

# Dancer's HEART

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Wilde Creek Book 6

**R.E. BUTLER**  
*USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

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# CONTENTS

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[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Excerpt from The Hunter's Heart](#)

[Books By R. E. Butler](#)

[About the Author](#)

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## CHAPTER ONE

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Adam Cruz watched his friend Jeremiah and his new mate, Honey, as they were introduced to the Wilde Creek wolf pack during the February full moon. The pack clapped and cheered as the two kissed. Adam was happy that Jeremiah had found his truemate—it gave him hope that he’d find his own mate someday.

Alphas Acksel and Brynn wished the pack a good hunt, and Adam went to congratulate Jeremiah and Honey.

“I’ve been worried about you,” Jeremiah said. “I’m sorry that things got crazy, and I wasn’t able to be there for you.”

“I’m cool,” Adam said. He tried to smile, but he knew he’d failed by the way that Jeremiah looked at him with suspicion.

“We can talk later if you want.”

Adam glanced at Honey. “Maybe I’ll take you up on that. Have a good first hunt, man. If anyone deserves to be happy, it’s you.”

Jeremiah grabbed Adam’s arm and stopped him as he turned away. “You deserve to be happy, too.”

He chuckled darkly, casting his gaze up to the dark sky. “Maybe my mate will fall out of the sky tonight, and she won’t give two fucks about my scars or my place in the pack.”

Adam moved away quickly, before Jeremiah’s concern became his undoing. Seeing Jeremiah so happy made something ache deep inside him. He wanted to shake it off as full-moon jitters, but he knew that his wolf was truly aching

for a mate. Someone to love. Someone to protect. A female who wouldn't care that he came from crappy stock, with a gambling-addict dad and a body covered with scars. Ducking into the woods, he wove his way into the darkness and looked for a place to shift.

When he was a teenager and new to shifting, he'd pretended as if his scars hadn't completely ruined his life, but they had. His skin ached in his human form and his wolf form. There was hardly a time when he wasn't thinking about how shitty his life was, although he tried to project a confident attitude about his appearance. He didn't want people to think all he did was complain, even though inside he cursed his dad frequently.

Stopping in a secluded area, he stripped and stretched fully, allowing his skin to warm naturally before he shifted. He'd been burned at age fourteen, when a man his dad owed money to tossed a Molotov cocktail through Adam's bedroom window. Apparently the man had mistakenly thought it was his dad's room. Because he wasn't old enough to shift, he'd had to go through painful skin graft treatments. By the time he was old enough to shift it was too late. His body hadn't been able to heal the remaining damage.

He still had scars, and some of the muscles and tendons in his leg hadn't healed right, so he was unable to run well in his shifted form. He had a limp in his human form as well. He'd never looked at his dad the same way again, and from the moment he'd been able to move out of the house, he hadn't looked back.

Fortunately, his dad wasn't part of the Wilde Creek pack any longer. Richard had moved back to his parents' home pack, four hours south, to escape his debtors and start over. In the thirteen years since Adam had turned eighteen and moved out, he hadn't seen his father once. He could stay the hell down there forever as far as Adam was concerned.

He closed his eyes at the burn as his skin stretched and made the change into his wolf. Waiting for the ache to ease, he lifted his muzzle and inhaled, sorting through the scents to see what lay in the darkness. In the distance he could hear

members of his pack hunting, but he knew he was all alone in this large stretch of woods.

His wolf growled, happy to be let free. Adam gave in to the urge to hunt and took off in the direction of the nearest game. The February night air was cold and crisp, snow fluffing up around him as he moved. He thought about catching a few rabbits to take home and butcher to make stew and decided that was a good plan. He could take a batch over to Jeremiah and Honey to make up for his grumpy attitude earlier. Jeremiah had always been a good friend to him, and someday maybe Adam's mate and Honey would become friends, too. If he ever found someone to call his own.

He hoped to fuck he would.

Shaking off his depressing thoughts again, he chided himself for letting his physical situation control his attitude. He normally wasn't so moody, but he couldn't seem to shake the melancholy tonight.

As he rounded a tree on the trail of a rabbit, he caught another scent on the night air and paused, his claws digging into the cold ground as he raised his muzzle. Something smelled like peppermint, and it made every protective and possessive instinct inside him roar.

With a warning snarl, he wheeled and moved as quickly as he could in that direction, the only thought on his mind a single, growled word: *mine*.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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Dancer Grayson loved her adopted brother, Row, but he was a total downer sometimes. Always worried for her safety, never impulsive. Of course, it wouldn't be good to have *two* impulsive people right now—someone had to be the adult. Well, Dani was an adult, but Row was the more *adultier* adult.

They'd been traveling for two days from their home in the bear sleuth to the last known whereabouts of a reindeer shifter herd. When she was found wandering alone in the woods at age three, Dani, a reindeer, had been adopted by Row's mom Alice. She had very little memory of her parents and their herd, who had all been killed by natural coyotes. There were times when she ached for the camaraderie of her own kind, but despite being entirely different from her adopted mom and brother, she'd grown up in a very loving home. Alice was an amazing surrogate mother who had always treated Dani as her own, and Row was the best big brother around.

As Row filled the SUV with gas, she got out and stretched, complaining about the trip. To her dismay, her outdoors-loving brother had insisted they camp out at night. "Can we get a hotel at least once?"

"No." Row shook his head. "After we find your people, then we'll see, okay? We used to camp out all the time, when did you become such a priss about sleeping outside?"

She huffed indignantly. "I'm not a priss! It's cold out. There's snow! No one should camp when there's snow. Plus, you snore."

He grunted. "It's plenty warm in the tent with the heater. And I don't snore."

The attendant gave Row change and Dani asked him, "Where are we?"

The human said, "Wilde Creek."

Row asked, "Is there any place in town to get a meal?"

"Not this late," the attendant said. "Unless you want junk food, which there's plenty of in the mini-mart."

"Ugh," Dani said, pressing a hand to her stomach. The idea of eating another bag of salty, fried food made her want to throw up. "No more chips and snack cakes."

"Thanks," Row said to the attendant. He and Dani got into the SUV, and he suggested, "It's a wooded town. We could go hunting."

"You mean you could go hunting and I could graze? What if there are hunters? I don't want to get shot." Deer were very likely to be shot by hunters. Not that Row wasn't also a candidate for being shot, because he was a big bear, but she was definitely in danger if humans with guns were around.

