

USA Today Bestselling Author

FIONA DAVENPORT

HER

*Loner*

# HER LONER

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FIONA DAVENPORT


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## **HER LONER**

Thora Ferguson didn't know shifters existed until she moved to Timber Ridge. But seeing how mates treated each other, she couldn't help but want one of her own.

After a decade as a lone wolf, Rome Coinin didn't expect the pack he joined five years ago would eventually lead him to his mate. But there was no doubting the pretty little chef was fated to be his. And now that he'd found her, nobody was ever going to come between them.

# PROLOGUE

## ROME

Being a loner for a decade had been hard on my wolf. It yearned for the comfort provided by a pack. My animal did not understand why I was cast out after my father was defeated by the alpha when he challenged him for the position after my mother was shot by hunters during a run. He feared I would eventually want to avenge his death...and I couldn't really blame him. He was probably right. If I'd stayed with my pack as I aged and grew in strength, I would've been tempted to follow in my dad's footsteps at some point. And I would have made damn sure I succeeded where he had failed.

Instead, I roamed the country, moving from state to state until I stumbled across Keane and his small pack in the wilderness. He'd shocked the shit out of me when he'd let me stay in one of the cabins. Even more so when he asked if I wanted to join their pack after being there for a month.

But I never forgot what it felt like to be a lone wolf. When an injured falcon shifter came to us after she'd been tortured for a year, I was plagued by dreams about my time spent on my own. Ramsey had been a loner when she was taken, and her vulnerability reminded me of the time when I had nobody at my back. Which was why I found myself promising her new mate that I would infiltrate the prison where the human was being kept to kill the bastard. He should've already been dead, except the alpha of the local pack hadn't wanted to get involved in the clusterfuck because Ramsey was just a loner he'd allowed onto his territory. The fucker.



Aero couldn't go after the evil human himself because he needed to stick close to Ramsey during the early stages of their mating. But I had no qualms about throwing myself into the line of fire to make sure she was safe. With no family or mate, if my plan went sideways, there wouldn't be anyone to mourn me beyond the other five members of my pack. Not that I expected anything to go wrong.

Flashing a wolfish smile at the guard I'd pinpointed as the one most likely to accept a bribe, I yanked an envelope thick with cash out of my back pocket. Removing the bills, I fanned them out so he could see how much I'd brought. "It'll be the easiest five thousand dollars you'll ever make."

His gaze remained locked on the money as he asked, "And all I have to do is get this guy outside in the yard by himself?"

"Yup."

He looked up at me, but only for a second. The lure of the cash was too much for him. "What's gonna happen to him?"

My inner animal pushed against my skin, beyond ready to scare the guard into doing what we asked if the bribe wasn't enough incentive. "Do you actually care?"

The scent of his greed was thick in the air. "Not really."

"Then all you need to know is that this won't come back on you in a way your bosses will think you were involved."

My reassurance was enough for him to reach out and grab the money. The deal had been made, and the bastard who'd hurt Ramsey would be dead soon.

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I SPENT the next fifty-two hours in the forest surrounding the prison, waiting for my opportunity to strike. The inmates had been outside for two hours when the guards started moving them toward the door. The guard I bribed glanced over his shoulder before he stalked toward the human who had captured Ramsey. My moment had finally come.

I called my wolf forward, and cracking and popping sounds filled the air. I dropped to my paws when my human form retreated. My muscles bunched as I crouched low and moved slowly through the tall grass toward the fence topped with electric wires. It was tall enough to keep the prisoners inside, but my wolf would be able to leap over the barrier.

I waited until the other prisoners were led inside while the guard tugged on the bastard's arm to separate him from the group. My keen hearing picked up their argument as I stealthily approached the fence.

"I didn't do nothing, man."

"There are reports of you selling contraband. Turn out your pockets," the guard I'd bribed commanded.

"What the hell? Talk to Simmons. I'm supposed to have protection from him," my prey complained.

"Simmons is off today," the guard snapped, yanking the prisoner close. "I don't care about your deal with him."

"I paid him two days ago," the bastard whined.

"Yeah, well...that's not my problem. You haven't paid me shit."

Even if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. The five grand I'd given the guard would've been more than what my prey could've paid him.

While the man who'd kept Ramsey in a cage and butchered her wings turned out his pockets, my gaze locked on the guard in the observation tower to my left. He carried his rifle on his shoulder as he paced back and forth, and his gaze had been scanning the yard while the prisoners had their allotted time outside. But as they filed through the door, his attention was focused on the group.

More than half the men were already inside. My window of opportunity was closing, so I lunged forward, closing the remaining distance between the fence and me in a few seconds. Then I pushed off my hind legs and leaped through the air, sailing over the electric wires with a few inches of

clearance before landing. My muscles bunched as I powered forward.

The guard spotted me, and his head jerked in shock. I took advantage of his stunned disbelief and went for my prey's throat. As much as I would have loved to make his death a slow one, I didn't have time for the torture he deserved for his crimes. Instead, I slashed at his chest with my claws and sank my teeth into his neck with a bone-crushing bite. Ripping through his jugular vein and carotid artery, I felt the blood spurt from his neck. They were both completely severed, and his limp form dropped to the ground when I released my hold on his neck.

He was already unconscious when I bounded away from him toward the opposite side of the fence. The wounds were too severe for him to have any chance of survival, no matter how quickly help arrived. He would bleed out before anyone had the chance to help him.

Ramsey's enemy had paid for her suffering with his life. He would be leaving the prison in a pine box instead of with his freedom after a ridiculously short sentence of only six months. He couldn't hurt her anymore. I savored the coppery taste of his blood as I raced across the yard and leaped over the fence, reaching the safety of the woods before the guards realized what had happened.

This would be a mystery the human authorities would never solve. An animal attack that would spark rumors of a beast living in the nearby wilderness...land claimed by the local pack. I took comfort in the fact that the alpha and his wolves would no longer be able to run free. Not when people would be drawn to the forest to hunt for the beast for many years to come. It was a small price for him to pay for his prejudice against loners.

I normally enjoyed talking with my parents on the phone, but my mom was laying the guilt trip on me extra thick today.

“But if you were still in Chicago, we could celebrate with you.” She heaved a deep sigh. “I don’t like to think about my baby girl being all alone on her birthday.”

I was a grown woman with a career and my own home, but my mom treated me as though I was still a teenager whenever she didn’t get her way. The blame for her self-absorption rested squarely on my dad’s shoulders. He always gave her whatever she wanted and pushed me to do the same.

“I came up for my birthday last year,” I reminded her.

“But not for Thanksgiving.”

She was never going to let me forget about that perceived slight, but it was a small price to pay for spending the holiday with Peppa and her growing family. Although we’d made a feast fit for kings, it had been the most relaxing Thanksgiving I had ever experienced. Mainly due to the fact that I didn’t have my mom looming over my shoulder, trying to tell me that her method of cooking the turkey was better than mine. Even though I was a chef who specialized in the preparation of roasted and braised meat.

“I had to work the day before and the day after. If I’d come up for the holiday, I would’ve only been able to spend half the day with you and Dad before I needed to turn around and head back to Timber Ridge.”

She sniffed at my explanation—one I'd given her many, many times already. "If you'd stayed at Castagna like I told you to do, spending the holidays with your father and I wouldn't be a problem."

None of my friends or family had understood why I'd left one of the very few restaurants in the world that had earned three Michelin stars for a job at a start-up in a small town almost two years ago. No matter how much I tried to explain why I was following my former sous chef—who'd only had the position for six months before she resigned—they just didn't get it. Peppa had protected the other female chefs of the misogyny in the kitchen as much as she could, but there had only been so much that she could do.

When I heard that she was leaving to take the executive chef position at a new restaurant, I hadn't hesitated to jump at the chance to join her. No matter how much my parents tried to talk me out of the decision, I hadn't budged. Although I knew I'd miss them when I left Chicago, I couldn't ignore the voice in my head urging me to move to Timber Ridge.

Not even when Peppa sat Larken—Castagna's pastry chef and a good friend of hers—and me down to explain that we would be surrounded by shifters if we moved with her. That she could change into a lioness, and the other two chefs who'd resigned with us—Bexley and Aero—were shifters, too. A polar bear and a falcon.

It had taken a lot for me to wrap my head around the existence of shifters, but there had been no denying the truth when she changed into a lioness in front of us. Knowing that she could've killed William—the head chef at Castagna—with one swipe of her powerful paw had made me respect Peppa even more. She had put up with a lot of crap from him before she resigned, and the jerk would never know how close he'd come to dying. Unfortunately.

"I know you don't agree, but I made the decision that was best for me, Mom."

I took some small comfort in the fact that William had come to regret treating Peppa as though she didn't belong in

his kitchen. I had been giddy when I learned that Armand—Castagna’s executive chef—had come to Timber Ridge only four months after we had left to ask her to return to Chicago and offered to fire William if she came back. He’d apparently managed to destroy the morale of a kitchen that had just earned its third Michelin star in that short amount of time, and nobody skilled wanted to take the positions we’d left.

Not that I blamed any of them. I would have been miserable working for him without her there to act as a buffer. Leaving had been the right choice. Knowing the restaurant had already lost one star without us reinforced that I’d made a good call.

“While I’m willing to admit that Timber Treasures is more successful than I expected, you could still do better if you came back home,” she insisted with a huff. “There are so many more options here. Chances for you to move up to sous chef and eventually executive chef. Or even to open your own place. I’ve told you time and time again that your father and I would be more than happy to give you the money to do so.”

“I appreciate the offer”—although I’d never accept it since the number of strings attached meant any restaurant I opened with their money would be hers more than mine—“but I’m happy where I’m at.”

In all the time since I’d moved, I hadn’t second-guessed the decision. Until today. My birthday.

I was close with my coworkers, but I missed having family near to celebrate with. My mom had sent a package with a present and Fannie May mint meltaways, but it wasn’t the same. No matter how delicious the dessert Larken would most likely make for me was, it wouldn’t be the German chocolate cake she had baked every year until I moved. Luckily, her favorite was also mine, so I enjoyed the cake as much as she did.

“Fine. Enjoy your birthday with your friends.”

She didn’t sound as though she really meant it, but I thanked her for the birthday wishes before ending the call. The

last thing I wanted was to get into a fight with my mom today of all days.

