thought…”

“What?”

“I thought *you* would be the new alpha.”

“I don’t have children,” Emmett said. “This is still something we’re going to have to think about. The next generation. The future of our den. Your child might be what we’ve been waiting for.”

Lauren felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature.

“Just think about it,” Emmett said. He turned and walked away.



Chapter Fifty

LAUREN
L “What did he want to talk to you about?” Wes asked.
“Not now,” Lauren said.

She would have to tell him eventually, she knew. What Emmett was proposing was something they would have to decide on together, and Lauren suspected Wes would be even less willing to consider allowing their child to go back and lead the den than she herself had been.

But the truth was that she *was* considering it. And if there was going to be an argument between herself and Wes about it, she didn't want to have that argument tonight.

They'd found their way to a secluded spot away from the rest of Emmett's group and had lain down together side by side. As was usual when the two of them headed to bed like this, they had begun to touch each other—first casual brushes of their fingertips across each other's skin, but gradually, things were beginning to heat up. That was what Lauren wanted to pay attention to—the feeling of his hands on her body. She didn't want to think about taking over the den. Not now.

She wriggled out of her clothes and set them aside, then began to lift his shirt over his head.

“Someone might see,” Wes murmured, but he didn't move to stop her.

“No one is going to see,” she said. “They're all asleep over on their side of the camp. We're fine. Besides, I want you.” He had never denied her something she wanted. He wouldn't start now, she was sure.

And she was right. With a groan of desperation, he reached for her. He rolled her onto her side and pulled her back so that her body was flush against his.

His hand reached around as he carefully thrust into her, and he cradled her swollen belly. For a moment, he didn't move, and Lauren closed her eyes, reveling in the sensation of fullness and the feeling that the two of them were one. She felt his lips on the back of her shoulder, then kissing their way up along the curve of her neck.

“You're so beautiful,” he whispered.

She *felt* beautiful. She felt worshipped.

He hadn't begun to thrust yet—she sensed he was waiting for her to ask—but he was panting hungrily, twitching behind her. Twitching *inside* her. Every move took her arousal higher and higher until it felt like her nerves were sending off sparks. The breeze over her fevered skin was almost enough to make her come.

“God,” she whispered. “This might be enough for me, Wes. I could come just feeling you inside me.”

He groaned. His hand trembled against her skin.

“Don't worry,” she whispered. “I want you to fuck me, baby. I want to feel you move.”

She hadn't even gotten the sentence out before his hands were sliding up to grab her breasts. His hips began to buck, almost erratically, as if he was unable to control the force of his desire and channel it into a rhythm.

His thumbs brushed over her nipples and she understood the feeling.

She had to bite down on her lip to keep from screaming as his thrusts hit her deep inside, waking some part of her that was constantly aching for his touch. She felt as if she was being turned inside out.

“Not a sound,” he growled in her ear, sounding wild and wanton.

She nodded vigorously. Somehow, control of the current situation had shifted away from her and back to him. He had been waiting for her approval to begin fucking her in earnest,

but she saw now that she had never really been in charge. This had been his show from the beginning.

God, that was hot.

His hand moved between her legs, and Lauren could feel how wet she made him immediately. He hummed happily now, toying with her, teasing her, but she wasn't going to last much longer at this rate.

“Wes,” she breathed.

“Now?” he asked.

He was asking whether she was ready to come. A part of her wanted to say no, to ask him to slow down and make this last as long as possible. But her body was racing toward her orgasm, and she wanted it, she wanted it.

“Now,” she moaned.

The rhythm and pressure of his fingers changed. He wasn't teasing her anymore. He was giving her exactly what her body needed, and she barely had time to marvel at the fact that he knew her well enough to know what that was before her orgasm was upon her.

She felt him stiffen behind her and knew that he was coming too, and then, simultaneously, they both relaxed.

She rolled carefully over to face him and placed a hand on the side of his face. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Hey. Thank *you*.” He leaned in and kissed her deeply.

As he pulled away from her, she let herself sink into what felt natural and instinctive. The scent of the woods around her and the bone-deep satisfaction in her body spoke to the bear within her, calling it to the surface.

Beside her, Wes shifted also and curled up beneath the tree they had claimed as their own to sleep.

She pressed her body up against his. She loved how strong and warm he felt when he was in this form. She felt so safe with him beside her.

She allowed her eyes to drift closed, listening to the sound of voices across the clearing.

She could hear Emmett even now, planning the future of his little rag-tag band.

Do we really have a chance at taking over the den and deposing Cody? Getting rid of Tina?

Could one of my children really become the next alpha?

She still didn't know whether that was something she wanted or not, but the more she thought about it, the more it began to appeal to her.

Maybe I could raise the next alpha.

It was definitely worth considering.



Chapter Fifty-One

L AUREN

Lauren awoke to the sound of shouting.

For a moment, she was disoriented. Her head was too high off the ground. Was she in a bed?

No. Her head had been resting on her paws. She had fallen asleep as a bear.

As that realization washed over her, she swam upward through her consciousness, returning to her human form, reaching out as she did for the pile of clothes she'd left beside herself last night. She tugged them on quickly, glancing over her shoulder at Wes. He was still asleep.

She looked over at the larger group. What were they shouting about?

Wake Wes or go and see for myself?

Wes would insist that she wake him if he had a say in the matter. He wouldn't want her facing whatever was happening over there by herself.

But I won't be alone. Emmett is there. Whatever's going on, he's not going to let it hurt any of us. And she didn't want to disturb Wes's sleep. He had been working so hard lately. He deserved to get some rest.

Her mind made up, she hurried across the clearing as fast as she could, which wasn't very fast in her heavily pregnant state. She enjoyed being pregnant. She enjoyed the feeling of carrying her children. But she was beginning to tire of waddling everywhere she went.

Emmett and his group came into view. There was a newcomer with them. As he turned slightly, the firelight caught his face.

"Matt?" Lauren cried out, incredulous, horrified.

Her cousin had been badly beaten. His eye was bloodshot and beginning to blacken, and he cradled one arm gingerly,

giving Lauren the impression that it had been broken. She hurried to his side.

He looked up at her. “Lauren. Shit. Emmett was telling me that you were here. You got big.” He grinned—tried to grin, at least. His lip was swollen, and she saw that he was missing a tooth.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “What happened to you? Who did this?”

“Who do you think?” Emmett spoke up. His face was twisted with hate. “It was Cody and his lackeys, of course.”

“I thought you were with him, Matt,” Lauren said.

“You thought I was *with* him? On his side?”

“No,” Lauren said. “But I thought *he* thought you were on his side. You were one of his betas.”

Matt shook his head. “He didn’t think so, I guess.”

“What happened? Did he find out you and I had talked?” Oh, she was going to feel awful if this had happened to her cousin because of her.

But he shook his head. “It’s nothing to do with you,” he assured her. “At least, I don’t think it is. He thought I was going to try to overthrow him.”

“But you weren’t,” Lauren said. “Were you?”

“No,” Matt said. “But I will now. He had his goons beat me up, and then he threw me out of the city. I’m exiled now.”

“The whole thing was a pretense if you want my opinion,” Emmett said.

“A pretense?” Matt asked. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t think he ever thought you were going to overthrow him,” Emmett said. “He wanted an excuse to get anyone having anything to do with our family out of town. Think about it. It’s the same thing he did to me. He made up a lie, or maybe he let Tina make it up, about me harming the women of the den. Once that spread, nobody wanted me

anywhere near the city. I was run out with pitchforks, practically.”

“That story wasn’t true?” Matt asked.

Emmett sneered. “Of course it wasn’t. You were in his inner circle. You must have known.”

“I swear, I didn’t,” Matt said shakily. “I only guessed. I didn’t even know you were alive, Emmett.”