"I'll keep you safe."

Using the map program on his phone, he found a heavily wooded area nearby. It took twenty minutes to find a road that skirted along the woods. Row parked and opened up the back to get their camping supplies ready for after they shifted, and Dani got out. Excitement coursed through her at the thought of shifting and running.

The sound of wolves could be heard in the distance, and Dani's heart sank. Row would never let her shift if there was a wolf pack nearby.

"Ah, damn it," he muttered. "We must be in pack territory. Get back in the car, Dani."

Dani opened her mouth to respond when something caught her attention. She closed her eyes and inhaled slowly. Sorting through the scents of winter and woods, she found a deep, spicy smell that made her heart pound and her skin tighten.

She was aware that Row was calling her name, but she didn't answer. He stepped around the side of the vehicle as she stared into the dark woods. "Dani?"

She turned her head slowly and looked at him. "I smell him."

"Him? Him who?"

"Mine. My...mine." Her whole body shook, and she exploded into her shift, far faster than she'd ever done before. One moment she was standing on two legs, and the next she was in her shifted form, pawing the ground with a snort. She glanced at Row for a heartbeat and then leaped toward the woods.

Row yelled after her, "Dani! Wait, it's too dangerous, they'll kill you!"

Dani didn't stop. She couldn't. The source of the spicy scent was calling to her, and she couldn't ignore it. Every feminine instinct within her demanded she find it, told her that the male who belonged to the scent was her true mate. She'd never been more certain of anything in her life than she was that the spicy-scented male was hers.

She could hear Row bellowing after her in his bear shift, but she was unable to stop racing through the woods. She darted this way and that, around trees and shrubs, as she zeroed in on the scent, leaving Row behind. Her heart pounded in anticipation.

Shifting into her human form, she stumbled to a stop and fell to her knees, catching herself on her hands. The ice and snow bit into her skin, but she was too distracted by the wild thoughts banging around in her mind to care. A large wolf with gray and black fur stalked through the shadows toward her. She could see him clearly in the bright light of the full moon. A million years of instinct as prey told her to flee from him, but as she stared into the amber eyes of the male whose scent had captivated her, she was unable to run away.

She straightened, settling back on her heels and shaking the snow from her hands. The wolf growled, but she knew it

wasn't meant as a warning. He drew close, lowering his head and whining softly as he laid on his belly and crawled forward.

She smiled. "I know who you are, and I'm not afraid."

He stopped moving and lifted his head, canting it slightly. Blinking bright amber eyes at her, the wolf nodded and then began to shift. She watched with anticipation as he changed from wolf to man, slipping to his knees as he transformed entirely.

She drew in a sharp breath. "You're beautiful." He had muscles on top of muscles and short, dark hair. There appeared to be something wrong with the skin on the left side of his body—it was mottled and rough-looking. Immediately her heart went out to him for whatever he'd suffered in the past.

He snorted. "Look in the mirror, sweetheart. *You're* beautiful." He glanced around them, tilting his head as if he were listening. "I think we're alone, but I don't want you to be cold. I'm Adam."

"I'm Dancer, but you can call me Dani."

He grasped her hands and stood, and she moved with him. As she rose, she ran her fingertips up his arms to his shoulders, feeling the marks on his skin, which were oddly smooth. "Adam?" she whispered.

"They're burn scars," he said roughly.

She stared up at him. They were so close that their bodies were almost touching chest to hip, but a few inches separated them. She felt anchored to him as his hands tightened on her hips.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He shook his head slightly. "Why?"

"Because you were hurt and I wish I'd been there to help you." She closed her eyes and inhaled. His spicy scent wrapped around her, making her weak in the knees.

His fingers dug into her flesh, and he snarled. "Where have you been all my life?"

“Too far.” She grasped his shoulders, standing on her tiptoes to close the distance between them. He pulled her close with a wolfy growl, and their lips met as their bodies touched. Everything inside her turned to liquid heat as he drew her even closer, pulling her against him, his erection trapped between them. She wanted to touch him everywhere at once, but she couldn’t stop holding on, afraid he would vanish, and she’d wake up and find it was all a dream.

He tasted as good as he smelled, and every time he chased her tongue with his own she found herself falling further into the spicy scent of him. Adam growled in warning as he lifted from her lips.

Row’s voice echoed behind her. “Let my sister go.”

Dani, still breathless from Adam’s amazing kiss, rolled her eyes and said, “Go away, Row.”

“Dani,” Row snarled, “come to me. We have a journey ahead of us.”

Adam growled darkly, his grip tightening on Dani possessively. “Mine.”

Dani looked at Adam and saw he was furious, ready to kill. She didn’t want Row to be hurt, or for Row to try to hurt Adam. “It’s okay, Adam,” she whispered. “That’s my brother.”

She pressed herself to Adam’s side, wrapping her arms around his waist and holding him tightly. She saw that Row was holding a female behind his back, and she heard the woman say softly, “Please don’t hurt my friend.”

Row’s growl cut off abruptly, and he straightened from his defensive stance. He glared at Dani and Adam. “You’re my responsibility. I promised our mother that I would take you to your people.”

“What if we get out of the woods and talk?” Dani suggested, trying to be helpful. “Adam isn’t going to let me go, Row. No more than you’re going to let that female behind you go. My name is Dancer, by the way, but everyone calls me Dani,” she added to the other woman.

The female giggled softly and leaned around Row to smile at Dani. “I’m Kammie. I’m not sure where we are exactly, but maybe Adam’s house is close? My apartment is on the other side of town, and I really don’t want to traipse naked through the streets.”

Dani laughed. “Me either. Adam?”

“My house is about a half mile that way,” Adam said, jerking his head to the right.

“You might have mentioned your house was nearby, instead of letting me molest you in the woods,” Dani said, chuckling as she tweaked Adam’s side.

“I had no blood left in my brain,” Adam said.

Row made a disgusted sound. “She’s my sister, man.”

“Sorry,” Adam said, not sounding one bit sorry. He swung Dani into his arms and began to walk, not seeming to care if the others followed them. Dani looked over Adam’s shoulder and saw Row pick up Kammie and fall into step behind Adam.

“We should talk,” Dani said, resting her cheek on Adam’s shoulder.