When my phone rang again right away, I assumed it was my dad calling to back her up. I didn't look down at the screen as I answered, so I was surprised when Peppa responded to my stilted greeting. "Happy Birthday!"

As soon as I heard my friend's voice, the tension drained from my body. "Thanks."

"Do you have any special plans other than our breakfast?"

I was meeting up with her, Larken, Aero, and Bexley to celebrate my birthday before the restaurant opened. But since only one or two of us could be off at the same time, I was going to be on my own tonight. "Nope, I think I'll probably watch a chick flick, drink a glass of wine, and demolish the box of chocolates my mom sent."

"That sounds heavenly." Although she sounded wistful, I knew Peppa wouldn't give up the hecticness of her life for the solitude of mine. She had found her fated mate—the one person every shifter was destined to spend the rest of their lives with—after we moved to Timber Ridge. Their son, Cyrus, was a handful now that he was able to toddle around everywhere he wanted to go.

"I can't complain too much."

My plans paled in comparison to everything Cason had done for her last birthday, but he tended to go overboard where she was concerned. All of the shifter males were like that with their mates. They loved their mates and children with a fierceness I wished I'd be able to experience someday.

Shortly after she'd met him, I had asked Peppa how shifters knew they'd found their fated mate. When she had explained to me that they only ever responded sexually to each other, I had wondered if maybe there was a shifter out there for me. I figured the odds were slim since I was one hundred percent human, but being the fated mate of a shifter would explain why I'd never been interested in dating—much to my mother's chagrin—and was still a virgin at twenty-five.

“Darn, that makes what I have to ask so much harder.”

My brows drew together. “What?”

Her sigh was filled with regret, unlike my mom’s earlier. “I tried like heck to figure something else out since it’s your birthday, but Ramsey isn’t feeling well, and Aero wants to stay home with her. But we’re fully booked, so being short-staffed in the kitchen would be tough.”

I couldn’t blame Aero for wanting to watch over his mate. She’d just recently given birth to their son, and her inner falcon was still recovering from her ordeal last year. My understanding was that the process was moving more quickly than they’d expected, most likely due to her pregnancy. But from what Aero had said, it had been too long since she’d been able to let her inner falcon fly free. Soon, though. At least that’s what we all hoped.

If going to work on my birthday would help her get there faster, I was happy to do it. “Tell Aero to stay home tonight. Of course, I’ll come in.”



**A**lthough I knew I'd made the right decision to cover for Aero at work, my feet still dragged as I trudged down the sidewalk toward Timber Treasures. Since the weather was gorgeous, I'd decided to walk instead of drive. At least then I was able to enjoy some fresh air before I spent the next six hours in a sweltering kitchen.

Aero had come in and done the prep work before heading back home to Ramsey, saving me a couple of hours to enjoy my birthday. But when I neared the restaurant, I spotted her at a booth near the window. My brows drew together until I realized that Aero must have been more worried about her than I thought. I should've told him to skip the prep work so he didn't drag her and Arbor out of the house to keep an eye on them while he was working.

I picked up my pace as I headed for the back door that led directly into the kitchen so I could avoid walking through a packed dining room. Flinging it open, I called, "I can't believe you made Ramsey and Arbor come in with you, Aero. Get outta here. I've got your station covered now."

My voice trailed off as the door shut behind me, and the lights flickered and went out. I should've heard curses and pots banging in irritation at the darkness, but the kitchen was quiet. Wondering if the lights had been acting up before I arrived, I thanked my lucky stars that I knew the space like the back of my hand and was easily able to make my way to the interior door that led into the dining room.

There wasn't any sound coming from there either, and I was starting to worry that something had gone horrifically wrong in the short time it had taken me to circle to the back of the building. I nudged the door open, my voice trembling slightly as I whispered, "Hello? Anybody here?"

My eyes widened when the lights suddenly came back on, and everyone shouted, "Surprise!"

"Whoa," I breathed as my gaze scanned the room, and I realized that all my friends and coworkers were here. "You guys closed the place down to throw me a party?"

"We sure did," Peppa confirmed, rushing forward to give me a hug. "Sorry about tricking you. I hope you still got to watch your chick flick."

"I did." My lips curved into a grin. "I even took a nap in the middle of it."

"Hopefully, you didn't spoil your appetite by eating too many chocolates because we have plenty to eat."

Kace, the alpha of the Timber Ridge pack who'd given Peppa permission to tell Larken and me about shifters, came up and put his hand on my shoulder. "She's not kidding. Your coworkers went all out on the food. My mouth has been watering for the baked Alaska, but Larken said she wasn't going to set it on fire until you arrived."

Searching the room for my friend to tell her to grab the rum and a kitchen torch, my gaze landed on a man headed straight toward me. I didn't recognize him—and with his looks, I definitely would have remembered if we had met before—but Ramsey and Aero were staring at him while she laughed. I vaguely remembered Aero mentioning that the friend they had named their son after was coming to visit and assumed it was him.

As my breath caught in my throat, I racked my brain trying to remember what he'd said about the guy. It wasn't much, just that the wolf shifter was a part of the pack in the wilderness where Ramsey had stayed after she was rescued. One thing

was for sure, my coworker hadn't mentioned how hot the guy was.

His deep brown eyes were locked on my face as he stalked closer, and they were filled with desire. My fingers itched to stroke through his thick, dark hair that was a couple of inches longer than the current style. A muscle jumped in his angular jaw as his tall, muscular body prowled toward me with animal grace.

Living in Timber Ridge, I'd seen lots of attractive male shifters. Although I had appreciated their good looks, I had never reacted to one of them...until now. I was surrounded by everyone I knew in town—many of whom had an enhanced sense of smell—and my panties were freaking drenched. Because of him.

If I had been in any doubt over what my libido roaring to life meant, his growled, "Mate," as he yanked Kace's hand off my shoulder would've eliminated it.

Kace stepped away from me with a smile. "Calm down, Rome. I have a mate of my own."

"Don't care," he grunted, wrapping his arm around my back to pull me against his side. "She's mine."

The alpha quirked a brow. "Do you even know her name?"

Aero and Ramsey's friend—the wolf shifter who was apparently my fated mate—snarled at him before answering. "Thora."

Kace aimed a soft smile at me. "But does she know yours?"

A giggle bubbled up my chest at his question. I'd heard the guy say a grand total of six words and knew only what Aero had mentioned about him. Luckily, that included his name. "He's Rome. Arbor is named after him."

Rome's nose wrinkled at the reminder that everyone used the baby's middle name, making me laugh again.

"Then I guess we can skip introductions." He turned toward Peppa. "Now that Thora is here, can you please tell

Larken to bring out the baked Alaska?”

“Sure, since you said please,” she teased as they walked away.

Rome shifted his hold on me until we were facing each other. “Happy Birthday, mate.”

There had only been two matings in the pack since I moved to Timber Ridge. Aero had gone up to the Wilderness Pack to hunt Ramsey down, so I hadn’t been around to see how things went down for them. I hadn’t been at the hospital when Peppa and Cason had met after the birth of his niece and nephew, but their connection had been obvious even to me when they’d come into the restaurant six days later. They’d been so darn sweet together. It was what started my dreams of finding a hunky shifter of my own. And now I apparently had one.

“Is it really as easy as that? We see each other from across a crowded room, and boom...we’re mates?”

Rome scanned the room before tugging me into the kitchen, where we’d have some privacy. “What have you been told about the mating process?”

My cheeks filled with heat as I thought about how Peppa had blushed when Larken and I had teased her about all the sex she and Cason must’ve had during the almost week he’d kept her away from Timber Treasures after our opening night. “Um...mostly just that you only feel desire for your fated mate, so there’s lots of, uh...orgasms involved. Because of all that pent-up need. And some biting.”

“Yeah, pretty baby. There will definitely be as many orgasms as you can handle.” I couldn’t tear my gaze away from Rome’s mouth as his lips curved into a satisfied smile. “Gotta take care of all that pent-up need for you.”

“Uh-huh.”

I was too dazed to come up with a better reply, but Rome didn’t seem happy with my answer. My head jerked up when his mouth pressed into a flat line, and a growl rumbled up his chest. “Fuck, I...shit.”

I couldn't imagine what he could be upset about when finding your fated mate was supposed to be the best day in a shifter's life. "What's wrong?"

"There's no other way to say this than to just get the words out there." He wrapped one of his hands around the back of my neck. "And you gotta understand that your answer isn't going to change a damn thing between us."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but it sounded serious. "Okay?"

His wolf flashed in his eyes the same way Peppa, Aero, and Bexley's did when they were feeling a strong emotion. "You mentioned that shifters don't feel desire for anyone other than their mate, but you're human. The lack of passion also tends to hold true for human mates, but unless they grew up around shifters, they don't know why they never feel chemistry for someone. Sometimes, they think it's because there's something wrong with them, and they attempt to fix the issue by trying to force it. Sleeping with people in the hope they'll find the right person to unlock the desire that's waiting for their fated mate, if only they knew they had one out there."

Rome struck me as a man of few words, and my brows went higher and higher as he rambled through his lengthy explanation. My lips parted on a gasp when I finally realized what he was trying to ask. "Until I moved to Timber Ridge, I thought something was wrong with me, but I never did that. I was too busy focusing on my career as a chef to worry about why I hadn't found a man who made me feel how you do. And then when I found out about shifters, I was hoping it was because I was someone's fated mate."

"Not someone's," he growled, stroking his other hand down my spine to splay his palm against my lower back. "Mine."

"Yours," I reassured, pressing my body closer to his. "All yours."

"I would've found a way to understand if you hadn't waited for me, pretty baby." He dropped his forehead against mine. "But I'm so damn happy you did."

“Is your wolf happy, too?”

“Happy doesn’t begin to describe his reaction,” Rome murmured with a shake of his head as he pressed my palm against his chest. “You’re the other half of my soul. Finding you has soothed my inner beast unlike anything else.”

That was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me. Sniffling, I pressed my cheek against the other side of his chest, needing to take a moment to appreciate the precious gift that I’d been given.

I wrapped my arms around my mate, my inner beast growling at me because it sounded as though she was close to crying. He wanted me to fix whatever had upset her, but I had no idea what I'd said wrong.

Stroking my hands up and down her back, I pressed a kiss against the top of her head. "I'm sorry, baby."

"Sorry about what?" she asked, tilting her head back to stare up at me with wide green eyes.