“And look at what he did to Lauren,” Emmett went on, gesturing to her even though he hadn’t officially acknowledged her presence. “She gets pregnant and he and his mate use it as an excuse to attack her and run *her* out of town too.” He glanced at Lauren. “They probably would have left you alone forever if you hadn’t gotten pregnant, but now that you’re at risk of providing a male heir, you’re a threat.”

“But why would they have waited so long to move against Matt?” Lauren asked.

“I don’t know,” Emmett said. He looked at Matt. “Why *did* they wait so long? Did something happen that made Cody think he had a reason not to trust you now?”

“Nothing’s changed,” Matt said. “I don’t know what it could be, except...”

He fell silent, staring off into the distance pensively.

“Except what?” Emmett prompted.

“Lauren’s pregnancy,” Matt said. “That’s the only thing that’s changing.”

Lauren shuddered.

“But Lauren’s not anywhere near the den,” Emmett said.

“I know,” Matt said. “But even so, they’re obsessed with her. They’re counting down the weeks until the babies will be born. They’ve estimated what they think your due date is going to be, and they’ve got it circled on a calendar.”

Lauren felt nauseous. “Why?” she asked. “Why do they care? I’m all the way out here. I thought they were going to forget about me.”

“No, they were never going to forget about you,” Matt said. “Cody considers your child to be the biggest risk to his way of life.”

“I knew it,” Emmett murmured. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“What are we going to do?” Lauren asked.

“We’re going to attack them,” Emmett said. “We’ve got Matt now. We’ve got everything we need—inside knowledge of the way they run the den, brute force, and a new leader to fight for. It’s time. We’ll make our stand tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Lauren breathed.

“Are you with us?” Emmett asked her.

She didn’t know what to say. This was all happening so fast.

“I need to talk to Wes,” she said. “I can’t decide anything until I’ve spoken to Wes.”



Chapter Fifty-Two

W^{ES} “Wes?”

He woke quickly, as he always did when he was in his animal form. There was never a moment of confusion as to what body he was in. Waking up as a bear was as familiar as waking up in his own bed—before it had been burned to ashes, that was.

What wasn't familiar was the expression on Lauren's face. She looked tormented. He was on his feet in an instant, looking around for the threat.

She rested her hands on his shoulders. “It's all right,” she said. “Stay calm, okay? Do you want to shift back? I want to talk to you.”

There was a brief pause as he considered that. Then he began to shift under her hands.

As the bear fell away and the human man emerged, he sank lower to the ground, until he was on his hands and knees in the dirt. Lauren kept her hands on his shoulders and lowered herself with him, so that when the shift was complete, she was kneeling beside him.

“What's wrong?” he asked, gripping her wrists in his hands.

“Nothing's wrong,” she said.

“You look like you're being hunted.”

“No, I'm not. Nothing like that. It's just...Matt's here.”

“Matt?” He struggled to his feet. “Your cousin Matt?”

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “Cody threw him out of the city.”

“Why?”

“I guess he thought Matt was going to challenge him. It's so fucked up, Wes. Matt would never have done anything. He's not that kind of person.”

“No, I know he isn’t,” Wes admitted. “I always had respect for Matt, even though he was working next to Cody. He wasn’t the type to start a fight. Is he okay?”

“He’s ready to start a fight,” Lauren said.

Wes’s heart skipped a beat. “Now?”

“They’re planning to attack the den tomorrow. To try to remove Cody from power. Wes...we need to make a decision.”

“You’re going to ask me to fight with them.” He had been afraid that this was coming.

“I don’t know what I’m going to ask,” she said. “I just want the two of us to be on the same page about what we’re going to do, Wes. Whether that’s joining Emmett’s war or going off on our own, I just want us to be together.”

“If I don’t want any part of this, you would leave with me?” he asked.

She didn’t hesitate. “Of course I would,” she said. “You’re my mate, Wes. You’re the father of my children. I want us to be a family. I want that more than I want anything else. And if we have to leave Chicago altogether, put all of this behind us and start a life somewhere else, then that’s what I’ll do. The only thing I care about is that you’re with me.”

Wes pulled her into his arms and held her for a long moment. It felt wonderful to know that, no matter what, she would be by his side.

“That’s not what you want, though,” he murmured.

“Wes—”

“It’s all right. You can tell the truth. You want to stay, don’t you?”

She took a deep breath. “I want to help them,” she said. “I want to raise our children as a part of the den we grew up in. And I don’t want to abandon my family now that they’re finally ready to make a stand. We can help them. Our babies are the best hope for this den’s future.”

Wes sighed. "I can't lie. I wish that wasn't true. I wish they didn't need us."

"I know you've never wanted power," Lauren said.

"No, I haven't," Wes agreed. "I've never wished I was an alpha, and if the role was offered to me, I wouldn't take it." It was part of the reason he had left the den in the first place all those years ago. He hated the rigid structure of den life. The idea of his child growing up to lead the den didn't feel right or natural. It felt like something he would rather avoid.

But if it meant his children could grow up in the culture of the den...

"I know how much it means to you to raise them among the den," he said. "I wouldn't want to take that away from you if there's a chance we can make it happen. Even if it means we have to fight."

She looked up at him. "Really? You'd be willing to fight?"

"I don't like it," he said. "But I have to admit that it might be the best way forward."

"Are you sure, Wes?" Her arms tightened around his waist. "I don't want to make you do this if you aren't comfortable with it. We can find another way."

"I want you to be happy," he said. "Haven't I always told you I'll do anything for you?"

"I won't be happy if you're unhappy."

"I won't be unhappy," he said. "I have the same memories you do of growing up in the den. Those were really good times. I would like our children to have that."

"And the alpha role?"

"We have years before we'll have to worry about it," Wes said. "And there's no point in trying to decide this on behalf of a child who hasn't been born yet. If he hates the idea, he can always abdicate. But we'll do our best to raise him to feel capable and ready to lead."

Lauren smiled up at him. "I feel exactly the same way."

He took her hands in his. “So we’re going to war?”

“I guess we are. Strange, isn’t it, thinking of it in those terms?”

“I don’t want you anywhere near the battle,” he said, glancing down at her belly. “We’ll figure out a way to keep you safe and out of the line of fire.”

“I want you to be safe too,” she said. “You have to promise me that you’ll be careful.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not going to let anything get in the way of meeting my children. I’ll be fine.”



Chapter Fifty-Three

W^{ES} “We don’t want a war,” Emmett murmured. “We’ll go to war if we have to. But the only fight I have is with Cody. All we really need is to find him. You know the plan?”

Wes and the others nodded. The plan was simple enough. They would infiltrate the city quietly, keeping to their human forms, and search for Cody. When someone found him, they would neutralize him and bring him to Lauren’s house, which she had offered them the use of to assist in their attempted takeover. All the men would be checking in periodically at Lauren’s to see whether Cody had yet been captured.

“When we have him,” Emmett said, “I’ll be the one to challenge him. The rest of you will guard the doors.”

Wes nodded again, even though he was uneasy with this part of the plan. Choosing one person to challenge Cody—that was just replacing one alpha with another. If it was going to be like that, shouldn’t they talk amongst themselves about who the best choice to lead them would be?

But there was no time. And besides, he wasn’t sure who he would have picked over Emmett anyway. There was no clear choice, no obvious great leader among them.

It’s only temporary. It’s only until my son is old enough to take the lead. That’s one thing we all agree on.

The group dispersed. Wes made his way quietly down the road in the direction he had been assigned to search—toward Tina’s house. They had suspected that Cody might be spending his time there if he wasn’t at his own home.

He thought of Lauren, who he had left on the outskirts of town. It was awful—painful—to be away from her. He wished he could have left one of the others with her as a guard. But who would have stayed? Who would have been willing?

He couldn’t imagine that anybody would.

She's waiting in her bear form. She's hardly defenseless.

But she was so very pregnant. It would be hard for her to run away if anything were to happen...