“We will, sweetheart,” he replied. He limped slightly as he walked, and she could guess that the burn scars she’d felt under her fingertips had somehow messed up his leg as well. She wasn’t about to ask him to put her down to let her walk on her own, though. She’d only just met him, but she had a feeling that her mate was a proud male who wouldn’t want her to question his ability to take care of her. And she had no doubt he could, and would, take good care of her for the rest of their lives. He’d held her close and growled fiercely when they’d been interrupted. He was ready to defend her against anything—that much she was sure of.

“It’s sexy when you growl,” she whispered, kissing his cheek.

He chuckled. “I’m glad you like it. I kind of can’t control it around you. My wolf is doing backflips right now because we’re so happy to have found you.”

“You don’t mind having prey for a mate?” As a reindeer, which were traditionally thought of as prey animals, she wondered if he would be embarrassed by her. Some shifters, especially the serious hunters like wolves, tended to think of prey shifters as inferior.

“Hell no,” he said vehemently. “I couldn’t care less what you shift into. You’re mine, Dani. I’m never letting you go.”

Everything changed for her in that moment. She didn’t want to keep going on her journey to meet her people; she wanted to stay with Adam. *He* was her people now.

“I don’t want you to let me go.”

He glanced down at her as he stepped up onto his porch. “Good.”

He pushed the front door open and carried her straight through a dark living room and into a bedroom. He set her gently on the bed and reached over to click on a small lamp, bathing the room in low light.

He straightened and stared down at her, his body tense and flexed as if he was stressed. She let her gaze roam his body. The left side of his body was mottled and shiny with burn scars. They formed thin stripes from his neck down to his knee and seemed worse on his torso.

Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked rapidly as she met his gaze. “Do they hurt?”

He relaxed slightly and cupped her face with one hand. “My leg hurts because the muscles were damaged by the fire. I was too young to shift and heal myself.”

She gripped his wrist and held his palm to her face. “I don’t care about your scars, Adam. I’m deliriously happy to have found you.”

His gaze searched hers, and she saw the awe in the blue depths as he realized she was being entirely honest. She truly didn’t care about his scars, apart from being sad that he’d been injured and that he still had pain.

“Where are you going with your brother?” Adam asked as he walked to a dresser and pulled out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He rejoined her and gave her the shirt, and then tugged the jeans on.

“My herd was killed when I was very little. Row’s mom adopted me, and she’s been searching for reindeer shifters ever since. Apparently my people like to keep hidden. She had a private detective searching for them, and he finally found a herd.”

She’d been nervous about meeting her own kind. She’d spent almost her entire life surrounded by shifters who were very different from her. Alice and Row had always made her feel welcome, but she’d never quite felt at home. When she and Row had left on their journey, she thought she’d finally find a place where she would feel welcome, assuming they embraced her as easily as the bear sleuth had. But now, as she sat in the presence of her true mate, she knew she’d never felt more at home in her life. It didn’t matter that Adam was a wolf; it only mattered that he was hers.

Adam fastened his jeans as she pulled the shirt over her head. His eyes darkened as he moved between her legs and gazed down at her. She rested her hands on his hips, splaying her fingers across his flesh as he stared at her intently. “I’m glad you came to Wilde Creek.”

“I’m glad you didn’t try to eat me,” she said.

“The night’s still young,” he whispered, his voice a low growl.

She exhaled slowly, her pulse racing as the air hummed with arousal. She wanted to strip him from his jeans and explore his body with her fingers and tongue. She wanted to know what he sounded like when he came.

“Dani,” he said hoarsely, “stop looking at me like that.”

She grinned. “I’m totally picturing a Little Red Riding Hood thing here...my big, bad wolf.”

He growled and hauled her into his arms, turning to the wall and pressing her back to it. She wrapped her legs around

his waist and linked her ankles. “Yes,” she hissed as he latched onto her throat, sucking her flesh into his mouth until she could feel the press of his teeth.

She could hear Row and Kammie talking quietly in the front room. He seemed to realize it at the same time, freezing against her and releasing her with a sigh. “I don’t want to leave this room, but we should probably go talk to your brother and Kammie before we go too far.”

She brushed the back of her hand across his cheek. “If you insist.”

“Let’s get them on their way and then we can see where the night takes us.”

“Back to bed,” she whispered.

“Fuck, Dani,” he groaned, pressing his forehead to hers.

It would have been so easy for her to reach between them and undo his jeans to free his cock and impale herself on him. She wanted to do that—to take him and be taken, to bond them together. But over that insistent need was the knowledge that her brother was in the next room and had very good hearing. She didn’t want her first time with her mate to be a hurried affair. She wanted him all night, with no interruptions.

After a long moment, he eased away from the wall, and she slid down his body reluctantly until her feet were on the floor. He went to the dresser, pulling more clothing from it and then offering her his hand, which she eagerly took. Her mind was spinning with all the things she wanted to do with him that didn’t involve clothing. Her mate was sexy as hell, and the last thing she wanted to do was have a conversation with her brother and Kammie. She hoped they’d hop out of the house fast, so she and Adam could get back to business.

They left the bedroom and walked into the front room, finding her brother and the she-wolf in the dark by the front door. Dani took the clothing from Adam and gave it to Row and Kammie, then returned to Adam’s side. He wrapped both arms around her, pulling her into his protective embrace.

Row made a face after Kammie had tugged Adam's shirt over her head.

"What?" Kammie asked.

"You smell like another male in that shirt," Row said.

Kammie rolled her eyes, and Dani giggled. Her brother was an idiot.

Row snarled in Dani's direction, and Adam pulled her behind his back quickly. His voice was threatening when he growled, "Do not snarl at my mate in my house. I don't give a damn who you are to her."

Kammie, looking genuinely surprised, said, "You're really mates, Adam?"

He nodded. "Yeah. What's up with you and growling bear here? Do you need help?"

Row snarled so loudly that the pictures on the walls rattled. Dani had heard Row growl and snarl since she was little, so she was used to him and his bear having a bad attitude from time to time. It didn't worry her, but Adam was tense. She could feel the fur of his shift prickling under her fingers as she rubbed his back in a calming motion.

Kammie said, "It's fine, Adam."

Adam cleared his throat before saying, "Dani said you were taking her to see her people, but that's clearly not your concern any longer."

Row's face tightened in anger. "She's my sister."

"I'm her mate," Adam said, growling the words. "I'll take her to her people."

"Or we could skip it," Dani said, sliding her hands around Adam's chest and resting her cheek on his shoulder as she peered at them. "I don't need to find my people to have found my home."