Her long blond hair brushed against the back of my hand, and I was sorely tempted to wrap it around my fist to tug her head farther back while I captured her mouth in a deep kiss. It was damn difficult to fight that urge, but I needed to make sure my pretty mate was okay before I kissed her senseless.

Dragging one of my hands up, I brushed my thumb across her cheek's soft, pale skin. "Making you cry."

She sniffled again, her nose wrinkling in a way that was somehow sexy and adorable at the same time. "I'm not crying."

"Maybe not," I conceded. "But those beautiful green eyes of yours have tears in them."

Her expression softened as she smiled up at me. "Happy ones because you're so sweet."

"Nobody has ever accused me of being sweet before."

Her eyes twinkled with joy. “I have a feeling I’m going to be saying it a lot.”

“Damn straight.” I finally gave myself permission to give in to the temptation that was her mouth. Bending my head, I pressed my lips against hers, my tongue sliding between them when she gasped. I’d only meant to get a quick taste before we returned to the party to say our goodbyes, but our kiss quickly spiraled out of control. Our tongues tangled together as I cradled her petite body against mine, her breasts pressing against my chest. Even through several layers of clothing, I felt the pebbled tips as she rubbed against me with a whimper.

We were both breathless when I lifted my head. Scanning the kitchen, I spotted a door in the back and started to tug her toward it. I only made it halfway there when she dug in her heels and protested, “We can’t just leave. It’s a surprise party for me.”

“There isn’t a single person out there who won’t understand why we snuck out the back,” I assured her, stroking my thumb against her palm. “The mated couples know what it’s like when you find each other, and anyone who hasn’t found their mate yet will be looking forward to the day when this happens to them.”

“They closed the entire restaurant for me, Rome.”

Her tone held a healthy dose of disbelief, as though she didn’t think she was important enough for her friends to go to such lengths to celebrate her birthday. Although there hadn’t been enough time for me to get to know my mate yet, I had no doubts that she was the kind of person who deserved everything the Timber Ridge pack had done for her tonight. And more.

If it took sticking around for her party to make her see that, then I’d suck it up and stay. For a little bit, anyway. “Okay, pretty baby. We can go back in there, but I want another kiss first.”

“Me, too,” she whispered, going up on her toes to press her lips against mine.



I loved that the hint of shyness I'd caught when she was talking about the mating process hadn't stopped her from taking what she wanted from me. My sweet little mate didn't hesitate to deepen the kiss, and a groan rumbled up my chest when her tongue slid inside my mouth. Gripping her hips, I yanked her against me so she could feel the hard length of my cock as it pressed against her stomach. "If you want to enjoy the party your friends are throwing you, we better get out there now. Before I toss you over my shoulder and find somewhere I can fill your tight little pussy with my come before I sink my teeth in your shoulder to mark you as mine."

My lips curved into a satisfied smirk when she shivered at my warning. Her eyes were foggy with desire, and the touch of regret in them when she pulled away from me soothed my ego. "We don't have to stay long, but I would like to try some of the baked Alaska that Larken made. It's one of my favorite desserts, but we don't normally serve it because the recipe takes hours between baking the cake, making the ice cream and meringue, and freezing everything in multiple steps."

"Is that the one they set on fire when it's served?"

She laced our fingers together and tugged me toward the door that led into the dining room. "Yup."

"I've always wanted to try it." My cock pressed against my zipper when she stared at my mouth as I licked my lips.

Everyone shouted out their congratulations on our mating as we walked into the dining room together. I stuck close to Thora as she introduced me to several of her friends as we made our way over to the table piled high with food.

"Ooh, they made some python ravioli in wild mushroom cream sauce with the loin that I roasted yesterday." She rubbed her hands together, grabbed a plate, and scooped herself a big serving of the stuffed pasta.

"Eat up," I murmured against her ear. "You're going to need the energy later."

Twisting around to grab another plate, she shoved it against my chest and muttered, "You will, too."

Her sassiness made me chuckle, even while it intensified my need for her. But there was no denying she was right. Since I was meeting Ramsey and Aero here around dinnertime, I hadn't eaten on my way into town. I'd heard amazing things about the food served at Timber Treasures and hadn't wanted to spoil my appetite. Not that it was even possible since my wolf gave me a high metabolism.

"As you wish." I winked and enjoyed my mate's pretty pink blush as I piled food onto my plate.

I led her over to a table for two in the corner and pulled out her chair before setting my plate down. "Would you like something to drink?"

A tall guy who smelled like a polar bear came up behind me with two glasses of champagne grasped in his large hands. "Thought you might want these."

He handed the glasses to me instead of offering one of them to Thora, which I appreciated. I'd touched my pretty mate enough that she carried the slightest hint of my scent, but it wasn't enough to make me comfortable with her being close to an unmated male. I wasn't sure anything ever would be.

Setting the drinks down on the table, I gave him a chin lift and muttered, "Thanks."

"Thank you, Bexley," Thora echoed my gratitude.

There was a flash of understanding in the polar bear's eyes as I dragged the other chair closer to Thora, sat down, and flung my arm around her shoulders. Holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender, he muttered, "You don't have anything to fear from me. Unless you don't treat her right. Then I'll have to kick your ass."

"Seriously?" Thora whispered, shaking her head as she dug into her pasta.

"I appreciate you looking out for my mate, but you'll never have to worry about that."

"Good," he grunted before turning on his heel to walk away.

Thora rolled her eyes. “I’ve spent almost two years in Timber Ridge and worked with Bexley and Aero for another year in Chicago, and I still don’t understand male shifter posturing.”

“Don’t worry about him.” I forked one of the ravioli on my plate and held it up to her mouth, waiting until she was chewing to add, “I’m the only male who matters.”

She almost choked on the bite I’d fed her. After she managed to swallow it, she muttered, “I didn’t think it was possible, but I have a feeling you’re going to be even worse than Cason and Aero are with their mates.”

I winked at her again. “Probably.”

“Lucky me,” she purred with a waggle of her brows just as Ramsey and Aero walked up to our table.

“Happy Birthday!” Ramsey flashed Thora a big grin and jerked her chin toward me. “I know Aero gave you a present from us earlier, but I have a feeling you’ll like this gift more.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I should’ve known that you’d try to take credit for me finding Thora.”

“The only reason you’re here is to visit us because we named our baby after you.” Aero’s grin matched Ramsey’s, and I wasn’t surprised that he had decided to back up his mate’s boast. “And you were so grouchy about us inviting you to a surprise birthday party.”

Normally, I would’ve grumbled about my bad timing in giving Aero shit about being a possessive bastard when it came to Ramsey, but I was more than willing to take whatever he shoved my way. “Make fun all you want. There isn’t a damn thing anyone can do to get me down now that I found Thora.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet,” Ramsey sighed.

“Right?” Thora agreed with a smug grin.

I pictured her smiling up at me, her naked body sprawled beneath mine after we’d both found our release. Wanting to make my dream a reality, I shoveled my food into my mouth,

feeding her bites from her plate so she'd be done faster, too. By the time her friend lit the dessert on fire and served each of us a slice, my blood felt hotter than the flaming alcohol on the meringue. The cake was delicious, but I barely tasted it. I was too busy fighting my wolf as he pushed against my skin, desperate to break free and claim my mate. When she set her fork down and leaned back in her chair with a satisfied smile, my control snapped.

When I came into the restaurant to cover Aero's shift tonight, the last thing I'd expected was to end up hoisted over a sexy male wolf's shoulder and carried out of Timber Treasures while all of my friends cheered him on. Rome headed straight for my house without asking which way to go. As he climbed the steps, I asked, "How did you know where I live?"

His grip on me tightened as he growled, "I followed your delicious scent here. If I'd caught it before I met up with Ramsey and Aero to meet Arbor, we never would've made it to your party in the first place."

"Delicious?" I echoed, butterflies swirling in my belly at the masculine approval in his raspy voice.

"Best damn thing I've ever smelled." One of his hands rubbed over my butt cheek, sending a jolt of desire straight to my core. "Can't wait to taste you while the scent of your need fills my lungs."

"Whoa," I breathed, my panties going from wet to completely drenched.

He grumbled something about needing to watch over me when he twisted the knob and realized I'd left my door unlocked. Even though I'd lived in a decent neighborhood, I'd had an extra deadbolt on my door back in Chicago. Not having to worry about crime was one of the things I loved most about living in Timber Ridge. But I knew enough about how overprotective male shifters were with their mates to realize no

explanation would make Rome feel better about finding my home unlocked.

My only option was distraction...especially since it would lead to all those orgasms he'd promised me. Twisting my neck, I nipped his earlobe. "Hurry up. I need you."

He kicked the door shut behind us and stomped up the stairs. When he reached my bedroom, he tossed me on the mattress and kicked off his shoes. I did the same with mine, and before I knew it, Rome was down to his boxers, and I only had my bra and panties on. As I stared up at him from the bed, my gaze drifted over the muscles that roped his tall body. "You're so gorgeous."

His eyes darkened as he took in the curves that had been hidden beneath my work clothes. "My looks are nothing compared to yours, pretty baby. Holy fuck. I don't know what I did for fate to pair me with you, but I'll be grateful for it until I take my last breath many years from now."

"So darn sweet."

His fingers slid under the sides of my panties. "Bet I'm not nearly as sweet as your pussy."

"There's only one way to find out."

He quickly stripped me out of my lingerie—while I did a mental fist pump for deciding to wear something sexy to cheer myself up about being at work on my birthday—before settling on his knees between my thighs. He looked so darn sexy staring down at me. I could've almost come just from looking at him.

His lips met mine, and I lost myself in his kiss just as quickly as I had earlier. Only this time, it was better because his naked chest was pressed against mine. And his boxers were the only barrier between his impressive bulge and my drenched core. I whimpered when he tore his mouth from mine, but the sound turned into a mewl as he kissed his way down my neck and chest to my breasts.

He flicked his tongue over one of my nipples as his fingers tweaked the other side, making my back arch off the mattress.

We were just getting started, and the pleasure was already almost more than I could take. It got even better when he sucked my nipple deep into his mouth, feeling as though there was a direct line between my breasts and my core that he tugged on with each pull of his lips.

I dove my fingers into his hair, gripping the back of his skull to press him close as he kissed across my chest. A moan slipped past my lips when he nipped at the side of my breast and murmured, “Gotta make you come before I get to feel that perfect pussy wrapped around my cock.”