No. Nothing will happen. All the danger is here, in the city. That's why I left her behind. Because I knew she would be safer there.

Still, it never failed to surprise him how difficult it was to be away from her, even for short stretches of time.

He turned a corner, and Tina's house came into view. He didn't know the place well, but like most shifters, she had lived in the same house since childhood. It had belonged to her parents. And in those days, Wes had known where everyone close to his own age lived.

The brownstone looked deserted. Through the closed windows, he could see that the lights were off inside.

They aren't here, he thought, not sure if he felt relief or disappointment. It looked like he wasn't going to be the one to have to capture Cody after all.

But what if Cody wasn't in any of the places they had decided to look?

Then, just as he was wondering that, Tina emerged from around the side of the house.

They both froze, staring at one another.

"You're not supposed to be here," Tina hissed.

"Where's Cody?" Wes asked.

"You were exiled. He's going to *kill* you for coming back."

"Fine. Where is he?"

"Not here."

"Bullshit."

"He isn't here, asshole. And you shouldn't be either. Get off my property."

Instead of pointing out that he wasn't technically *on* her property, but rather on the sidewalk, Wes stepped forward onto

her lawn and raised his eyebrows.

She took a step backward, and he realized that she was intimidated by him. *Good.*

“Get away from me,” she said. “You’re not a part of this pack. You were exiled. Take your pregnant *girlfriend*—” she spat the word that was more commonly used for humans than for shifters as if it was an epithet— “and get away from this city. You’re not wanted here.”

“No,” Wes said. “You’re the one who isn’t wanted.”

“What the fuck did you say to me?”

Something like acid was coursing through him. All he could think about was the way it had felt to stand there and watch this woman burn his home to the ground. “No one wants Cody in charge of this den,” he said. “We’re going to put a stop to his so-called leadership. He’s a terrible alpha.”

“How dare you!”

“He’s going to destroy us all, and he doesn’t even care. I think it’s what he wants.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Tell me where he is,” Wes said, stepping toward her. “Come on, Tina. There’s no way you want this den to go to hell. You’ve always been kind of a bitch, but this is your home. You can be part of what we’re going to build after he’s removed from power if you help me now.”

“You’re talking about my mate!”

“And what has he ever given you?” Wes demanded. “Night after night of endless parties? Is that really what you want? Didn’t you ever dream of something more?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m going to be a father,” Wes said quietly. “I have dreams for the *future* of this den. I have dreams for my family.”

“You’re not going to be a part of this den’s future.”

“I guess you can’t understand, can you?” he said, boiling over with anger. “You have no genetic heritage. You have no children. You’ll never know what it’s like for the future to actually matter.”

Tina let out a scream of rage. Her whole body trembled, and her eyes dilated to black.

Wes braced himself for a fight.

But suddenly, Tina relaxed.

She smiled at him.

Then she raised a hand and raked it violently across her own cheek, her pointed fingernails opening three bloody gashes in her own skin.

As Wes stared in confusion, she pressed her hand to the wound and collapsed to the ground with a cry.



Chapter Fifty-Four

W^{ES} He stared at her, taken aback, almost frightened. Why had she done that? What did it mean? There was something about it that terrified him—especially the way her mean, beady eyes were fixed on him now. It was as if she was waiting for something.

Then he heard a roar of rage.

He turned just in time to duck the powerful swipe of a bear's paw. The animal stood on two feet behind him, teeth bared, signaling anger.

Wes rolled away and came back up onto his feet several yards from the bear.

“Cody,” he breathed.

They hadn't accounted for this in their plans. They had assumed they would be taking him by surprise, not the other way around.

But there would be no capturing him. That much was clear. He had the drop on Wes, and he was wild with anger.

This is why Tina scratched her face. She had done it to provoke him. Of course. It all made sense now.

And it had worked. Cody clearly believed that Wes had been the one to harm his mate.

He would fight Wes to the death now, just like Wes knew he would have done if anyone had dared to harm Lauren.

Which meant that there would be no duel between Cody and Emmett. The duel would be here and now, between Cody and Wes himself.

“I challenge you,” Wes yelled at the animal before him. “I challenge you for leadership of this den!”

The bear roared in fury and swiped at Wes again, but the distance between them was too great. Wes turned and sprinted

across the yard, putting as much space between himself and his foe as possible.

He heard the bear give chase, thundering after him. He felt the earth shaking beneath him. He heard Tina cry out, but he couldn't tell what she was saying.

It didn't matter. There was only the bear—and himself.

He let his anger take over. He let it sweep through his body like fuel, pushing him to new heights, drawing his own inner bear forth. He felt the animal spring out from the core of him, taking possession of his body, lending him strength and power.

He dug in his claws, whirled abruptly, and launched himself at Cody.

They collided with bone-shattering force. There was pain, but it was secondary to the anger and the determination to eliminate this threat once and for all. Wes dug his claws in, not knowing what part of his adversary he had a grip on, and not caring. The point was to tear him apart. That was all that mattered.

Cody fought back. Wes felt a sharp, stinging pain along his back and knew that a gash had been opened up there. He ignored it. It could be dealt with later. He opened his mouth and dug his teeth into flesh, biting down hard, the metallic taste of blood filling his mouth and overflowing onto his fur.

Glancing up, he saw that it was Cody's neck he had in his mouth. That was the reason for all the blood.

Cody made a sound that was half roar and half whimper.

I'm killing him.

The bear knew it instinctively. The hot blood in his mouth was Cody's life draining away.

Wes had never wanted to end another man's life.

He didn't want to do it now.

His human mind prevailed. He released his enemy and stepped back, hoping that they could simply agree between

them that this fight had been won. Surely, there was no need to play it out to the end.

Wes stepped back and examined Cody carefully. It was a grievous wound, and it would have killed a human, most likely, but shifters healed quickly. If they got him help, he would live. And then he would be forced to step aside, to concede that he had been beaten—

Cody lunged up off the ground.

Tina screamed.

Cody slashed Wes's shoulder violently, and Wes reacted, throwing him back to the ground. He grabbed him by the neck once more.

Instinct took over.

How many times had he killed his prey like this, holding them by the neck? How many times had he watched Lauren do it?

This time—it wasn't any different. He was fighting for his own survival, just as he had been doing since the day he'd gone off on his own to live wild for the first time. Killing a deadly enemy was no different from killing food. It was doing what he needed to do to survive, and to ensure the survival of his family.

He felt the life leave Cody's body. He hadn't expected that he would know the moment it happened, but he did. The struggle went out of him, and he seemed to grow in weight.

“You bastard!” Tina screamed. “Oh, you *bastard!*”

Wes backed away from both of them, dizzy with what he had done.

I killed the alpha.

He could still taste Cody's blood. It was still hot.

He felt ill.

He turned his attention to Tina. There was no way of knowing whether this fight was over. Would she try to avenge her mate? Would she want to fight him now? The idea of

another fight, so soon after his first kill, made him feel dizzy. He didn't know if he would be able to stand it. And could he really bring himself to kill a woman if she insisted on a fight to the death, as Cody had?

“Wes!”

He turned.

Emmett was running up the street, sprinting toward them.

Oh, thank God.

He sank back into his human form—and immediately turned and vomited. The taste of blood on human lips was so much more potent, so much more difficult to stomach.

Emmett arrived in the yard and surveyed the scene. Then he moved to Tina's side and hauled her to her feet.

“Let's go,” he said. “Everyone is waiting for us at Lauren's.”



Chapter Fifty-Five

LAUREN
“Hold still,” Lauren murmured.

Wes was drenched in sweat, but he was shivering. His eyes were glazed, and he stared off into the distance, not seeming to see anything.

“He might be going into shock,” Emmett said. “Try to warm him up.”

Lauren nodded. She finished bandaging the wound on his back and grabbed a blanket, pulling it over his shoulders. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close against her, letting him rest his head on her belly. He always liked that.