Adam turned his head to look at Dani for a long, quiet moment. Without breaking eye contact with her, he said, "You can borrow my truck to drive to Kammie's."

Kammie said, “You don’t want to drive us?”

Adam glanced at Kammie for only a second and said, “I don’t really want to leave the house. You can bring the truck back tomorrow.”

“Late tomorrow,” Dani added.

Row made a disgusted sound, and Dani grinned at Adam.

Adam pointed to a hook on the wall next to the front door, where a set of keys dangled, and Row grabbed them. She and Adam said goodnight to Row and Kammie, and when they were gone, Adam walked to the door and twisted the lock.

He turned with a soft growl, and a shiver raced down her spine. She’d never had such a hungry look directed at her. What she’d wanted from the moment she’d scented him in the woods was within her grasp and she had no plans to ever let him go.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Adam closed the distance to his mate swiftly and lifted her into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist and grasped his shoulders, lowering her mouth to his. He moved to the bedroom as they kissed, his wolf growling with excitement. Part of him wanted to sit and have a long conversation with his mate, to find out everything about her until he knew her more intimately than anyone else. But the larger, less chivalrous part of him didn't want to do any talking at all.

He crawled onto the bed and laid her down, caging her with his arms. Her scent hit him hard as she sighed against his lips and let her head fall back on the pillow. Her blue eyes were dark with passion, heavy-lidded and sexy as hell. She was his perfect angel, fallen from the heavens just for him. He couldn't believe how fortunate he was to have found her.

"Adam," she whispered, her fingers sliding through his hair and her nails scraping his scalp. "I want this so badly. Make me yours, please."

His throat tightened with emotion. She was laid bare before him emotionally, and he let go of the tight hold on his own emotions.

"I never knew if I'd have a mate of my own. My scars," he said, closing his eyes for a brief moment, "they make me feel like I don't belong anywhere."

"You belong with me."

“I do,” he said, meeting her intense gaze. “I’m not just lucky enough to have you as a mate, I’m fortunate that the most beautiful female I’ve ever seen in my life is my true mate, the one female on the planet meant for me.”

She blinked as tears filled her eyes. “You’re going to make me cry.”

He kissed her, tasting the salt of her tears. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said against her lips. “I just want you to know how important you are to me. I swear to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

She nipped his lower lip and arched her brow as he met her gaze. “You can start by losing your pants.”

He loved that she was comfortable enough with him to tease him even though they’d only known each other for a little while. “I hope you didn’t plan to get any sleep tonight,” he said as he eased from the bed and shoved his jeans to the floor, stepping out of them. He climbed up the bed as she scooted back, and knelt between her spread legs.

“Nah,” she said, reaching for the bottom of the shirt she wore and lifting it slowly. His brain fizzled out as he watched her gradually bare herself to him. Her pussy was bare and glistening with arousal, and he wouldn’t have been able to look away for anything.

His hands tightened on her knees as she pulled the shirt over her head and tossed it away. She leaned back on his pillow and rested her hands on top of his. He slid back on the bed, easing down between her legs. His muscles ached as he moved, but he pushed past the pain to focus on Dani. He looked up the length of her body and found her smiling in anticipation. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip, and he growled softly before flicking his tongue out to graze her clit. She inhaled sharply, her nipples beading tightly as her hands slid into his hair and tugged him forward.

She moaned his name as he kissed her pussy and pushed her thighs further apart to expose her more fully to him. He licked her clit, rubbing his tongue along either side before sucking it into his mouth. She groaned and tilted her hips. He

flicked the tip of her clit as he sucked, wiggling the tight bud while she writhed under him.

He released her clit and slid his hands underneath her, lifting her to his mouth as he stroked his tongue into her. Her sweet taste saturated his senses, driving him wild as her thighs tightened around his head and her fingers twisted in his hair. He growled as he licked her and she moaned loudly, rubbing herself on his tongue. Laving her pussy from bottom to top, he swirled his tongue around her clit and took it into his mouth once more. She released his hair and gripped the slats of his headboard, crying out as she came.

“Adam, Adam, please,” she groaned, as he pushed his tongue into her wet heat, drunk on her scent and taste.

He lifted from her and saw her knuckles were white as she gripped the headboard, her mouth open and her lower lip plump from where she had been biting it. He’d never seen anyone as beautiful as Dani, flushed from climax and wanting more.

He kissed up her body slowly. Her skin was so soft, and she deserved to be worshipped from head to toe. He nuzzled her stomach, kissing her navel and moving leisurely up her, stopping to nuzzle and lick her nipples. She caged his hips with her legs, twining her ankles together at the small of his back. He slid his hands underneath her and gripped her shoulders as the head of his dick touched her pussy. She was slick with arousal, and the tight heat of her pussy was almost enough to make him come as he pressed slowly into her.

She tugged him closer with her legs, lifting her hips and urging him forward.

He kissed her throat with a growl. “You’re killing me, Dani.”

“Yes, say that again.”

He chuckled. “Which part?”

“My name.”

He slid inches deeper into her, his heart hammering in his chest and his wolf rubbing against his skin. “Dani. My.

Fucking. Dani.”

She let go of one of the slats and gripped his shoulder, her fingernails biting into his skin as he slid all the way home inside her. He went still, their bodies wed as tightly as possible, and licked her throat, feeling her pulse flutter under his tongue.

Lifting his head, he gazed into her eyes as he slid from her pussy until only the thick head of his cock was inside her. “Dani,” he murmured, pressing into her once more, watching her eyes dilate from the pleasure.

She hummed, biting her lower lip. “Faster. More.”

He wanted her to come; he was greedy for her pleasure. Sliding one hand down to her ass, he squeezed her cheek and then tilted her hips up. She gasped in surprise and then moaned, her legs falling open as he pulled from her pussy and then thrust in faster. Her eyes glazed over as he began to move more quickly, holding her close and rocking into her.

Her eyes shuttered, and he nipped her throat. “Keep them open,” he growled, fucking her harder and faster. She let go of his shoulder and returned her hand to join the other one gripping the headboard over her head. She gazed into his eyes, her pussy gripping his cock as he pushed her toward climax.

He twisted his hips until he heard her breath catch and knew he’d hit the right spot, and then he took her as fast as he could, driving into her until her pussy clutched him tightly and she shrieked in pleasure. He couldn’t hold back his release; he let go, crushing her against him as his cock spilled inside her. He shouted her name as his fangs erupted from his gums and his wolf rose to the surface.