“If you keep paying attention to my breasts like that, it just might happen.”

“We can see if I can make you come with just breast play another time.” He moved lower, trailing his tongue down my stomach. “Right now, I need the taste of you in my mouth more than I need my next breath.”

He nudged my thighs farther apart with his shoulders, and then his tongue flicked over my clit.

“Holy crap.”

“Feel good?” he rasped, his dark eyes locked on my face as his tongue dipped lower.

“Uh-huh,” I breathed.

“You taste even better.”

Those were the last words he said for a long time. His mouth was too busy devouring me to do anything else as he sent me soaring over the edge before building me right back up again. Over and over until I was a boneless heap from the four mind-blowing orgasms he’d given me before he finally shoved his boxers down his legs and kicked them off.

Positioning himself between my legs, he lined his dick up with my entrance, notching the tip in my channel. “Ready for me, pretty baby?”

I’d always expected to be nervous when I finally lost my virginity, but there wasn’t a hint of doubt in my mind about

what was going to happen next. I was confident that Rome would make it good for me. “Yes, please take me now.”

His dark gaze held me captive as he surged forward, filling me with one powerful thrust. After all the pleasure he’d given me, it took me a moment to realize his invasion was painful. Tears filled my eyes as I dug my nails into his shoulders.

“I’m so sorry. I hate that I had to hurt you,” he murmured, kissing each drop away as it trailed down my cheek.

I breathed through the pain, relieved to discover it didn’t last long. After a couple of minutes, all I felt was...full. Wiggling my hips, I felt a shaft of pleasure in my core. “It’s already better.”

His wolf flashed in his eyes as he asked, “You sure?”

Stroking my hands up his muscular chest, I gave my hips another experimental wiggle. The tension drained from my body when I realized there wasn’t even a little bit of pain anymore, only pleasure. “Oh, yes.”

“Thank fuck,” he groaned, slowly sliding out and then inching his way back inside. “Gonna spend so much time in this pussy. You were made to take my cock.”

I twined my arms around his neck to pull him down for a kiss. “Keep giving me orgasms like you did with your mouth, and you’re not going to get any arguments from me.”

“Hold on, pretty baby. I don’t have it in me to go slow or gentle. This is gonna be a heck of a ride.”

My inner walls fluttered at his warning, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. I was wet enough for him to pound in and out of me without any resistance while I held on for the ride like he’d instructed. The headboard pounded against the wall in rhythm with his thrusts as he built the pleasure in me higher and higher. My body was taut as I got closer to the edge. “So close.”

“C’mon, pretty baby. Need to feel you fly apart around me before you milk the come from my cock.”



Slipping a hand under my butt, he lifted me. The new position had him hitting my G-spot with the next few thrusts, making me gasp. “Yes! Oh, yes!”

When he bent his head low to suck one of my nipples into his mouth, I flew apart. As amazing as the other orgasms he’d given me were, this release was bigger than anything I’d ever felt. My screams of pleasure echoed around the room as Rome anchored himself deep in my pussy, throwing his head back as he roared my name. I felt the hot splashes of his come against my inner walls as his cock jerked inside me.

When we were coming down from our orgasms, he slid his arm under my body to grip the back of my neck. Tilting my head to the side, he nipped at my shoulder. “I’m gonna mark you right here. Are you ready for it? Ready to complete the mating process so nobody will ever mistake you for anything but mine?”

I’d heard enough about the mating mark to know that it wouldn’t hurt, so I didn’t hesitate to answer, “Yes, please. I’ve been ready my whole life to be yours.”

A growl rumbled up his chest as intense joy flared in his eyes. Then he lowered his head and sank his teeth into my shoulder. It seemed as though the world held still for a moment, and then everything fell into place. I’d never realized a part of me was missing, but now that I’d been claimed by Rome, I felt whole for the first time in my life.

Waking up wrapped around Rome was the best way to start my day, and I had a whole lifetime of mornings like this ahead of me to look forward to. I wanted nothing more than to stay snuggled up against him for hours, but the rumbling of both of our stomachs reminded me why that wasn't possible.

Rolling over to smile up at the sexy wolf shifter in my bed, I murmured, "Good morning."

"The best morning." He wrapped my hair around his fist and held me in place while he dipped his head to claim my mouth in a deep kiss. "I'm so damn glad that I finally found you."

Realizing that I didn't know how old he was, I gasped. "Um...how long is finally?"

He flashed me a sexy grin. "Are you worried that fate tied you to an old man when you're only twenty-five?"

"I don't care how old you are." I shoved against his chest. "But it's not fair that you know my age because we met at my birthday party."

"I guess I should tell you." He rubbed his nose against mine. "But only if you pay the toll."

"The toll?" I echoed.

"Yeah, gimme a kiss," he demanded.

“That’s a price I’m happy to pay.” I pressed my lips against his. “And one I’m looking forward to charging you whenever you want to know something about me.”

His dark eyes were full of appreciation. “I like how your mind works, baby.”

“What I’d like is an answer to my question.” It was hard to judge a shifter’s age. He could be five years older than me or fifty, for all I knew. Luckily, being mated to a shifter would slow down the aging process and lengthen my lifespan.

“I’m thirty-two.”

“Not so old, after all.” I grinned at him. “You’ve only got seven years on me.”

There was a naughty gleam in his brown orbs. “Young enough to keep up with you.”

“You sure did a good job of it last night.”

I shouldn’t have been able to take more after the five orgasms he’d given me and losing my virginity, but I’d still welcomed him with open arms both times he’d woken me up. And he’d made sure that I’d been well-rewarded for it.

I’d come to recognize the glint in his eyes when he snaked his arm around my waist and rolled onto his back with me sprawled on top of him. Pressing my palms against his chest, I pushed up and shook my head. “Nuh-uh. Don’t give me that look. We need sustenance before we go at it again. Didn’t you feel your stomach when it growled? I swear, mine is trying to eat itself.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were hungry?” He lifted me off the bed and onto the floor before rolling off the mattress. “Do you stuff we can make in the fridge? If not, I can run over to Timber Treasures to grab my car so I can head over to the store and stock up on supplies.”

My heart melted at how worried he was about me needing to eat something. I wrapped my arms around him to give him a quick hug. “So darn sweet.”

“Only with you, pretty baby,” he rasped, stroking his thumb over the mating mark on my shoulder. His touch sent a spark of desire coursing through my body, making me shiver. “You like that?”

I nodded. “Feels so good.”

“I’m gonna play with that mark while I pound in and out of your body,” he promised, his eyes flashing wolf. “But later. First, I need to feed you.”

“That won’t be a problem.” I pointed at my chest, not bothered by the fact that I was completely naked. I couldn’t be after he’d explored every inch of my body with his hands, lips, tongue, and teeth. “I’m a chef, remember? Food is my thing.”

He chuckled with a shrug. “I thought maybe it was like how doctors make the worst patients, and you might hate to cook when you’re at home.”

“Nope, I love to cook no matter where I am.”

He patted his six-pack abs. “Then fate did me an extra favor because I love to eat.”

Rubbing my hands together, I thought about the ingredients I had in the kitchen. “How does ricotta hotcakes with thick-cut maple bacon sound?”

“Fucking fantastic.” He patted my butt to nudge me toward the bathroom. “If you’re going to make me a gourmet breakfast, you get first dibs on the bathroom.”

“We both know you would’ve let me go first even if you were the one cooking this morning.” I put some extra swivel in my hips as I walked away, glancing over my shoulder to flash him a grin. “Because you’re so darn sweet.”

He sighed and shook his head while I giggled. When he growled at me with a playful spark in his eyes, I raced the rest of the way into the bathroom. With Rome waiting on me—and my stomach making growling noises after all the exercise I’d gotten between the sheets last night—I was in and out in record time.

When I walked back out, he was sitting on the edge of the bed. Setting his phone on the table, he got up and gave me a kiss before he moved past me. That reminded me that I hadn't checked mine since before I walked over to Timber Treasures last night. After I threw on a pair of pajama pants and a T-shirt, I grabbed my white chef's jacket off the floor and pulled my phone out of one of the myriad of pockets.

Several texts were waiting for me on my cell, most of them well wishes for my birthday and/or my mating. But the one that made me squeal with joy was from Peppa.

"Good news?" Rome asked as he strode out of the bathroom to check on me with a towel wrapped around his lean hips.

"Yup." I grinned at him and turned my phone so he could see the screen. "Looks like I have an unexpected vacation in honor of our mating."

I wouldn't have been able to read the message from that far away, but his vision was a heck of a lot better than mine since he was a shifter. "I get you all to myself for a whole week?"

"Uh-huh."

His answering grin was wider than mine. "Your boss just made herself one of my favorite people in Timber Ridge."

I narrowed my eyes and my foot against the floor, crossing my arms over my chest. "Oh, really?"

"Only because she's good to you, pretty baby." He walked over and pulled me into his arms, brushing a kiss against the top of my head. "And because I'm not sure my wolf could've handled you being in a kitchen with an unmated male so soon after I found you. If she hadn't offered to give you this time off, that polar bear shifter you work with would've been taking his life into his own hands by going in to work with you."

"Mm-hmm." His answer made sense, but I still didn't like hearing him compliment another woman. Even though Peppa was my friend and happily mated to Cason. And knowing that Rome would never be attracted to another woman. He was all

mine, but our bond was still so new. It felt fragile. Like it needed to be nurtured. Which was exactly why Peppa had given me the week off. Because she'd gone through the same thing when she met Cason. "She went through the same thing with her mate and took six days off right after our opening. And Cason still insisted on coming in with her when she came back. It used to crack me up whenever he growled at Aero or Bexley, but I have a feeling that I won't find it quite so funny when you're the one feeling threatened by one of my coworkers."

"Because you'll be too busy getting hot and bothered by my possessiveness." I was about to huff out a denial when he leaned back and quirked a brow at me. Staring into his dark eyes, it was impossible to pretend that seeing him get jealous over me wouldn't turn me on. "And I gotta admit, I like that you can be just as territorial over me as I am with you."

"Good because I'm willing to bet this won't be the last time." His reassurance soothed my worry that I'd overreacted, and I went up on my toes to give him a quick kiss. "Now go get ready so I can feed us, and we can burn off some of this chemistry before we make my house spontaneously combust."