“I killed him,” Wes said softly.

Lauren saw blood on his teeth. She held him tighter. “Can somebody get him something to drink, please?”

Matt nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, he returned with a glass of amber liquid.

Lauren knelt before Wes and pressed it into his hands. “Drink,” she said quietly.

He drank. He made a face as he swallowed, but when he opened his eyes, they looked normal again.

“You okay?” she asked.

He took another drink, swished the liquid around in his mouth, then grabbed an empty bowl on the end table and spat into it. Lauren saw that the liquor and blood had mingled together and were now faintly green.

She handed the bowl to Matt. He hurried away with it.

“I’m all right,” Wes said quietly.

“You did good, you know,” Emmett said. “What you did—it had to be done.”

“Were you going to kill him?” Wes asked.

“If he made me,” Emmett said. “I didn’t want to do it either. But if he forced a fight to the death—yeah, I would have done it.”

“You’re *monsters!*” Tina sobbed.

Lauren turned. She had all but forgotten about the woman in the corner, chained to an exposed pipe. But now she remembered. Tina was the one thing they still needed to deal with.

“What are we going to do with her?” she asked.

“What do you mean, *do* with me?” Tina demanded. “Are you going to kill me too?”

“Nobody wants to kill anybody,” Emmett said to Tina.

“He killed Cody!” She pointed a trembling finger at Wes. “He’s evil!”

“Cody wasn’t going to let me live, and you know that,” Wes said. Lauren was relieved to hear his voice sound steady. “It was kill or be killed.”

“And you would dare to defy your *alpha*?”

“My alpha exiled me,” Wes pointed out. “He disowned me. I wasn’t his anymore, which means that he wasn’t mine.”

“I suppose you think you’re our alpha now,” Tina sneered. “But the den will never respect you. No one will submit to you. You’re not half the man Cody was.”

“He’s man enough to get a woman pregnant,” Lauren pointed out.

“Bitch,” Tina snapped. “Shut the fuck up. You’re barely shifter at all. Nobody wants you here. You’re not part of this den, and you haven’t been since you walked away twenty years ago.”

Wes took a step forward. “Speak to her like that again and you’ll regret it, Tina.”

“Lauren’s right,” Matt said. “We need to figure out what to do about her. Whatever we decide to do about den leadership going forward, she’s not going to go along with it. Our new

leader will always be in danger from her because she'll never submit."

Everyone in the room regarded Tina. She stared back at them defiantly.

"Exile," Lauren said.

Emmett glanced at her.

"We don't want to kill her," Lauren said. "Nobody wants to have to do that. So the best choice is exile. It's the way she's been solving her problems for years. We send her out into the wild, and then we won't have to deal with her anymore."

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" Matt asked. "What if she comes back?"

"If she comes back, we *will* kill her," Wes said. "Lauren is right. This is the best way. We offer her mercy. It's her choice whether or not she wants to take it."

"You don't have a merciful bone in your body," Tina bit out.

"You know that isn't true," Wes said. "You know because you were there when I offered mercy to your mate. You saw me try to end the fight. He was the one who wanted to keep it going. He was the one who wanted one of us to pay the ultimate price. Well, now I'm giving you the same choice I gave Cody. Walk away from me right now, and if you do, I'll let you live."

"I hate you," Tina said through gritted teeth. "I hate all of you."

"That's fine," Lauren said.

"If I ever get a chance to make you pay for what you've done here today, you can rest assured I'm going to take it. You'd better be prepared to look over your shoulders for the rest of your miserable lives. I'll never give up on trying to hurt you back the way you've hurt me."

Emmett had clearly had enough. He turned to a pair of his friends. "Take her to the border of the city," he said. "See to it that she runs away."

The men nodded. They went over to the pipe, unchained Tina, pulled her to her feet, and hauled her out of the house.

Lauren lowered herself carefully onto the couch. She felt exhausted, and her babies had clearly picked up on her emotional turmoil because they were kicking around inside her as if they were at a parade. She rested a soothing hand on her belly. "It's okay," she murmured. "Everything's fine now."



Chapter Fifty-Six

Two Months Later

LAUREN

“Emmett’s here!” Wes called.

Lauren stood up slowly, a lasagna pan gripped in one oven-mitted hand, the other hand on the small of her back. She knew that Wes hated the fact that she was on her feet at all, let alone bending over to use the oven, but she was determined to play a role in today’s meeting.

“You’re more than welcome to attend,” Wes had told her. “You don’t have to cook for us.”

“But it’s my house,” Lauren had said. “And they’re my cousins, and you’re my mate. I want to do this. Let me.”

He’d given in, in the end, on the condition that she let him know immediately if she started to feel unwell at all. Lauren had agreed to that. She didn’t want to do anything to put her babies’ health at risk. She wasn’t stubborn enough for that.

But right now, she was feeling fine, apart from a little back pain. She placed the lasagna on a trivet in the middle of the kitchen table just as Wes and Emmett made their way into the kitchen. They were laughing like old friends.

Emmett crossed the room to her and embraced her. “Damn, girl,” he said. “You got big. You’re a house.”

Lauren laughed. “I know,” she said, running a hand fondly over her stomach. “I’m ready to be done with this, just about.”

“When are we expecting them?” Emmett asked.

“Any day now,” Lauren said.

“Well, I’m sure they’ll come in their own sweet time,” Emmett said. “If they’re anything like their mom and dad, they’re not going to let anybody tell them how they should live their lives.”

Wes slugged Emmett in the shoulder. “Help her get the drinks, will you?” he said. “Make yourself useful.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Emmett went to the refrigerator. “What’s fair game, Lauren?”

“Anything,” she said. “Matt’s probably going to want a beer.”

“And you?”

“Ice water,” she said. “I’m thirsty all the time these days.”

Emmett started preparing the requested drinks. The doorbell rang.

“That’ll be Matt,” Lauren said.

“I got it.” Wes turned and went down the hall to let Matt in.

“You’ve been feeling all right?” Emmett asked Lauren. “He’s taking good care of you and everything?”

“He’s great,” Lauren said. “Things couldn’t be better, Emmett. You’re sweet to worry about me.”

“Someone’s got to,” Emmett said. “And I am your oldest male relative. That kind of makes me the patriarch.”

He grinned. Lauren grinned back. Under the present circumstances, the idea of the den having a patriarch was more a running joke than anything else.

Wes returned with Matt, and the three men sat down around the table. Lauren grabbed a stack of plates and joined them.

“Wes,” she said, “do you want to do the honors?”

Wes stood up and grabbed a spatula. “Lauren’s been working hard all day,” he said.

“Well, it looks great,” Matt said. “Lauren, I can’t believe you spent the day cooking. You look like you’re about to pop.”

“She’s *nesting*,” Wes informed the other two men.

Matt shrugged. “I don’t know anything about that,” he said. “I guess this is what I missed out on by not having

children of my own. Nesting.”

Lauren and Wes exchanged a glance. They had had this very discussion more than once lately—asking each other what they might have missed, had they not found each other when they had.

Lauren, for her part, felt as though the most important events in her life had taken place over the past year.

All the time she had put into building a life in the suburbs, all the energy she had spent building her career—none of that mattered now. What mattered was the life she and Wes were going to have together. Their children. Their family.

And one of their babies would be the new leader of the den.

Wes, Matt, and Emmett had all been candidates for leadership after Cody’s death. Wes could have claimed the alpha role as the one who had defeated the old alpha, but he had made it clear from the start that he wanted nothing to do with the position. As the next two male heirs, Emmett and Matt had been the logical next choices, but neither of them had wanted to take the risk of starting another territory battle.

Collectively, they had agreed. It would be better to wait until Lauren’s child came of age. He would take leadership. Until then, Wes, Matt, and Emmett would govern collectively as a council, rebuilding the den treasury, cutting down on the number of frivolous expenses, parties, and unnecessary exposures to the human world, and preparing the den to be a safe place for the babies to grow up.