She tilted her head and bared her throat to him, her hands sliding into his hair as she said, “Make me yours, Adam.”

He sank his fangs into her throat as gently as he could. She moaned, her pussy squeezing him once more, as he tasted her blood and marked her completely. He pulled from her throat and nicked his tongue with his fangs, covering the marks with his blood to help them heal in a way that would scar

permanently. As he nuzzled her throat, he could think of nothing except the future that lay ahead of them; Dani as his wife and mate, children filling the house, and a life together full of love and happiness.

He rolled to his back, and she followed, curling against him like a warm and familiar weight. She rested her head on his shoulder and linked her fingers with his.

“When can we do that again?”

He chuckled and tilted her chin up until he could see her eyes. “Anytime you want.”

“All the time. I want to do that *all* the time.”

“I’m so glad I found you, Dani.”

“Me too.” She sat up and straddled his legs, planting her hands on the bed on either side of his stomach. She gazed at his dick, which thickened as soon as she locked eyes on it, and grinned. “Having a true mate rocks.”

It sure as fuck did.

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It was pretty clear to Adam that his sweetheart was not a morning person. She groaned when she rolled over and a beam of sunlight hit her in the face, which caused her to roll back over and pull the covers over her head. He was in bed with his mate, and he decided not to waste the opportunity to wake her up fully. He tucked himself against her back and brushed his fingers down her stomach with a feather-light touch. Then he teased her clit, lightly rubbing the bud until her breathing started to quicken and she slid her leg back over his to open herself more completely to him. He kissed her throat, nibbling on her neck as he fingered her pussy and thumbed her clit until she was panting for breath and making sexy moaning sounds. Her back bowed, and she threw back the covers as she came, gripping his wrist and canting her hips to take his fingers deeper.

He flexed his hips and pushed his dick into her, linking their fingers on her stomach as they moved together. She squeezed his hand tightly, lifting it to her mouth to kiss his knuckles. He bit down lightly on her neck as he came, groaning against her flesh as his dick emptied inside her. He'd never felt so connected to another person before, and he knew it was because they were true mates. They were meant to be together, despite being from two very different places.

She rolled to her back, her eyes bright and her skin flushed with passion. "That's a great way to wake up. I'll definitely be a morning person if your fingers are my alarm clock."

He chuckled, leaning over to kiss her before slipping from the bed. "Whatever my mate wants."

"I want to stay in bed with you."

"I'd love that, sweetheart," he said.

"I have a feeling that there's some wolfy thing we need to do, though."

He nodded. "I need to let my alphas know that I've found you and set up a time to meet with them."

She sat up. "Will they let me stay?"

He frowned, stopping in the middle of tugging up his jeans. "Why wouldn't they?"

"I'm not a wolf."

"That doesn't matter. You won't be allowed to join the pack, but we're true mates, and they can't—and won't—separate us."

"Oh, okay." She smiled in relief. "I thought you might want to come back to my sleuth to live, and it would be cool if you did, but I like it here already. I'd like to stay."

It was his turn to be relieved. When he'd woken up that morning and stared at his gorgeous, sleeping mate, he'd wondered if she would want to go back to her home. He wouldn't fault her for that—it was her home and her mom was still there—but he had hoped she would want to stay. He enjoyed living in Wilde Creek, but the truth was that anywhere

with Dani would be home for him. The address didn't matter, only that they were together.

"We don't have to decide today, sweetheart, but if you'd like to stay in Wilde Creek, then that would be fine with me. Right now, though, we're on our honeymoon, so let's just enjoy it."

"Okay. Honeymoon?"

"Technically I guess you might call it the mating-moon?" he said with a chuckle.

"Mating-moon. I like it."

He finished pulling on his jeans and leaned over to kiss her. "How do you like your coffee?"

"Lots of milk and sugar. Do you want help?"

"Just keep your sexy self in bed until I get back."

She leaned back against the pillows, looking like a fallen angel. "Hurry back."

He groaned and forced himself to walk out of the bedroom instead of climbing back next to her and seeing how many more times he could get her to scream his name. After starting the coffee, he grabbed eggs and bacon from the refrigerator and loaded up two skillet on the stove. While everything cooked, he called Acksel on his cell.

"Good morning, Alpha," he said when Acksel answered. "I found my true mate last night and I wanted to let you know. Her name is Dani Grayson."

There was a long moment of silence, and then Acksel cleared his throat and said, "You did? That's great, Adam."

"What's great? Who is it?" Brynn demanded.

Acksel explained and Brynn squealed in excitement. "Tell him I said congratulations and I can't wait to meet her."

Acksel chuckled. "I take it you heard that?"

"I did, thank you both."

“Of course. I’m sure you’re enjoying your time with your new mate. We would like to meet her. How about seven on Monday night? You can bring her to the house and we’ll have dinner.”

“That sounds great. See you in a few days.”

“Take care of your new mate.”

“I will, Alpha.”

Adam ended the call and tended to the food on the stove. He placed the cooked eggs and bacon on two plates and set them on a tray. After making toast and fixing the coffee the way Dani had said she liked it, he carried the tray into the bedroom and set it on the bed next to her. When he joined her, she said, “You made breakfast too? You’re too good to be true.”

“Oh?” he asked with a laugh.

“Sure. You’re sexy as hell, you rocked my world, and you can cook. You may be the perfect man.”

“Only maybe?”

“Well, I haven’t seen if you leave the toilet seat up or not.”

“I’ll be sure to put it down for you.”

“Well, that seals it, then. You’re perfect.”

His wolf pranced in his head. “I think you’re the perfect one, Dani. Beautiful, sexy, and you taste like sugar and peppermint.”

Her cheeks pinked. “Thank you for breakfast, Adam.”

As they ate, she told him about her journey with her brother. “We’d only been on the road for two days, but it felt like a lot longer. Row only wanted to camp. I couldn’t get him to agree to a hotel.”

“Not much for camping?”

“I don’t mind some aspects of camping, but in the snow? Not so much. I would go stay in a cabin, or go camping in the summer or the fall, but not tent-camping in the winter. It’s just

too cold. Even with our extra warm sleeping bags and a heater, I still had to sleep in all my clothes, and I couldn't get comfortable. You're not a camper, are you?"