“**W**hat do you think you’re doing?” I growled as I whipped open the door to the shower and glared at my mate. “I specifically remember telling you not to shower when I left to go to the store.”

Thora giggled and dipped her head under the water, distracting me for a moment with the soapy suds that ran down her wet, naked body. “You did. But while you’re cute when you get bossy, I didn’t agree.”

I inhaled slowly, and even though I knew the smell of cherry blossom would only overpower my scent on her for a short time, I was still irritated that she wasn’t completely saturated in it.

“I smelled like sweat and sex,” she muttered.

“I fail to see the problem with that,” I drawled in reply.

Today was our last day before Thora had to return to work that evening, and I was struggling with the idea of being apart from her, especially knowing she worked with several unmated males between the polar bear and servers. Logically, I knew she would never be attracted to them, but I couldn’t seem to make my mind, or wolf, understand that. My demand that she not shower had been rooted in my need for it to be unquestionable that she was mated. To me.

She shook her head and tossed me an amused smile that indicated she didn’t quite understand how serious I was about this. “I’m almost done.”

“You’ve left me no choice then,” I grunted before quickly undressing and joining her in the steam-filled stall. “I’ll just have to get you dirty all over again.”

Thora gasped when I grabbed her ass and hauled her body against mine, but the second our lips touched, she melted into me with a moan. She must have brushed her teeth because her taste had a delicious hint of mint when my tongue swept inside her eager mouth.

I devoured her as I slowly walked her back until she was pressed against the tile wall, then lifted her, and her legs automatically circled my hips. My cock was always at least semi-hard around my mate, but being this close to her tight, wet pussy had my dick throbbing with need and steadily leaking precome.

I bucked my pelvis, and she gasped, arching her back and thrusting her gorgeous breasts up to my face.

“I fucking loved the way you respond to me, pretty baby,” I murmured before taking one hard nipple in my mouth and scraping my fangs over the delicate skin.

Over the past week, we’d opened up and learned a lot about each other, not just our preferences in bed. I’d never felt a connection like this with anyone else. Talking to Thora, just being with her, came so easily. But while I enjoyed all the time we spent talking or eating or walking in the woods, it was early enough in our mating that we could barely go an hour or so without fucking.

“Rome,” Thora moaned, wiggling a little, trying to take me inside her. “Need you.”

“And you’ll get me, I promise. But I want to make sure you carry my scent all over you first.”

I switched to the other breast and gave it equal treatment, then I kissed her again, deep and thorough until she was panting and mewling sweet little pleas for release. I would never climax before my mate, but I wasn’t ready to come inside her yet. So I slipped a finger into her tight channel, then another and another until I was thrusting three digits in and



out. She cried out, and her body tensed as her orgasm built. After finger-fucking her a few more times, I pressed my thumb on her clit and sealed my mouth over hers, swallowing her screams of rapture.

My cock was painfully hard and ready to explode, so I set Thora on her feet, making sure she was steady enough to hold herself up. Then I took a step back and pumped my dick a couple of times before allowing myself to come. Thick jets of semen spurted from my tip, and I sprayed it all over her chest, stomach, and pussy. My desire to knock up my woman had kept me from coming outside of her womb all week, but the need to have her saturated in my scent won out this time.

Thora raised an eyebrow but didn't protest. Instead, her mouth quirked up in a knowing smirk. When I was finished—but not empty because I seemed to have an endless supply of seed for my mate—I dropped to my knees in front of her and began rubbing my come all into her skin.

“This seems a little extreme, don't you think?” Thora asked, sounding amused rather than irritated.

“Nope,” I replied, letting the P pop at the end. After making sure I'd spread my essence all over her, I surged to my feet and cradled her jaw in my hands, lifting her face so I was staring straight down at her. “Until you have a sexy little bump in your belly that makes it beyond clear you're taken, I doubt I'll be any less determined to make sure you wear my scent strong enough to deter even a human male.” I gave her a soft kiss, then a wry smile. “Maybe not even then.”

Thora's eye went wide, and I worried for a moment that she would freak out at the realization that I'd been fucking her unprotected all this time. I hadn't thought much about it at first, and when it did finally hit me, I ignored it in favor of attempting to get my mate pregnant.

However, the look in her eyes was one of hopeful joy. Then she laughed and gestured to her body. “Mission accomplished.”

I knew she was referring to the way I'd rubbed my scent all over her, but I latched onto the double meaning and

growled, “Not quite.”

Grabbing her ass again, I boosted her up until she was at just the right height and impaled her on my pulsing cock. I was already on the verge of bursting once again, and when her hot, slippery pussy gripped me, I grasped onto the last shreds of my control with an iron grip.

“Fuck,” I grunted, resting my forehead against hers. “How does it get better every damn time?”

“I don’t know,” Thora breathed. “But you should stop questioning it and see just how good this can get.”

I chuckled, amazed as always that my mate could make me laugh, even while I was buried inside her. “You got it, pretty baby.”

With her back supported against the tile and my hands palming her ass cheeks, I was able to pull back almost all the way before driving in so deep I bumped against her cervix.

“Rome!” she cried out as her head dropped back and thumped against the wall.

Her pussy clenched, and I lost what little sanity I’d been clinging to. “Fuck,” I groaned. My hips began moving, pumping in and out fast and hard. “So damn tight. Love the way your pussy milks my cock.”

“More,” Thora cried out. “Oh, yes!”

I gave her what she wanted, putting all my energy into driving her to a mind-blowing climax. My spine tingled, and my balls drew up, warning me that I wouldn’t last much longer. “Come, pretty baby,” I growled as I pulled her cheeks apart and dipped just the tip of my fingers into her puckered hole.

Thora’s scream rang off the tile walls, but it was nearly drowned out by my own roar as my orgasm hit me like a freight train. I exploded inside her, filling her so full that it leaked out and rolled down her thighs.

*That ought to do it,* I thought smugly.

I cherished the time I spent with Rome in our little bubble, but I was also excited to get back into the kitchen at Timber Treasures. The only time we'd ventured out of my house was when he'd gone out to his car—which Aero had dropped off in my driveway after my birthday party—to grab his bag. Not that he really needed his clothes when we spent most of our time naked. Our days had been filled with endless bouts of sex as we christened every room in my house. More than once. I didn't think there was a single flat surface he hadn't spread me out on in the whole place.

I couldn't remember the last time I took an entire week off work, except for when I made the move down here. And that hadn't been a fun time. Packing all my possessions, loading the truck, and making the drive only to do everything in reverse again was harder work than being in the kitchen at the restaurant.

That week had been nothing like the past one. Other than cooking for us, Rome barely let me lift a finger. Since I was the one who prepared most of our meals, he insisted on cleaning up after me. And not just in the kitchen. If a load of laundry needed to be done, he handled it. Including folding the clothes and putting them away.

As I pulled my chef's jacket and a pair of black work pants out of the closet, I noticed how organized my closet was. After putting them on, I padded into the bedroom and smiled at Rome, who was sprawled in the chair in the corner. "I am a lucky woman."

“Oh, yeah?” He beamed a lazy grin at me. “How come?”

Moving close, I climbed onto his lap and brushed a kiss against his lips. “Because you take such good care of me.”

“Not sure what I did to earn your appreciation, but whatever it was, you make it damn easy, baby.”

“So sweet,” I whispered.

His palms dipped under the waist of my pants to grip my butt and squeeze. “You know what happens when you use that word.”

He’d gotten in the habit of devouring my pussy—which he said helped him stay sweet since I tasted better than honey—every time I called him that. Which was often...and not just because I enjoyed the orgasms he gave me with his mouth. He just always seemed to know the perfect thing to say and do to make me happy. “You’ll have to hold that thought since I need to get to the restaurant.”

“Not I...we,” he corrected, gently swatting my butt before lifting me off his lap.

We’d gone round and round today about this after he learned that Bexley and Hendrix, another unmated male chef that Peppa had hired a few months ago, were going to be in the kitchen during my shift. “Are you sure you want to come to work with me tonight? Eight hours is a long time. I don’t want you to get bored.”

He raked me up and down with his heated gaze. “I could happily stare at you for eight hours straight without getting bored.”

“But I’m not sure I could get through it without making a mistake with one of my knives.”

Our bond had strengthened to the point where I could feel the weight of his stare even when I had no idea he was behind me, but it had done nothing to lessen the chemistry between us. If anything, it had only heightened my need for my sexy mate.

Crossing his arms over his broad chest, he asked, “What does Cason do when he goes into the restaurant with Peppa?”

“I’m not sure.” I shrugged. “He mostly hangs out in her office, but he’s not there as often as he used to be since Cyrus is quite the handful now.”

“Do you think she’d let me use her computer?”

“I can’t see why she’d have a problem with that, why?”

He beamed a smug grin at me as he got to his feet. “I’ll take a page from Cason’s book and hang out in the office while you’re busy. It will give me the chance to pay some bills for the pack, check on our investments, and balance the accounts.”

I was surprised when he’d told me that he didn’t have a job but managed the Wilderness Pack’s finances. With his big muscles and rough edges, Rome didn’t seem like the office type, but he’d explained that his wolf found more satisfaction in investing than chopping wood or fixing cars. He enjoyed the rush of victory when he beat the market. And for a small group of guys who lived simply in the wilderness, they had plenty of investments for him to manage.

“Then I guess we have a plan.”

Rome didn’t hide how happy he was with my agreement, giving me a quick kiss before we headed downstairs to walk hand-in-hand along the sidewalk. Several of my neighbors called out greetings as we made our way to the restaurant. When Rome followed me through the back door and Bexley spotted him, the polar bear shifter I called friend shook his head and glanced over his shoulder at Larken. “You owe me five bucks.”

“Darn it,” she huffed, pulling a folded bill out of one of her pockets to toss it at him. “I thought for sure he wouldn’t be as bad as Cason.”

Rome wasn’t bothered by their teasing. He was more worried about making sure that Bexley and Hendrix knew that I belonged to him before leaving me with them...even though

he was only going to be one room away with an open door between us.

After giving me a long, deep kiss and stroking his thumb over my mating mark, he glared at both of them as he strode toward the office. Once he was out of our line of vision, Larken turned to me and fanned herself. “Dang, girl. That was hot.”

“You have no idea.”

“Which is a shame since I really wish that I did,” she muttered before focusing on the dessert she was preparing.