It was everything Lauren had dreamed of for her children. She couldn’t have asked for anything more.

As she had imagined, the children would be raised in the community that a den provided. Matt, who had served right under Cody for so long, would teach them everything they needed to know about den management and politics. Emmett, who had always been a fighter, would teach them self-defense. Lauren herself would teach them the ways of the human world

that would always be with her, ensuring that if they chose to go their own way one day, they would be capable of doing so.

And their father would teach them the ways of the wild.

They would grow up surrounded by other shifter children in a community full of shifter adults to serve as role models. It was exactly what she had wanted when she had learned that she was pregnant and had come back to the city to start her family.

It had taken her a little bit longer than she'd expected to reach her goal. But in the end, she had made it.

She felt her babies move inside her. They would be here soon.

She couldn't wait to meet them face to face.



Chapter Fifty-Seven

LAUREN

“Put that lasagna pan down and come here,” Wes said mock-sternly.

Lauren laughed. “Can I run some water in it first, please?” she asked. “The cheese will all stick to the sides if we don’t let it soak.”

He was already behind her, his hands moving over the rounded shape of her body, sliding up under the hem of her dress to remove it. “Do you think it’s easy for me to just look at you all evening and not be able to touch?” he growled in her ear. “I’ve been going out of my mind here. We’re never having company over again.”

She inhaled sharply as his lips found the sensitive spot on her neck. “You can’t just—you can’t just say we’re not having people over anymore,” she murmured. “Guests. Family. Jessica.”

“Shut up a minute. I don’t want to talk about my sister right now.” He took her hands and pressed them flat to the countertop, then placed a gentle hand on the back of her neck, bending her over so that her cheek was resting on the marble as well. “Are you comfortable?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.” Bed was no longer the most comfortable place for lovemaking, not now that she was so heavily pregnant. Standing up, they had found, was easier.

She heard the sound of his zipper. It made her thigh muscles twitch. With her cheek pressed against the countertop, she couldn’t see what was happening behind her, but she could imagine it. His hand on his cock, stroking slowly the way he always did when he was preparing himself to fuck her. His eyes closed, lazily enjoying the moment before he was inside her.

If she hadn’t wanted him so badly, she would have told him to prolong that moment. The anticipation was almost as

delicious as what was to follow.

She felt his fingers first, and then his cock, as he carefully guided himself into her. They moved slowly now, not wanting to jolt or jostle the babies, not wanting to knock her stomach against anything. He slid fully into her, then bent over her, his chest against her back, his head resting on her shoulder. His long, strong arms reached around and embraced her around the middle, where she was most full.

“I fucking love you so much,” he groaned.

Lauren closed her eyes and breathed slowly, enjoying the sensation of fullness. Sometimes it was enough for her to just be with him like this, connected, wrapped up in one another, their hands roaming slowly over each other’s fevered skin while their bodies remained absolutely still.

Sometimes.

Today she wanted more.

She reached back and caught his hip with the tips of her fingers, pulling him closer, deeper. He understood at once what she was asking for. He kept one arm loose around her belly and moved the other hand to her breast. He lifted her slightly in his arms so that she was cradled between them and his chest, her cheek no longer pressed to the counter, and began to thrust.

It was heaven.

She felt surrounded by him and full of him. Everything she could feel was Wes, and she didn’t think she would ever get enough.

He kissed along the line of her neck to her shoulder. The arm that had been cradling her belly dropped down so that he could stroke her inner thighs. She shivered at the softness of his touch. Not for the first time, she marveled at how such strong hands could touch her so tenderly.

Their lovemaking was slow and steady, all-consuming, and Lauren’s pleasure escalated so gradually that she wasn’t sure when her orgasm began. It wasn’t like a wave crashing over her. It was like the tide, rising and rising, until she found

herself completely submerged without knowing exactly when it had happened.

And it went on and on. Her body trembled, her breathing became ragged, and she didn't think she could take any more, but it didn't stop. Every touch of his hands brought her to new heights. Every thrust of his hips sent her further and further into the stratosphere, and in the back of her mind, she began to wonder if she would ever come down.

It was like being her animal self. She was so far removed from her own humanity that it was hard to remember who she was. Her body moved instinctively, responding to his without thought.

She was vaguely aware of the moment when he came too. She knew the sounds he was making—they were familiar to her, after all the times the two of them had been together. It was as pleasurable as an extra hand helping to stimulate her body to hear him make those noises and to know that she was the cause of it.

Eventually, the almost unbearable pleasure began to subside.

She was standing in the kitchen, still cradled in Wes's arms. The sounds that she had long since tuned out began to make themselves known around her again. The birds singing outside, the refrigerator humming, the ceiling fan whirring.

"Are you all right?" Wes asked.

She murmured something. She didn't know what she had intended to say, exactly. Words were difficult right now.

"Do you want to go lie down?"

She nodded.

He couldn't lift her—there was no way that wasn't awkward—so he helped her walk instead, guiding her to the bedroom and easing her down in the bed that had once been hers alone, the bed they now shared. He sat beside her and arranged the pillows behind her, then kissed her forehead.

“That was amazing,” he said, looking her in the eye.
“You’re amazing, Lauren. I hope you know that.”

“You too,” she whispered. She would tell him in more detail later when she felt more articulate.

But he understood. Hadn’t he always? He smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

“I’ll go and get you a glass of water,” he said, getting to his feet. “You get some rest.”



Chapter Fifty-Eight

W^{ES} Lauren shook Wes out of a deep sleep two nights later. He blinked, momentarily confused. “Lauren? What’s going on?”

“Wes,” she gasped. Her face was pale, drenched in sweat. “It’s happening. The babies—they’re coming.”

He had been preparing for this moment, anticipating it, for months. Now that it was here, he felt at a loss. His children were coming into the world. He saw clearly now that there was nothing he could have done, no preparations he could have made, that would have made him feel ready for this.

Lauren gripped the bedsheets suddenly and let out a guttural cry of pain. “Wes—!”

“Okay.” He scrambled to his feet. They had had a plan in place. He *did* know what he needed to do. “Hang tight. I’m calling Jessica.”

She gripped his hand in hers. He saw tears in her eyes. “Hurry.”

He nodded, grabbed the phone, and dialed.

“Hello?” Jessica had clearly been awake already. “She’s in labor, isn’t she?”

“How did you—never mind. You can come over, can’t you?”

“Of course I can,” Jessica said. “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

The phone disconnected.

Wes knelt on the floor so that he could look Lauren in her eyes. “Remember the breathing?” he asked. “We read about it in the book.”

She shook her head vigorously. “I can’t. I don’t know how. I can’t do this.”

“Oh, yes, you can,” Wes said. “This is what your body was made for. You *can* do this, Lauren. You’ve already proven to me that you can do anything you set your mind to, so don’t tell yourself you can’t handle this. You can do it.”

Her face contorted with pain again. Her grip tightened on his.

“Our children are counting on you,” Wes said. “They’re ready to come and meet you. But they need you to get them here. You’ve got this. You’re strong. Now, breathe like the book said.”

He tried to mimic what they’d read about in the parenting book she had bought. He had thought the book was silly at the time—a human indulgence—but if it gave her something to focus on instead of the pain she was so obviously in, he was grateful for it.

She met his eyes and fell into a rhythm, breathing along with him.

“You can do it,” Wes murmured. “I’m right here with you. We can do it together.”

A contraction wracked her again, and she gritted her teeth and moaned, but the look on her face was one of determination now. He had gotten through to her. He could see that. She wasn’t afraid anymore.

The door opened, then slammed closed. “Wes? Lauren?”

“In here, Jessica!” Wes yelled, infinitely grateful that his sister had arrived. They would be able to handle this, but at the same time, he knew he would feel much more capable in her hands.