He laughed. "No, sweetheart, I promise."

She let out an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Good. Anyway, we stopped in town and Row suggested we go for a run in our shifted forms. When we parked near the woods, we could hear the wolves howling. Row said we couldn't shift, and that's when I...guess I felt you. I knew I had to get into the woods, but I wasn't really sure why. It wasn't until I saw you that I knew we were mates."

"I felt the same way. I was following your scent, but I didn't understand exactly what I was following until I saw you."

"It's pretty cool that we found each other like we did. To think, we could have driven right by this town and you and I might never have met." She shivered.

"Fate's a funny thing, but I'm really thankful it was on our side last night."

"Me too."

After breakfast, Adam took care of the dishes, and was thrilled to find that Dani was just as anxious to get back to bed as he was. As they reveled in their time together, he was amazed at how freeing it was to have found his true mate. He'd worried about his scars ever since he'd gotten old enough to be interested in females. Although he'd had sex over the years with pack females, he'd known that what they shared together was fleeting. It was about the good feelings that accompanied sex, the quick rush of pleasure that followed a climax, and the way it felt so good to fuck before hunting. He'd known with absolute certainty that what he'd experienced then hadn't been a shadow of what love was like. Even though he'd known Dani less than a day, he couldn't imagine his life without her in it. He was already falling for her. She was perfect. She was his.

“I’m sticky,” she said, her voice rough and a humorous glimmer in her eyes.

Scooping her up into his arms, he slid from the bed and said, “Sorry, sweetheart.”

She nuzzled his throat. “It’s not a bad thing, necessarily, but if we’re going to take a nap, I don’t want to sleep on the wet spot.”

He chuckled. “I’ll change the sheets while you shower.”

She clucked her tongue. “You do laundry, too? Now I know you’re too good to be true.”

“My dad didn’t really do much in the way of housework. I had to learn how to take care of myself, because he was more interested in seeing the bottom of a bottle than making sure I had clean clothes or food to eat. I moved out as soon as I turned eighteen, but I feel like I’ve been on my own for a lot longer than that because of his behavior.”

He put her down in the bathroom and turned on the shower. She wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed the space between his shoulders. Her warm breath skirted over his skin, and he rested his hands on top of hers. “I know it probably sounds childish, but I hate your dad. I hate that he didn’t act like a proper father and didn’t take care of you. I hate that you know how to do laundry because you had to fend for yourself.”

He closed his eyes against a swell of emotion. He’d hated his dad for years, too, until he’d realized that actively hating him took a lot of effort and didn’t allow him to move on. That Dani was angry on his behalf for things that had happened well before they’d known each other made him grateful for his mate’s tender heart.

He turned in her arms and cupped her face. “I promise to be a good father to our kids. My dad’s footsteps are ones I never want to follow in.”

“I never doubted that for a second,” she said.

Pushing the shower curtain aside, he held Dani’s hand while she stepped into the tub and turned her back to the spray.

She didn't let go of his hand, tugging until he joined her. "If we shower together, we're going to get distracted."

"I know," she said, wiggling her brows. Her warm, wet hands closed around his erection, and he tugged the shower curtain closed and cupped her face.

"Mine."

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Adam couldn't get enough of Dani; she was addictive. They'd made love in the shower until the water chilled, and then they'd been drying off and heating each other up when he heard his truck pull up outside of the house.

"Yay, I'll have clothes!" Dani said.

"Stay here, I'll get your things," Adam said, kissing her swiftly and moving out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He dressed in a pair of jeans and walked to the front door, unlocking it and tugging it open. He blinked at the bright sunshine.

"Hey," he said, yawning. "Dani's in the shower; she'll be glad to see her bags."

Kammie followed Row into the house. Adam shut the door behind them and led Row back to the master bedroom, watching as he dropped the bags on the bed and disappeared back into the front room. Adam closed the bedroom door and Dani came out of the bathroom, dropping the towel that had been tucked around her body, and unzipped a large suitcase.

The sight of her bare body made him growl, wanting to forget that they had company in the other room.

"Stop growling at me, you know how much I love that," Dani said.

"Sorry, sweetheart." Adam scrubbed his hands over his eyes and willed his wolf to calm down.

"You don't have to apologize, but my brother and his new mate are waiting to talk to us and I'm pretty sure that neither

of them are interested in hearing me scream your name.”

He chuckled. “I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

“Just until they take off.”

Dani dressed quickly in a pair of jeans and a thick sweater. He took her hand, and they walked together out to the front room.

“Thanks for bringing my clothes, Row,” Dani said.

Row tossed the truck keys to Adam, who placed them on the coffee table. “Have a seat. Are you guys hungry or thirsty?” he asked. Although he didn’t want anyone to interrupt his mating-moon with Dani, he wasn’t about to shove her brother out the door.

“We can’t stay. We need to check in with your alphas and pick up Kammie’s things from the woods,” Row said.

“Oh, okay,” Dani said as she plopped on the couch with Adam and snuggled close to him. He put his arm around her, loving how easily she fit against him. “Adam talked to Acksel this morning, but told him we wouldn’t be leaving the house anytime soon. We’re going to have dinner at his house on Monday night.”

Dani looked up at Adam, and he envisioned her naked and spread before him, her skin pinking as he brought her to climax again and again. Row grimaced and cleared his throat in a way that sounded suspiciously like a growl.

“Kammie and I haven’t discussed everything yet, but I’m planning to take her home so we can mate officially.”

“How weird is it that we both found our mates?” Dani smiled, not taking her gaze from Adam.

“Anyway,” Kammie said suddenly, “we’ll leave you guys alone.”

Row said, “You need to call Mom.”

“I will,” she said, glancing at her brother and then swiftly returning her gaze to Adam’s.

“Are you going to go meet your people?”

“I don’t think so,” Dani said, sighing quietly as she faced her brother. “Adam’s my family now. I know that Fayar would probably let us use the sacred cave, but I’d rather follow the pack’s traditions for mating since we’re going to be staying here.”

“Kammie and I will leave in a few days.”

“Be sure to call before you come over next time,” Adam said. Dani grinned at him.

Row growled in annoyance but said nothing. Dani stood quickly and went to hug each of them in turn. “Let me know when you’re heading home. I want to say goodbye.”

“We’re coming back here,” Row said. “This is Kammie’s home, and that means it’s mine now.”

“What about Mom?”