It was easy for me to sympathize with my friend since I’d been in her shoes only one week ago. I could only hope that she was one of the lucky humans who wound up being mated to a shifter like me. I patted her on the back as I made my way over to my station and got to work on trimming the bison that had been delivered while I was out.

There was lots of work to be done, and my shift flew by faster than I had expected. Rome stayed busy in the office, but he came out to check on me several times throughout the evening. I didn’t miss how he found excuses to rub against me each time to leave his scent behind. It was a good thing everyone I worked with knew about shifters. If we’d been in any other professional kitchen, I would have been reprimanded the first time he sauntered in as though he owned the place and fired an hour later when he did it again.

Peppa had only laughed when she came in halfway through dinner service and found him in her office. Then she headed over to my side and murmured, “So freaking happy for you, Thora.”

I bumped her with my hip, set my knife on the stainless-steel counter, and stripped off my gloves to press my hand over my heart. “Leaving Castagna to follow you here was the best decision I’ve ever made. Thank you so much for making a place for me at Timber Treasures.”

“As if there was any doubt that I’d want you in my kitchen.” She flashed me a soft smile. “Fate works in

mysterious ways, my friend.”

And wondrous ones, as proved by pairing me with Rome.

I enjoyed spending time with Rome's wolf. It was so incredible that this huge beast was wrapped around my little finger. He bounded around my backyard, crouching over his front legs as he wagged his tail with a bark. His human side flashed in his eyes with a teasing glint, and then he barked. It was clear that he wanted to play.

Darting forward, I stroked my hand over his back before racing away from him. "Tag, you're it."

If this had been a true race, I wouldn't have gotten more than a couple of steps away from him. But the wolf gave me a head start, and I made it all the way to the bottom step of my deck before he nipped at the hem of my shirt. "You got me!" I cried.

He barked in response and dashed toward the trees that lined the back of the yard. I thought I was in pretty good shape, but it didn't take long before I was panting. He led me on a merry chase, closing the distance between the trees and me and darting away before I could touch him.

Bending over, I pressed my hands against my thighs and gasped, "No fair. You're way too good at this. I can't catch my breath."

He trotted over to check on me—just like I knew he would. When he pressed his snout against the back of my knee, I reached down to rest my hand on his back. Then I shrieked, "Haha! Tag, you're it again," before pivoting to dart away.



His wolf let out a broken howl that sounded an awful lot like he was laughing, and I giggled as I ran. I didn't get far, though. When I was halfway to the deck, a warm male body pressed against my back, and strong arms wrapped around my body to lift me off the ground. "I can't believe you tricked me like that. I was worried about you."

I wiggled in his hold until he set me back down so I could turn and twine my arms around his neck. "Sorry, babe. I don't have many advantages against you. It was my only chance of winning."

There was an approving gleam in his dark eyes. "My pretty baby hates to lose, huh?"

I freaking loved his nickname for me, but when he added "my" in front of it...holy crap. My panties were drenched. "I'm a much more gracious winner."

"I'll keep that in mind." He brushed his mouth against mine before nipping at my bottom lip. "Luckily, we won't be on opposite teams except when it's just the two of us."

He shook his head and smiled. "I can't remember the last time my wolf played like that."

I was glad I could give that back to him. My heart had ached for the boy he'd been when he'd left his childhood pack after his father died when he was only seventeen. I hated that he'd been on his own for a decade before he found Keane's pack in the wilderness, but his experiences while he'd been a loner had shaped the amazing man he was today. And they'd been a big part of what had brought us together since he had helped Ramsey while she was recovering because they had that in common. If another member of his pack had been the one she'd befriended, we might never have met.

Shaking my head to clear that line of thought, I focused on the here and now. "I'm looking forward to doing it again soon."

"My wolf won't fall for the same trick twice," he warned.

I quirked a brow. "Want to bet on it?"

“I guess it would depend on the stakes.” He laughed and shook his head. “Since you’d probably win.”

“It should be something good because there’s no probably about it.” I flashed him a confident grin. “I’d definitely win. Your wolf wouldn’t risk the chance that I might actually be hurt.”

“I’m glad you know that you’ll always be safe with him.”

His wolf was big and fierce enough to scare most shifters, but I knew he’d never hurt me. Neither would the man, no matter how much I pushed his buttons. “Because he’s a big sweetie.”

“My wolf is not sweet. He’s a savage beast,” he growled, hoisting me over his shoulder to stalk the rest of the way to the house.

I giggled as he stomped across the deck and through the door, which earned me a playful swat against my butt. “Okay, okay. I admit it. You’re a big, scary hunk of a man.”

“That’s more like it,” he murmured before setting me on my feet.

“It’s a good thing I have a privacy fence.” My gaze raked down his sexy body, stalling between his legs as his dick hardened and a drop of precome beaded at the tip. “I’d hate to have to kill someone for seeing you like this. Kace wouldn’t be happy about it.”

“I’m sure the alpha is just as territorial over his mate. He’d understand,” he assured me with a smile as he pressed my back against the nearest wall and crowded against me. “But my wolf loves how vicious you can be.”

I peered up at his face. “And you?”

“I already knew you were fierce.” He wagged his brows as he snagged the pair of athletic shorts he’d left on the table and tugged them on. “I’ve seen for myself how good you are with a knife.”

“You should probably warn the rest of your pack about my knife skills so they don’t mess with me.”

His brows drew together. “My pack?”

With everything we’d talked about over the past week, the one topic that we had avoided was where we were going to live. “I figured you’d want to take me up to your cabin so I could meet them before we moved up there.”

His eyes widened, and his head jerked back as though he was blown away by the suggestion. “I didn’t think that was really an option now that I have you.”

“How come?”

Rome wrapped his arms around me and brushed a kiss against the top of my head. “My cabin is great, but your house is a lot nicer. And there’s a reason we’re called the Wilderness Pack. The nearest restaurant to our pack lands is about half an hour drive away, and it’s owned by humans who aren’t aware that shifters exist.”

“I’d still kick butt in the kitchen.” I leaned back to smile up at him. “Even if it was just an open flame in the backyard.”

“You’re an incredible chef and an amazing woman. I have no doubt that you’d be able to stomp through the forest to hunt up enough supplies to whip up a gourmet meal for the entire pack.” My heart warmed at his confidence in me. “But you love your job. You wouldn’t have the same kinds of opportunities

“And you’re happy handling the Wilderness Pack’s finances,” I pointed out. “I asked Peppa about it, but Kace already has somebody who does that for him. So that wouldn’t be an option for you here.”

“Look at you being as sweet as you accuse me of being all the damn time.” He claimed my mouth in a passionate kiss that left me breathless when he lifted his head. “I don’t see Keane taking my role away from me. There isn’t anyone else in the Wilderness Pack who could do the job half as well as me, and I can manage the accounts as easily from here as there.”

“But would you be okay with living in Timber Ridge? Kace’s pack is a lot bigger than what you’re used to, and

you're not a fan of crowds.”

“I can handle being around people as long as you're one of them.” His hold on me tightened. “Being here makes you happy.”

“I get to take care of you, too.” I nipped at his bottom lip, loving how his wolf flashed in his eyes in response. “Especially on the important stuff.”

“And you do an excellent job of it, pretty baby.” He brushed his lips against mine again. “How about a compromise?”

“What kind?”

He thought about it for a moment before suggesting, “I'll talk to Keane and Kace about splitting my time between the two packs while you check with Peppa to see if she'd be okay with scheduling you four days on and three days off so we can spend a few days at a time at the cabin.”

It was the perfect compromise, at least as far as I was concerned. “I love that idea.”

“Then we'll make it happen.”

**H**aving my fated mate under the roof of the cabin where I'd lived for the past five years was even better than our time at her house. There was something about having her scent on my sheets and knowing only five other people were within fifteen miles of us that soothed my inner beast.

It also helped that we'd barely seen anyone since we got up here. Keane and Leyton, his younger brother and beta, had stopped by the first day to meet Thora, but they hadn't stayed long. Booker, who used to be a part of the Timber Ridge Pack, had dropped off a hunk of venison after his wolf took down an elk. It was a great welcome present, and Thora had used it to back up her boast about being able to cook over an open fire. It tasted better than the elk they served at Timber Treasures, which was fucking delicious.

Garner had been on his way out of town for work when we arrived. His car had already been packed, so he said hello and offered his congratulations on our mating before he hit the road. Although he left his litter to join Keane's pack a few years ago—which was a surprise since cougar shifters tended to be solitary animals with the exception of mated pairs and their offspring—he still worked for his parents' construction company. They let him pick the jobs he took, and he was paid very well for the three-to-six-month stints he did out of town.

That only left Artemis, the sole dragon shifter in our pack who was a recluse. He rarely left the cave he'd claimed, and the news that I'd found my mate and brought her up here hadn't been enough to lure him out. His cabin, which was

directly to the right of mine, had remained empty since we arrived two and a half days ago.

I was kicked back on one of the chairs on my back deck, enjoying the sunrise and a cup of coffee, when Thora stumbled out of the cabin. My pretty little mate was not a morning person unless food was involved, but she loved to cuddle when she woke up. Since she was probably still full from the snack we'd had in the middle of the night, I figured it would take her longer than usual to wake up.

Setting my mug on the table next to me, I stretched out my arms so she could climb on my lap. Then I brushed a kiss against the top of her head and murmured, "Good morning, baby."

"Morning," she grunted as she leaned over to snag my coffee and take a sip. "Mmm, good."

I normally took mine black, but this was my second cup, and I'd added some cream and sugar since I figured she'd be up soon. "Glad you like it."

"Of course, I do. You made it perfect for me."

She wiggled to get more comfortable, but I gripped her hips to hold her still. Although I'd just had her beneath me four hours ago, my cock was already hard again and having her body pressed against mine was too much temptation. "Careful, pretty baby, before you start something you're not ready for yet this morning."

My mate grinned at me over her shoulder, and I was so damn mesmerized by how pretty she was that I almost missed the scent of two human males creeping closer to our position. I hadn't heard anyone drive up, which meant they were coming from the forest. None of the members of my pack had ever invited a human friend to camp on our lands, and they sure as fuck wouldn't have decided to do so during my mate's first visit here.

I didn't know who the hell was trying to sneak up on us, but no way in hell was I going to let them get close to my woman. Jumping to my feet, I tossed Thora across the deck

toward the door. “Get inside the cabin and barricade yourself in the bathroom, baby.”