She appeared in the bedroom door. “How are we doing? How far apart are the contractions?”

“How far apart?”

“Jesus, Wes, you’re supposed to be timing them.”

“Shit.” He had read that in the book Lauren had bought, but he’d forgotten. Why had he remembered about the breathing, but not that?

“About ninety seconds apart,” Lauren said.

“You were timing them?” he asked.

“I was counting—oh, God, Wes—!” She grabbed for his hand again.

“All right, move out of the way,” Jessica said brusquely, nudging Wes aside.

“Hey!” he said indignantly.

“Have you delivered any babies before?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Then let me handle this. Hold her head, okay? Lauren, honey, it’s time to push.”

“Already?” Lauren sounded distraught. “It’s happening so fast.”

“I know. But your babies are ready, and we can’t ask them to wait. Take a deep breath with me—good—okay, push now.”

Lauren strained in Wes’s arms, letting out a cry of effort as she did so. The muscles in her neck stood out. Wes wished to God he could do this for her somehow. It was awful to see her in pain.

But there was also something beautiful about it.

She’s so strong. She’s a warrior.

I wish I could show her what I see when I look at her like this. I wish she could see the way this looks through my eyes.

A moment later, he heard a small cry. Lauren relaxed with a gasp, and Jessica sat back, holding up a tiny baby.

“He’s here,” she said. “Your son.”

My son.

“Take him, Wes,” she said, handing him toward Wes. “Next one’s coming quickly.”

Wes held out his arms and accepted the baby, holding him close, rocking him slowly, carefully.

“How is he?” Lauren asked.

“He’s—” *the most precious thing in the world.* “He’s perfect.”

“Time to push again,” Jessica said. “You ready, Lauren? Do it now.”

Wes shifted his son to one arm so he could hold Lauren’s hand as she labored. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder, panting with exertion.

Fifteen minutes later, it was over, and she lay reclined happily against her pillows with a daughter in each arm. Wes still held their son, cleaned up now and wrapped in one of the blankets they had bought in preparation for the babies’ birth.

“Three,” Lauren said happily. “Three is a good number.”

“Three is amazing,” Wes said. *A boy and two girls.* It was everything he would have asked for, everything he would have dreamed of, if he had ever imagined that dreams of this magnitude were within his reach.

Jessica came up behind him and wrapped her arms around him. “You did good,” she murmured.

He nodded, feeling incapable of speech. It was difficult to imagine that anyone could have done any better.

And when Lauren looked up from the babies in her arms, smiling up at him as if he was the greatest thing she had ever seen, he felt as if his heart was going to burst with satisfaction and pride.

He had never been happier in his life.



Chapter Fifty-Nine

W^{ES} “It’s just a formality,” Emmett assured Wes. “Everyone’s already in complete agreement about this. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

Wes nodded. “I know,” he said. “I’ll just feel better when it’s over with.”

Emmett grinned. “To think that when we started out, I had to talk you into letting your kid be the den’s next alpha. Now you’re worried he won’t be picked.”

“Well, you made me see the sense in it,” Wes said. “And you were right. I want it now. It makes sense for our family, and it makes sense for the den.”

Emmett nodded. “Everybody wants it,” he said. “There’s not going to be any dissent.”

Wes turned his son in his arms so that he was facing outward. He and Lauren had talked about wanting the babies to see as much of the world as possible, and they always tried to carry them facing out when they were awake so they could get a look at their surroundings.

“Hey, little man,” Emmett said.

Xander blinked sleepily and waved a fist.

“He’s getting big, isn’t he?” Emmett said.

“I had no idea how fast babies grew,” Wes agreed. “I guess it’s normal, though. The other two are almost as big. I feel like, before I know it, I’ll be taking them into the woods and giving them hunting lessons.”

“I bet you’re looking forward to that part.”

“I’m looking forward to a lot of things,” Wes grinned. “But Lauren says we can’t let our anticipation for the future keep us from cherishing the moment, and she’s right. I definitely want to enjoy having babies while I’ve got them.”

Emmett nodded. “Should we get inside?”

“Is everyone here already?”

“Yeah,” Emmett said. “I actually told them to get here half an hour earlier than I told you, because I didn’t want you to be stuck waiting on them.”

“That was thoughtful,” Wes said, slightly surprised.

“I know it’s hard for you guys, having these babies. Being new parents,” Emmett said. “You and Xander will want to get home as soon as possible.”

Wes smiled. He was thrilled that he and Emmett were becoming so close.

If I’d had a brother like him, I might never have left the pack and gone off on my own.

Then again, that was selling Jessica short. She had always been wonderful, and that hadn’t kept him from going his own way. Maybe it was just something he’d needed to get out of his system.

The important thing was that he was here now. He was back with his den, and he was ready to help shape their future.

And the baby in his arms was going to be a fundamental part of that.

He followed Emmett into his house. A select group of decision-makers for the den were in attendance today—the elder members, the fighters who had helped Emmett and Wes in reclaiming the den from Cody’s leadership, and a few others whose opinions were widely respected.

They all fell silent as Emmett and Wes came into the room.

“Thank you for being here today,” Wes said. “It means a lot to me and my wife that you came to see us. Lauren wishes she could have been here too, but—”

“She’s recovering from childbirth,” said one of the den elders. “We all understand. Please send her our best wishes.”

“I’ll do that,” Wes said. “Thank you.”

“We’re here to officially name Xander Simms as the heir to the alpha position in our den,” Emmett said. “Xander is the eldest qualifying male descendant of Arthur Wood, making him the best choice to ascend to the role. Is anyone opposed?”

Wes held his breath, looking around the table. He would fight for his son’s right to lead if he had to.

But it didn’t come to that. Apparently, no one had any objection. Heads around the table were nodding, and people were smiling at Wes as if to signal their approval.

“It’s settled then,” Emmett said. “Xander is officially named the rising alpha of our den, and when he comes of age, he will assume the role.”

“I thought you might like to meet him,” Wes said. “Those of you who haven’t, that is.” He placed Xander carefully on the table so that the meeting attendees could look at him.

Everyone leaned over to get a closer look.

“He looks like Lauren, doesn’t he?” an old woman said. “I remember her when she was just a baby. She looked just like this one.”

“He’ll be independent,” someone else said. “He’ll blaze his own trails, that’s for sure. Both his mother and his father are that way.”

“But he won’t go off on his own the way we did,” Wes said. “We’ll raise him to understand the value of the den and the importance of his role here.”

Of course, he knew the truth was that he wouldn’t be able to control his son’s decisions when the time came. There was every possibility that Xander *would* choose to go his own way. Wes would encourage him not to. But he wouldn’t be able to force him to stay.

And if he does decide to leave, I would support that. I’ll never make him feel like he has to choose between his family and his dreams.

“To our new alpha.” One of the men at the table raised a glass.

“Hear, hear,” someone else chimed in.

Sensing that the meeting was on the verge of turning into a party, Wes scooped Xander back into his arms. “I should get home to Lauren and the girls,” he said. “It’s just about Xander’s nap time.”

“Thanks for bringing him by,” Emmett said. “Always good to see the kids.”

By the time Wes was out on the street, Xander had already fallen asleep. Wes held him gently, determined to make it home without disturbing him.

My son, the future leader of this den.

He couldn’t wait to tell Lauren how well everything had gone.



Epilogue

Five Years Later

W^{ES} “Dad!” Melody shrieked. “Carolyn took my acorns!”

Wes glanced at Lauren, standing beside him at the sink and drying the dishes he handed her. “Carolyn took her *acorns*? Are they squirrels now?”

“No, they’re just collecting them,” Lauren said.

“That’s weird.”

“Oh, really, is that weird?” Lauren laughed. “This coming from the guy who collected *cicada shells* when we were kids.”

“Oh my God.” Wes shook his head. “I’d forgotten all about that.”