“She can come with us if she’d like, but she’s got her life in the sleuth.” Row kissed Dani on the cheek and gathered Kammie close, ushering her out the door.

“That’s interesting,” Dani said as she shut and locked the door.

“Because he wants to come back here to live?” Adam asked, closing the distance between them.

He slid his arms around her and pulled her close. She melted against him with a happy sigh. “Yeah. He was talking about taking a job training the young males in the sleuth when we got back from our trip to meet my people. But he found his mate, so maybe that changed his plans.”

“We need to talk about my work,” he said, frowning.

“Later,” Dani purred, scratching his back lightly with her fingernails. “Much later.”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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The following morning, Row called and asked to stop by with Kammie to say goodbye. Kammie, for whatever reason, had decided they should go to the sleuth sooner rather than later.

“We’ll bring Mom back with us,” Row said. “I know she wants to meet Adam.”

“If you really loved me, you’d bring my stuff back with you.”

He looked down at her, his eyes flashing with emotion. “I do love you, Dani. You’re a wonderful little sister, and I’m glad you found your truemate.”

“Adam will keep me safe,” she said.

Row looked over her head where she knew Adam was watching them. “I know he will. I’ll always care that you’re safe and loved, but you’ve got a good male.”

She gave him and Kammie a final hug, and then shut the door. Turning to face Adam, she said, “Kammie has a hard time of things in the pack, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah. Being forced to be a low-ranked omega isn’t easy for anyone.”

She tilted her head and looked at her handsome mate. He had the most soulful blue eyes. When they sparkled with desire, it made everything inside her go haywire. “So, I don’t understand this omega stuff, because the sleuth isn’t ranked

like the pack is. Before we go meet with your alphas, I'd like to know what the deal is with everything."

He smiled. "Of course. I wanted to talk about my job anyway." He looked past her shoulder to the front window. "It's sunny. Want to go for a walk?"

"It's pretty cold," she pointed out.

"I'll keep you warm."

After dressing in her winter coat and matching magenta hat and gloves, she took Adam's hand and followed him out of the kitchen's sliding door into the backyard. The yard was ample, edged on three sides with small shrubs. Beyond the shrubs were the woods where she'd met Adam.

They passed by the shrubs and walked into the woods. The morning sunlight filtered through the trees, making the snow shimmer. "It's so pretty here," Dani said.

"I'm sure it's pretty in Oakville."

"Yeah."

"Are you sure you want to stay in Wilde Creek?" he asked.

"Of course. Don't you want to?"

He was quiet for a moment, and then said, "I do. But I want your happiness more than I want anything for myself. If you'd be happier with your sleuth, then that's where I'd be happy, too."

She glanced at him and the frown that tugged the corners of his full mouth downward. "I'm not going anywhere, you know."

He looked at her in surprise. "What?"

"I mean, I'm not taking off, period. I feel like you're trying to be extra-nice to get me to stick around. We're truemates. Where you are is where I am."

His frown eased and his gaze softened. They stopped walking and turned to face each other, his hands resting on her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Dani. You probably think I'm an idiot."

“Never.”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “I have no idea how to be a good mate to you. My mom died when I was a kid, and all my dad did was carouse with human women.” He rested one hand over his heart. “I *know* you won’t leave, but part of me is still terrified you will. I can’t shake the feeling that I have to do everything possible not to lose you.”

She stepped close and slipped her hands inside his coat until she had her arms wrapped around his waist, her hands linked at his back. “Things are still new between us, so a little worry is understandable, but I’m very happy to have found you. I don’t have any plans to leave, because being with you makes me feel like I’m whole, like I didn’t know I had this missing piece of myself until we met. I’d be empty without you. I don’t want that, ever.”

He pressed his lips to hers, and in spite of the chill in the air, she felt warm from the inside out. The woods seemed to go entirely silent, a reverent sort of quiet that Dani wished would last forever. All too soon, Adam’s lips left hers and he stared into her eyes, his gaze searching and full of emotion. “I was only half existing before you came into my life, Dani. I never, ever want to go back to that place.”

“Trust in me, Adam,” she said earnestly.

“I do. I trust you more than I’ve ever trusted anyone.”

She beamed. Their hands clasped again and they continued their walk. “I know that you don’t know much about wolf hierarchy, so I’ll try to cover the basics. Our pack is what I’d call medium-sized. There are over a hundred members including kids who aren’t old enough to shift, all the way through our retirees. At the top of the pack is the alpha male—that’s Acksel. His truemate is Brynn, who’s human and pregnant with his pup.

“Under Acksel, the males are ranked according to fighting ability. Ren is the beta—he’s basically Acksel’s right-hand. Sam is the theto, and he’s in charge of the protectors, who are the highest-ranked males. The protectors are like a wolf police

force; they do things like patrol town and guard the alphas and anyone else that needs it. Then there are the omegas.”

He stopped talking, and all she could hear was the crackle of the icy branches as they moved in the light breeze.

“If I hadn’t gotten burned, I’d be a protector. I can’t run fast in my shift because of the way my muscles healed when I shifted. Because I’m not whole, I’m an omega.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

He wouldn’t look at her as they walked; his shoulders hunched and his whole body tensed.

“Omegas are the lowest members in the pack. Females are always omegas, and so are retired males who aren’t at full strength due to age or injury. In my case, I became an omega when I shifted as a teenager and it became clear that I couldn’t function fully. My leg tightens up and aches, and the pain has even brought me to a complete stop at times in the middle of a hunt. So while I might be a good tracker, and a good hunter, and even a good fighter, I will never be anything but an omega. I’m at the beck and call of the alphas and any high ranked males.”

“Are the omegas ranked?”

“Not officially, but there’s an unspoken hierarchy within the omegas. While all of us work for the high-ranked pack members, not all pull their own weight. For example, some of the females actually order around some of the lower-ranked females.”

“You mean wolves like Kammie?”

He nodded. “It’s supposed to be equal among the omegas—everyone should be working to make the pack a better place—but there are those who don’t, and the alphas aren’t interested enough to do anything about it. Or at least Acksel isn’t. Brynn cares, because she doesn’t really understand pack hierarchy.”

“It must be hard to be human in a pack. At least I understand about shifting.”

“My friend Jeremiah and his mate Honey are stewards. They work exclusively with the retirees.”

She hummed. In the sleuth, bears who were unable to hunt, take care of their homes, or help out, were taken care of by everyone. That wolves had to be assigned to take care of the retirees made her curious.