“What?”

I hated hearing the fear and confusion in her voice, but I couldn't have her out here if we were about to be attacked. “Now!”

She must have realized something was very wrong because she nodded and whispered, “Be safe,” before she yanked the door open and disappeared inside the cabin.

The men realized they'd been discovered, but they didn't do the smart thing and head back into the forest. If they'd retreated, they might have had the chance of surviving our encounter. But probably not.

We'd never know, though, because they decided to charge forward when they realized they'd lost the advantage of surprise. The one on the right drew a gun from his shoulder holster while the other yanked a wicked-looking knife from a sheath on his thigh.

Unlike my mate, Keane was a morning person. His grizzly liked to roam our territory before the sun came up each day. A habit that I'd teased him about a bunch of times since I'd joined the pack. But I was damn happy for it when he came stomping out of the woods behind the men. I was confident enough in my fighting abilities to know that I could've handled their attack on my own but having a six-hundred-pound grizzly as backup meant I didn't have to kill them both right away and would hopefully be able to get some answers out of one of them.

He attacked the guy with the gun, mauling him from behind, and I rushed forward to wrestle the knife away from the other man. Since I was trying my best not to kill the fucker, it took me longer to finish with him.

“About damn time,” Keane muttered, having shifted to his human form after his prey had taken his last breath. “I thought I was going to have to kill that one for you too.”

“Nah, we don’t want him dead.” I wrenched the man’s arms behind his back and lifted him off the ground. “He can answer some questions for us. Right?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat as he frantically nodded. His buddy was dead, and he couldn’t break free from my hold, but I still didn’t want him near my mate. When I glanced over my shoulder at my cabin, Keane must’ve picked up on my concern. He hefted the dead body over his shoulder and stalked toward the tree line. “Leyton’s on the front porch. No harm will come to your mate while we question him.”

The bond between the brothers let them communicate while in their animal form. Leyton must have been stomping around in the woods with Keane when the humans trespassed on our land, and he’d let him know what was happening. “Thanks for sending him to guard her.”

The alpha shrugged off my gratitude as he dropped the dead guy on the ground and turned to glare at the one I dragged over. “Now that we’re far enough away so that she can’t hear his screams, it’s time for some answers.

“Who the hell are you? And what the fuck do you want with me?” I growled, my wolf pushing against my skin. He didn’t care about the reasons behind their attack. All he wanted was the taste of his blood in his mouth as he killed the man who tried to get close to my mate.

“I–uh–” he sputtered.

“Out with it, man. Before he loses his hold on his wolf and rips out your throat,” Keane hissed.

“Th–th–that’s what happened to Mark’s friend.” He glanced down at the bloody body on the ground and paled. “He–uh–was killed by a wolf while he was in jail.”

Keane crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “And you two dumbasses thought it would be a good idea to go looking for his killer?”

“Mark knew about this tracking app his friend had on his computer. He said we should come to the last place it pinged, even though it’d been months since then. But he didn’t say shit



about a damn grizzly shifter. There was supposed to be a female falcon here. A wounded one who wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight."

The spineless bastards were looking for Ramsey and had no fucking clue they'd stumbled upon that bastard's killer... me. It was the last mistake either of them would ever make. "Does anyone else know you're here?"

"Ye—" His answer broke off when Keane growled. It scared him enough to switch to the truth. "No. I swear. Nobody else knows about the app, either. And Mark wiped it before we came out here. He thought if we retrieved the falcon, he'd...um...be able to get some respect, you know?"

"Respect from who?" I asked.

He shook his head. "He didn't say. I just know that he was involved in some dark shit and needed my help. I never would've come, except I owed him for giving me an alibi when my ex-girlfriend accused me of knocking her around."

Keane and I exchanged a glance, and he nodded his head to confirm that he didn't smell any lies on the coward. Then he shifted back into his grizzly, completely freaking out the guy I was holding.

"You're going to let me live, right? I told you everything I know," he whimpered as the scent of his urine filled my nostrils.

He was a woman-beater who'd dared to come on my land and got too damn close to my mate. The only answer I gave him was to shift into my wolf and rip out his throat.



I hadn't heard much while I waited for Rome, huddled inside the shower. Since he'd told me to barricade myself in the bathroom, I figured it was the safest place to be like in a tornado.

About ten minutes had passed—although it felt like hours—when he called out, “It’s me, baby. Everything is okay now.”

I was crawling out of the tub when he came into the bathroom, naked with blood dripping down his chest. I scanned his body for any sign of where the blood was coming from but didn't spot any injuries. “Holy crap. Are you hurt? What happened?”

“It’s not mine,” he reassured me as he reached over to turn the water on in the shower.

My brows drew together. “Whose is it?”

He scrubbed his palms down his face with a sigh before he met my gaze. There was a hint of vulnerability in his brown eyes as he admitted, “One of the guys who came looking for Ramsey.”

“Ramsey?” I echoed softly, not understanding why anyone would think she was here. “After all this time? It’s been forever since she was up here.”

He explained the quantum dot her captor had injected into her when she was too drugged up to know what was happening. I couldn't believe technology like that was actually

real and in the hands of the bad guys. “Was it the guy who took her?”

“No, I killed him before his sentence was over. Aero was worried he’d come after her as soon as he got out, but Ramsey wasn’t in any condition for him to leave her to go after the guy. And stealth attacks don’t really work for grizzlies, so Keane couldn’t take care of it for him. So I did.”

“Oh, right. I forgot that I heard something about him dying while in jail.” My mind whirled at his confession. “I guess I figured it was another inmate or something, but you killed the man who hurt Ramsey?”

He nodded. “I did.”

“And the guy who came looking for her today?”

This time, he shook his head. “No, Keane took care of that guy. But I killed the friend he brought with him after we questioned him to ensure nobody else had access to the history on the tracking beacon. They should be the last guys who’ll ever come here looking for Ramsey.”

They’d killed two men while I hid in the bathroom. My gaze darted toward the small window to my left. “What about the bodies?”

“Keane’s bringing them to Artemis. His dragon’s fire burns hotter than a crematory. Their bodies will be burned to ashes in no time at all.”

My knees felt weak, so I shut the lid on the toilet and dropped down onto it. Rome grabbed one of the little paper cups I’d brought with us and filled it with water. “Drink this, baby.”

“Thanks,” I whispered.

He crouched down to watch me while I took a sip, and I realized he still had that man’s blood on him. I jerked my chin toward the shower and said, “Go rinse off. I’ll be fine for a minute.”

“Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent.” I understood why he was reluctant to leave me, but he really needed to get cleaned up before I puked because of the blood on his chest. And I’d only be a few steps away from him because I wasn’t going to be ready to walk out of here on my own anytime soon.

My answer must’ve been what he needed because he brushed a kiss against my forehead before padding over to step into the shower. It wasn’t until he was beneath the water that I figured out that the concern in his dark eyes masked a vulnerability that hadn’t completely disappeared. As I sipped at the water he’d given me, I tried to figure out what could still be bothering him.

From what he told me, the danger had passed. Having two bad guys connected to a shifter trafficking ring had to have tweaked his protective instincts, but neither of them had gotten close to me. He’d gotten me into the safety of the cabin before they could do anything, and then he’d taken care of the problem.

“Oh.” My lips formed a perfect circle as it hit me...he was scared that I would judge him for killing those two men. My sweet, silly man.

Understanding that he needed me to reassure him put some starch back in my spine and settled my nerves. I didn’t have time to fall apart when my mate was worried.

He was quick in the shower, in and out in only a couple of minutes. I waited until he dried off and hung the towel on the bar on the wall next to the stall. Then I stood and interlaced our fingers to lead him over to the bed. Pushing against his chest until he sat on the edge of the mattress, I straddled him and did my best to ignore his perpetual hard-on. He needed a heart-felt conversation right now. Sex could come later. And I had no doubt that it would.

Cradling his jaw with my hands, I stared down at his gorgeous face. “There isn’t a single thing you could ever tell me that would make me love you less than I do right now. My feelings for you grow bigger and stronger each and every day, and nothing is ever going to change that.”

“Fuck,” he groaned, dropping his head against my chest, his breath hot against the valley between my breasts.

I stroked my fingers through his hair. “Were you really that scared?”

“I just admitted to killing two guys. That’s a lot to take in,” he mumbled against my skin.

I tugged on the hair at the back of his head until he looked up at me. “They were evil men. Their deaths probably saved countless lives. Men, women, and maybe even children who didn’t deserve to die. Unlike them.”

His eyes were glassy—with actual tears from the man who claimed he wasn’t sweet—as he murmured, “I love you, pretty baby.”

Rome had done so much to show how he felt about me, but it was nice to hear the words. My lips curved into a satisfied grin. “Oh, yeah?”

“So damn much.”

“I know. Me, too.” I pressed my lips against his for a kiss that was supposed to be fast but quickly became hot and heavy when he took control. I was breathless and sad that we had to leave soon when he finally tore his mouth from mine. “Enough to hunt down an elk for me to bring back to the restaurant? Peppa would probably give me an extra day if I called to let her know the wild game up here is better than anything our suppliers can provide.”

There was a speculative gleam in his eyes as he asked, “You think so?”

I nodded. “Yeah, she won’t be able to resist the combination of higher quality meat and free.”

“How much elk does the restaurant go through each month?”

Since I was in charge of ordering the meat for Timbers Treasures, it was easy for me to do a quick calculation in my head. “About two hundred and fifty to three hundred pounds.”

“I can get more than that with two kills a month.” He stretched his arm out to grab my cell phone off the bedside table. “Ask her if she’ll let you switch to two four-day weekends a month if we bring her an elk each time we’re up here for an extra day.”

She hadn’t balked at bringing my schedule down to four days a week, and the switch would give us a more equitable split between the two packs. And I liked how relaxed he was when we were at the cabin—excluding today’s encounter with the bad guys. “Great idea! I love how you think.”

A quick call to my boss had her agreeing to the change and promising to have someone cover my shift tomorrow. With that taken care of, now that we weren’t in a rush to get back to Timber Ridge, I tossed my phone back on the table and scooted back to wrap my fist around Rome’s hard length. “How about we celebrate my new schedule and declaring our love for each other the old-fashioned way, with lots of hot, sweaty sex.”

Rome showed me how much he loved how I thought two more times before we left the bed again.