“Jessica and I used to make fun of you all the time about it. We called you bug boy.”

“Mean.”

“You were collecting cicada shells, Wes. You would have made fun of a kid for doing that too.”

“Well, yeah, probably,” Wes conceded.

“Do you want to go see about the acorns? Or should I do it?”

Wes sighed. “I will,” he said, drying his hands on his pants. The kids seemed to be incapable of getting along these past few months—the girls in particular. It was a phase they were going through, he knew, but he would sure be glad when this particular phase was over.

He left Lauren to the dishes and went up the stairs to the playroom. Pausing outside the door, he listened to a bit of the argument.

Melody was obviously in tears, her voice hitching and breaking. “I collected them all *day*, Carolyn. They’re mine. Give them back.”

“They’re not yours.” Carolyn sounded near tears too. “You cheated. We said I would get all the front yard ones and you would get all the back yard ones.”

“These aren’t *from* the front yard. They’re from the *side* yard.”

“So they’re not yours! They’re anybody’s!”

Wes was about to go in and break up the argument, but then he heard a third voice. Xander.

“If you didn’t agree who would get the ones in the side yard, you should split them,” he said. “That’s what’s fair.”

Both of the girls grumbled a bit, but it was obvious that no one was going to dispute what Xander had said.

Xander spoke with authority. “Carolyn, give Melody back half of the acorns you took from her, and then you can keep the rest.”

“She should give back all of them,” Melody said, but there was resignation in her voice. “I was the one who thought of looking in the side yard.”

“Yeah, but if you split them with her, you get half of them back and you don’t have to fight about it,” Xander said. “And fighting is bad, right?”

“I guess.”

“Okay, then.”

There was the sound of a drawer opening, and then a rattling sound. “How do we know how much is half?” Melody asked.

“We’ll count them,” Xander said. “And if there’s a leftover one, Melody, you can have it because it *was* your idea to check the side yard.”

“Okay.” Melody sounded much happier than she had just a moment ago.

Seeing that his services weren't needed here after all, Wes turned and went back down to the kitchen.

Lauren looked up when he came in. "What's up?" she asked. "Are they okay up there?"

"They're fine," Wes said. "I didn't have to do anything, actually."

"What do you mean?"

"Xander mediated the whole thing. It was impressive. I didn't know he was so good at that."

"You know," Lauren said. "I did see him handle a dispute the other day about which of the girls got to eat the last popsicle. He really is a born leader, isn't he?"

"He's going to make a hell of an alpha someday," Wes said.

Lauren looked at him. Xander's future was something they almost never talked about. They had agreed years ago to wait until he was ten years old to discuss it with him so that he could have a few years of unfettered childhood without having to worry about what lay ahead.

But seeing him take the lead with his sisters this way, falling into that role as naturally as he did—it gave Wes confidence that his son would rise to the occasion without any trouble when the time was right.

The den couldn't have asked for a better leader, in Wes's opinion. Xander would be perfect.

But he was even happier to see that it wouldn't be a struggle for Xander. His son would be comfortable with power, comfortable with guiding those around him. He would be *happy* as alpha.

It was the one thing Wes had never been sure of, even as he had accepted that future for his son. Now he felt like he could be sure.

Lauren smiled, her eyes filling with tears, and Wes knew that she was thinking the same thing.

“He’s going to have such a good life, isn’t he?” she said quietly. “He’s not going to have to spend years running around trying to figure out what he wants. He’s going to know who he is from the start, and the perfect role for him will be right there waiting for him when he’s ready to step into it.”

Wes nodded. “I think so,” he said. “I think he’s going to be great at this.”

Lauren embraced him, wrapping her arms around his waist and standing on her toes to kiss him.

“If this is the big accomplishment of my life,” she said, “it’s more than I ever dreamed I would do.”

Wes nodded. He felt exactly the same way.

He kissed her again, deeply, thanking God that he had given in to his impulses that day after her mother’s funeral. The best things in his life were built on that moment, and he wouldn’t trade any of it for the world.



Free Preview of Midlife Magic Dragon

Here is your free excerpt from Chapter 4....
Bad idea. Bad fucking idea.

But damn, it was one he couldn't resist.

He'd wanted to kiss Maddie from the moment he'd spotted her in the woods. And when she'd come into his home, all piss and vinegar, he'd had a feeling she'd felt the same way.

His lips lingered on hers, Maddie's sweet taste intoxicating him like nothing else. He opened his mouth slightly, enough for his tongue to move past his lips and to hers. She responded with her body, her tongue teasing the tip of his.

Scorn's cock was so damn hard, he could hardly stand it. And the mere thought of spreading Maddie's legs and shoving it into her undoubtedly perfect pussy was enough to make him wild.

But in the middle of the kiss, he noticed something strange.

More specifically, he noticed the *lack* of something.

His rage. It was gone.

Scorn would've guessed that the nearness of Maddie, her body being pressed against his, would be enough to set his rage off, to make him lose total control. But it didn't. If anything, the closer he grew to Maddie, the more...*balanced* he felt.

He focused on what was happening, on the kiss. Scorn wanted more, and the way she ground her body against his, he could sense she felt the same way.

"This is...insane," she said as he took his lips from hers, Scorn kissing along her neck. "You're...you're a damn hobo in the woods. What am I doing?"

He opened his eyes enough to see that she was smiling, that the whole situation seemed crazy in an amusing way.

She doesn't know the half of it. She doesn't know that I am...was...a fucking king. And she doesn't need to know.

“You’re doing what you want. And I’m doing the same thing.”

He raised his head, bringing his lips to hers one more time. But instead of their lips touching, Maddie raised her index finger and placed it over top of his mouth.

She changing her mind?

“Here’s the deal,” she said.

“Let’s hear it.”

“I’ve got...some history—with men.”

“Sure.”

“And that history was far from the best. Bad history—the kind that makes you want to swear off men for good. That’s what I’d done, as a matter of fact.”

“You’re really good at dirty talk; you know that?”

She laughed, placing her hands against Scorn’s chest.

“Seriously. I’d be totally fine with never being with a man ever again.”

“But here you are.”

“Here I am. But if this is going to happen, then I want to make it damn clear that it’s a one-off thing. We do this, I leave, and that’s the end of it.”

“Damn,” said Scorn. “And here I was planning on proposing to you.”

“Always with the smart-ass comments,” she said with a slight smirk. “But I want to make sure we’re both on the level here. This is sex, and nothing but. Got it?”

Scorn wanted to agree, but deep down, he *knew* that there was something more happening here other than two people about to scratch an itch.

But he wasn't about to argue. The hottest damn woman he'd ever seen in his life was right there, telling him she wanted to fuck.

“Got it.”

“Good. Then let's do this.”

She followed up her words by reaching forward and taking hold of his cock through his jeans.

“Someone's eager,” she said.

Scorn did the same, moving his hand slowly up along her thigh, coming to a rest between her legs. He could feel the heat of her, that warm wetness, through the thin fabric of her pajama pants.

“Then I'm in good company.”

He rubbed her slowly, Maddie closing her eyes, her mouth opening slightly as he rubbed her pussy. He kissed her more as he touched her, starting at the top of her chest and working his way back up to her lips.

Soon Maddie began grinding her hips into his hand, guiding him to keep his fingers there, to not stop what he was doing. He brought his lips to hers, and they kissed deeply, their tongues intertwining as she continued moaning.

Scorn moved his hand up to the waistband, slipping his fingers underneath both it and her panties. As he traveled over the neatly trimmed patch of hair above her cunt, he realized right away that she was as wet as he'd guessed.

Maddie hurriedly opened up his jeans button and zipper, reaching underneath his boxer-briefs and taking hold of his cock at the precise moment he slipped a pair of fingers into her.