## **EPILOGUE**



## ROME

I raised my head, and my brow shot up in surprise when Thora came stomping into Peppa's office. She looked furious, and her ire was clearly directed at me. But she looked so adorable when she was riled up that I had to suppress a grin.

"Everything all right?" I asked, keeping my expression and tone neutral.

"You!" she snarled, pointing a finger at me. "This is all your fault."

"Pardon?" I had no clue what she was talking about.

Thora grumbled as she came around the desk, then planted her hands on her hips and glared at me. "Peppa is sending me home."

"What?" Anger sliced through me, and I fought the urge to seek out Thora's boss and lay into her for making my mate unhappy. But I stayed calm, figuring I should find out more before flying off the handle.

Thora's pretty green eyes welled with tears, and my heart clenched, prompting me to jump to my feet and pull her into my arms.

"I was working on the bacon-wrapped lobster tails, and my stomach lurched. I barely made it to the bathroom before I—" She stopped suddenly and clapped a hand over her mouth as she spun around and ran to the private bathroom attached to the office.

Worried, I quickly followed, and when I saw her drop to her knees and vomit, I grabbed her hair to hold it out of the way.

After a few heaves, there seemed to be nothing left, and she fell back onto her butt. “What’s wrong?” I demanded, terrified that she was sick and irrationally thinking of all the ways I could lose her.

“What do you think, Mr. I’m going to knock you up?” she grumbled.

My mind emptied for a moment, and I blinked at her as I tried to comprehend what she’d just said. Bacon. Throwing up. Knocking her—a grin suddenly split my face. “You’re pregnant?”

Thora sighed and tried to stand, prompting me to scoop her up and set her on the sink. “Obviously, I won’t know for sure until I take a test, but I’m pretty confident. I’m late, and my breasts have grown a little and been extra sensitive lately.”

I’d thought they’d gotten a little bigger but had chalked it up to my imagination. And I’d definitely noticed how much more responsive she was when I played with them. But for some reason, I hadn’t put it all together.

I whooped and picked her up again to spin us around, then promptly put her back down when she turned green. There was a stack of little plastic cups on the sink, so I filled one with water and handed it to her. She rinsed and spit a few times, then handed me the cup to toss in the trash. After rummaging around, I managed to also find a bottle of mouthwash among some other toiletries. Thora gave me a grateful smile and swished with that as well.

All the while, I studied her and thought about how she’d come storming angrily into the office. “Are you unhappy?” *Please, don’t say yes.*

Thora looked at me as though I’d grown another head. “Of course not!”

Relief flooded my veins.

“I just never considered that my job might be compromised if I throw up every time I smell bacon or any other meat that might upset my stomach. And it’s all your fault!” She poked her finger into my chest, and I couldn’t help laughing.

“I didn’t hear you complaining when we were making our pup. In fact, I seem to remember you screaming yes an awful lot.”

Thora giggled and dropped her forehead onto my chest. “Okay, so maybe it isn’t aaaallll your fault.”

“Thora?” Peppa’s concerned voice suddenly floated to the bathroom from the office, and my mate hopped off the counter to walk out the door. “Are you okay?”

Thora smiled weakly and nodded. “Yeah.”

Peppa studied her for a moment, then grinned. “I knew it. You’re pregnant, aren’t you?”

“Yup,” I answered with a cocky lift of my lips, popping the P at the end.

“We don’t know for sure yet,” Thora added, rolling her eyes at me. But a smile played at the corners of her mouth. Until she looked back at her boss. “But if I am, I guess I’ll have to quit. I know you won’t be able to hold my position until after I have the baby, but—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Peppa interrupted, holding up a hand in a stop gesture. “No one is quitting.”

“But if I can’t stand to be around meat—”

“Thora,” Peppa cut her off again. “I had the same problem when I was pregnant with Arbor.”

“Rome,” I muttered. It made more sense not to get everyone confused with two Romes, especially since I lived in town half the time. But it still irritated me that they’d named their son after me and didn’t call him that.

Peppa ignored me and kept talking. “The doctor gave me some anti-nausea pills that worked like a charm. And the urge to vomit usually only lasts a month or two. If you need to take

some time off until it passes, your job will be waiting for you when you're ready to come back."

Tears filled my mate's eyes again, and even though I knew they were because she was happy, I still glared at Peppa for making my woman cry.

"You know I hate it when you cry, pretty baby," I murmured as I put my arms around her and dragged her back against my chest.

"Well, you better get used to it," Peppa snorted. "Pregnancy hormones are a bitch."

Thora laughed. "Thank you, Peppa."

"Of course."

Thora's hands covered mine where they were resting on her still flat belly. "A baby. I can't believe it." Her tone was infused with wonder and excitement, fueling my own happy emotions. The satisfaction of knowing I'd put my baby inside her didn't decrease my want for her, though. If anything, it was even more intense.

Thora squirmed, and I knew she could sense my growing desire and felt my swollen cock against her ass.

Peppa cleared her throat and backed up toward the door to the office. "I'll just leave you two to, um, celebrate. Try not to break anything. Take a couple of days off and go see the doctor, Thora."

My mate nodded, her head bumping my chin since I'd been resting it on her crown. "Okay. Thank you again."

Peppa waved off her gratitude. "Congratulations!" Then she was gone.

Once the door was shut, I turned Thora into my arms. "You heard the boss, we're supposed to celebrate."

Thora smirked as her hands slid up my chest to lock around my neck. "That's what she said, so we'd better do it."

## **EPILOGUE**

I cooed at Danika and grinned when she grabbed my finger and held it tight while her curious eyes wandered all around her. My heart filled with warmth, just like it always did when I looked at my eight-week-old daughter.

“How are my gorgeous girls?” Rome asked as he sauntered into the extra room in our cabin that we’d turned into a nursery.

This was Danika’s first trip to the wilderness because we’d decided to stay close to town, near our doctors, while I healed, and she grew a little stronger. Our baby girl had been enthralled with her surroundings ever since we arrived, and I knew she was going to love it up here as much as her mommy and daddy.

“We’re amazing,” I said with a happy sigh as I dropped my head back for a kiss when Rome came up behind me.

“Have I mentioned how much I love you lately?” he asked softly.

I pretended to think hard. “Not in the last...oh...thirty minutes or so.”

“Excuse my neglect,” he teased with a wink, then kissed me deeply, leaving me panting with need and anxious for Danika’s naptime. When he lifted his head, my sexy mate gazed down at me with no barriers blocking the depth of his emotion in his eyes. “I love you more than anything, pretty baby.” Then he tickled our daughter’s tummy and grinned

when she gurgled something akin to a laugh. “And our little pup.”

Before I could say anything else, there was a loud, insistent pounding on our door. Rome scowled and muttered something as he stalked from the room. I followed but stayed back far enough that no one would see me, though I could still see the door.

A huge form lurked outside, but when Rome didn't hesitate to open the door, I figured it was one of our packmates.

Keane, who'd been gone since we arrived, shoved Rome away and stepped inside. He looked determined and fierce as he glanced around, clearly looking for something. “Where is she?” he growled.

“What the fuck, Keane?”

“Where is my mate, dammit!”

My eyes went wide, and I walked into the entry, holding Danika close and glaring at the alpha. “You better not be talking about my daughter,” I growled. *Could shifters sense their fated mate as babies?*

Rome hurried over to me and pulled me into his arms. “Relax, baby. It's almost unheard of for someone to know their mate before they're at least teenagers.”

“Almost?”

Keane was storming around the living room sniffing, but at my comment, he glanced my way and growled, “It's not your pup. But she's near, I can smell her, but...not in the cabin... she's...” He trailed off as he headed toward the back of the house.

We followed, but when he left through the back door, I stayed just inside and watched as he made the rounds in our backyard.

Suddenly, there was a rustle in the forest, and both Keane and Rome stiffened, alert and ready to shift at any sign of trouble.

There was another rustle, and a woman stumbled out of the tree line.

Keane growled, “Mate.”

The woman looked up at the sound of his voice and spotted our alpha. Her eyes were glued to him, seeming not to notice anything else around her. But when he took a step forward, she squeaked, spun around, and ran back into the thicket.

Keane sighed, clearly annoyed at her reaction, and took off after her.

Rome and I both stared at where they’d disappeared for a few stunned moments. Then I burst out laughing.

Rome shook his head and grinned as he walked back to our cabin. “I wasn’t sure that grumpy bear would recognize his mate if she ever came along. I thought he’d be too caught up in his brooding.”

I snorted dryly. “From what Ramsey’s told me, you could’ve given him a run for his money before we met.”

“I didn’t brood,” Rome protested with mock offense. Then he shrugged and winked at me. “Maybe I did, but it was sexy when I did it.”

“Like Ramsey would have noticed that,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

“No, but you’re picturing it now and can’t deny it’s turning you on.” He crowded me back into the house and shut the door behind him. “I can smell your desire, pretty baby.”

He wasn’t wrong, and I squeezed my thighs together, trying to relieve some of the ache between them. “Danika is...” I didn’t finish my thought because when I gazed down at my daughter, she was fast asleep in my arms.

“I think she’s got the right idea,” Rome practically purred in my ear. “Nap time for everyone.”

I shivered and hot-footed it back to the nursery, where I carefully placed my daughter in her crib. Rome brushed his fingers over her fuzzy head, then leaned down to place a kiss



there. Seeing how sweet he was with our daughter only heightened my desire.

When he stood back up and turned to face me, I swallowed hard at the fierce hunger in his eyes. The last couple of months of my pregnancy, I'd been under orders from the doctor not to have sex because I was at risk of going into early labor. Then we had to wait six weeks after her birth.

When I was given the green light, Rome practically vibrated with anticipation until Danika's next nap time. Ever since then, it seemed like he was trying to make up for all the orgasms he would have given me over those three and a half months.

Not that I had a single complaint about it...I wasn't any better and practically jumped him whenever I got the chance.

Although...when I turned up pregnant a few months later, I blamed him. He'd only laughed and proceeded to demonstrate how I'd *agreed* every time. Over and over.

Keane is next up in [Her Grizzly!](#)

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

The writing duo of Elle Christensen and Rochelle Paige team up under the Fiona Davenport pen name to bring you sexy, insta-love stories filled with alpha males. If you want a quick & dirty read with a guaranteed happily ever after, then give Fiona Davenport a try!

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