“Oh...oh *fuck*.” The moans poured out of her mouth as he fingered her. Scorn grunted hard as she stroked his cock up and down, teasing him with her fingertips.

Her touch was intense—more intense than he would've expected. It had been so long since he had been touched like this. With each moment that passed together, Scorn grew more

and more certain that there was something between them, something powerful.

But he pushed that out of his mind as quickly as he could, watching as Maddie pulled his long, thick cock from his underwear, his prick solid and throbbing and dripping just for her. She stroked him as he fingered her, the intensity of the moans making it clear she was drawing closer and closer to orgasm.

His fingers curled inside of her, Scorn watched as she threw her head back in total delight, letting out a scream as he made her come. She gripped his cock hard, stroking him so good that he worried he might bust right then at the sight of this sexy-as-fuck woman in the middle of a powerful orgasm.

But he wanted more, and he was going to get it.

When Maddie finished, Scorn placed one hand on the small of her back, holding Maddie in place as he took off her shirt. Her breasts were just as gorgeous as they'd been before, and he was ready to see them in their full glory.

They kissed as he reached back and unhooked the clasp, her full, round, pink-tipped breasts falling out as she shimmied out of her sleeping pants and panties. Scorn pulled his mouth away from her for long enough to take in the sight of her naked before him, the pure perfection of her bare body.

He needed to be inside of her, and he needed it in a way that he couldn't resist.

Scorn grabbed Maddie's hips, pulling her down onto the couch in a laying position. Her breasts bounced as she settled, her hazel eyes flashing in surprise as he took control. Once she was down, he grabbed both of her legs by the ankles and spread her open, her pussy pink and wet and inviting.

"Come on," she moaned, squirming her hips.

"You want this cock?" he growled, dragging the head of his prick against her opening, Maddie closing her eyes and savoring the feeling.

"So...so fucking badly."

“Then ask for it. Ask nicely.”

Her mouth formed into a sly smile, and he could sense she hadn't been talked to like this by a man in a long, long while—if ever.

“Please,” she said. “Give it to me.”

It was all Scorn could stand. Still spreading her open, Scorn took his cock into his hand, teasing her clit a bit more before placing his head at her opening and pushing into her.

The sensation of her velvet walls gripping his cock was like nothing he'd ever known. He slid all of his inches into her, Maddie moaning and writhing as he filled her as perfectly as a key into a lock.

When he was buried to the root, he held fast, still coming to grips with just how good she felt.

Then he pulled back and shoved into her. Maddie's body shifted, her breasts shaking from the impact.

He did it again, then again, Maddie sighing with pleasure with each full penetration.

And as he fucked her, Scorn noticed how *different* sex with her was, how it felt like something more intense than just a physical connection with another person. It felt like a bond was being formed, one that wouldn't be easily broken.

“I want to watch you come again,” growled Scorn, still thrusting into her with wild abandon. “Do it. Now.”

Maddie opened her eyes, nodding at his words.

“You...you're a real prick, you know that?” Her words were broken up by the thrusts, Scorn grabbing her leg and holding it against his powerful chest.

He picked up the pace, driving into her with deep, full strokes, his thick cock vanishing inside again and again. Maddie let out a soft shriek, and then she came again. He felt her cunt grow even wetter, her face wincing in pure ecstasy as she came.

Scorn couldn't take it any longer. He reached the point of no return, her tight, wet cunt bringing him to the brink of pleasure and pushing him over. His cock throbbed hard as he came, his seed draining deep inside as the orgasm ripped through his body.

They came together, reaching their peak at the same moment. She arched his back below him, Scorn's muscles going taut as the last pulses of orgasm worked through his body.

Then, when they finished, he fell to her side. The couch was wide, enough space for them both. Scorn wrapped his big, thick arm around Maddie and held her close.

They said nothing, both recovering their breath as the fire crackled before them, the rain still falling outside.

"This place," she said finally. "It's a fucking mess."

He laughed. "There's the door if it's not good enough for a princess."

"Makes me wonder what kind of man would live like this."

"The kind you're not going to see after tomorrow."

He'd intended it as a joke, but the truth of the statement stuck with him, made him pause.

Scorn realized he didn't *want* to never see her again. His face fell, and Maddie didn't say another word.

She rested her head on his chest and soon was asleep. The day caught up with him. And soon, Scorn was out like a light.



HIS DREAMS THAT NIGHT were strange. Scorn was in his home, the cabin he'd lived in since leaving the Blackshrouds. A storm raged outside, and he was seated on his couch with his bottle of whiskey, as usual.

During the dream, he sipped and watched the rain, lighting illuminating the living room. But to his shock, the walls of the

house grew smaller and smaller. He tried to ignore it, figuring it was his imagination.

The more he drank, the more he realized the house was closing in on him, that it'd crush him unless he did something. He threw down the bottle of whiskey and ran outside into the rain. The cabin vanished into nothing, and he was alone in the storm.

At least, he thought he was alone. Maddie, as gorgeous as ever, stepped out of the trees, a smile on her face.

He woke up the next morning, two realizations hitting him. The first was that, for the first time in a long while, he wasn't hung over. He'd fallen asleep with Maddie before he could reach his whiskey-induced oblivion.

The second was that he felt more...*balanced* than he had in years. The rage, usually there to greet him in the morning, was surprisingly absent.

And speaking of surprisingly absent, Maddie was gone too.

Scorn rose, the embers in the fireplace glowing a soft orange. He sat up, grabbing his jeans and shirt and pulling them on as he got up to find her.

"Maddie?"

Nothing. His voice echoed through the house. He pulled on his socks and boots and made his way into the kitchen, then the dining room.

Nothing still.

He went up to the second floor, thinking she might've wanted to take a quick shower.

Nothing there either.

Then he sniffed the air, trying to find that familiar scent of lilacs and sex.

Nothing.

Fucking hell—don't tell me she's gone.

He hurried through the house, calling her name and trying to find her. But no response came to any of his cries.

She's gone.

“Fucking hell!” he shouted. “You stubborn, *stubborn* woman!”

He grabbed his coat and hurried out of the house. No doubt in his mind that she'd decided for one reason or another that she wanted to leave on her own terms.

But Scorn didn't give a damn *why* she'd left. He only knew that it was dangerous as hell for even a powerful dragon like him to be in these woods, let alone a human woman.

The morning was bright and sunny, the grass glistening with last night's rainfall. Scorn closed his eyes and sniffed the air, trying to catch a whiff of her.

He did.

Lilacs and sex, he thought. *Damn, she smells good.*

Scorn opened his eyes, taking off in a full-blast run, tearing across his cabin's clearing and into the forest. As an alpha, he was an expert tracker. And there was something about Maddie that made her scent even more pronounced.

He followed it, running through the woods and soon catching sight of her boot prints in the soft mud.

Maddie, what the fuck were you thinking? I'm sure you think you can do anything, but you really think you can make it back to human country all on your own?

The nearest town to Scorn was a good thirty-minute drive away. No doubt in Scorn's mind that Maddie thought she'd be able to wander to the nearest highway and hitchhike back home.

But as Scorn ran, he caught the scent of something else on the wind, something that most definitely was *not* Maddie.

“Wolf shifters,” said Scorn, his eyes narrowing. “Feral.”

He knew he had to run hard and fast to find her as quickly as he could. If Maddie had enticed him, Scorn realized there

was no telling how much of a temptation she'd be to the feral wolves that stalked the woods.

Maddie's scent grew stronger and stronger, along with the scent of the wolves.

Then a scream cut through the air.

It was her..... [CONTINUE READING ON AMAZON](#)



About The Author

J.L. Wilder likes wild things! Her alpha shifters are gruff and tough, with a pinch of tenderness. Curl up with these bad boy book boyfriends, and they will have you howling at the moon!

When not writing shifter smut, J.L. spends as much time as possible exploring the outdoors. She loves getting into trouble with Ace, her Siberian Husky.

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