They stopped walking, and Dani looked around. The woods were beautiful. Snow and ice-covered trees stretched for what seemed like miles. “When we talk to Acksel tomorrow night,” he said, grasping both of her hands and giving them a squeeze, “I’d like to ask if you and I could join the stewards.”

“I thought I couldn’t join the pack because I’m not a wolf?”

“You can’t, but I know that Jeremiah and Honey could use some help with the retirees, and it would be a way for you and I to work together. Unless you wanted to do something else?” He stammered a little. “You can work wherever you like, or you don’t have to work. I wouldn’t mind if you stayed home.”

She quirked a brow. “Want me barefoot and pregnant, huh?”

His cheeks flushed, and he shook his head. “No. Yes.” He groaned in frustration, and Dani laughed.

Untangling their hands, she pressed her gloved fingers to his cheeks and smiled at him. “I never worked outside of the sleuth. I want to be able to do whatever you do in the pack, but I wasn’t sure if I would be allowed. If we can work together with your friends, then I think that’s a wonderful idea. I’d love to be able to help people who need it.”

He blew out a relieved breath. “Good. I’m sure Acksel will approve, and then I’ll call Jeremiah and we can go visit them and hash out the details.”

“He’s your best friend?”

Nodding, he gripped her hips and drew her close. “He and I shared a similar dislike of being omegas, but he found a place in the pack, with his mate, where he fits. Now that I have

you in my life, I want us to find that, too. I think the stewards are the perfect place.”

They continued their walk through the woods until they reached the far edge, and she could see a row of homes through the trees. “This is the retiree development. Many of the retired pack members live here, but there are others scattered around town.”

“What does retiring mean?”

“Some wolves want to run and hunt their whole lives, but sometimes things happen to take a wolf out of that activity. Age can bring arthritis, and even in the wolf form the joints can ache. We heal faster than humans, but we don’t escape everything that comes with old age. Some wolves get injured and shifting causes them pain. Retiring is a way to stay a member of the pack and under the care of the alphas, without being required to hunt or be active pack members.”

She stared at the small houses. “Will they mind that I’m a reindeer?”

“Why would anyone care what you shift into?”

She shrugged. “I’m prey.”

He growled, and his upper lip curled. “You’re mine.”

“I know that,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean my shift is prey. Sometimes predator shifters don’t like prey shifters.”

He let out a deep sigh and wrapped his arms around her. “I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Dani. You could shift into a chipmunk and it shouldn’t matter to anyone in the pack, because you’re a shifter, not a natural animal.”

She quirked her brow. “Are there chipmunk shifters?”

He blinked and then laughed. “I have no idea.”

She looked around the woods and said, “Better not do anything really private out here, just to be safe.”

His eyes darkened and he leaned forward, pushing her gently against a tree. “We can be quiet.”

“Yeah right,” she said with a snort as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I almost went deaf this morning. You howl when you come sometimes.”

“Just for you.” He lowered his lips to hers and everything ceased to exist around them. The world could have fallen away and she wouldn’t have cared.

She eased away from the kiss. “You make me forget everything.”

He laughed. “Is that good or bad?”

“It’s good, except when I want to take my clothes off and we’re out in the woods.”

“I wouldn’t want you to freeze anything important.”

“Let’s go home.”

He took a step back and swung her into his arms. She hugged herself close to him and rested her head on his shoulder, yawning and snuggling close.

“Sleepy, sweetheart?”

“I had a horny wolf in my bed last night.”

“Sounds like a real hardship.”

She kissed his neck. “Well, it helps that he’s sexy as hell and has a talented mouth.”

“At your service,” he said with a soft growl.

He carried her all the way across the woods and into the house. After they’d removed their winter gear, they hurried to the bedroom, stripping and slipping under the covers as quickly as possible. As they settled on the bed together, she could see his face tighten in pain when he moved his leg. She had no doubt it was aching from the strain of carrying her.

“Can I do something to help your leg?”

“The pain will ease with time,” he said. He kissed her gently and tugged her closer. She rested her head on his bent arm and slid her hand up his side. The scars had become familiar to her already.

“I don’t want you to be in pain.”

“To be honest, it doesn’t matter to me much right now. I get to have you in my arms. The pain is dull compared to how I’m feeling inside.”

She tilted her head to look up at him. “What do you mean?”

“You’re mine.”

“I am. You’re mine, too.”

“I’m falling for you, sweetheart. I know it’s only been a few days, but when you’re in my arms everything else slips away, even the pain.” He kissed her and she settled her head on his bicep.

“I’m falling for you, too.”

“We’ll catch each other.”

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The following night, Dani took care to dress well for dinner with the alphas. She didn’t have a lot of fancy clothes with her, but from what Adam had told her about the alphas, they sounded like pretty down-to-earth people. She dried her long, blonde hair with her travel hair dryer and braided sections on both sides, connecting them at the back with a few bobby pins. The mating mark that Adam had given her their first time together had scarred, and now showed with her hair pulled up.

She had unpacked her things the day before, filling up one dresser drawer and a little bit of closet space. She rummaged in the drawer until she found a bra and pair of panties, slipping them on before heading into the closet to find something to wear.

Adam was waiting in the family room for her. It had taken him no time at all to get ready; men had it so easy. Dani finally decided on a white sweater and a pair of navy leggings. After dressing, she tugged on socks and slipped into her favorite leather boots.

“I’m ready,” she said as she walked into the family room. Adam stood from the couch and growled softly.

“You look amazing.”

“Aw, you’re sweet.”

He crossed to her so quickly his movements were a blur, caught her in his arms and kissed her. “Gorgeous,” he whispered against her lips before kissing down her jaw to her throat, where he nibbled on the mating mark and made shivers shoot down her spine.

“Careful. Compliments like that will make us late.”

He lifted from her neck with an annoyed grumble. “Why didn’t I tell Acksel that tonight was a bad time for us to leave the house?”

“It’s only for a few hours,” she said, patting his cheek and slipping from his arms to get her coat from the hook by the door.

He joined her, tugging on his own jacket. “We’ll eat fast.”

They walked together to his truck and he opened the door, helping her inside. “Do you have a car in Oakville we need to make arrangements to get?” he asked as he climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine.

“No. Mom let me use her car.”

“You can use my truck whenever you’d like, and we can get a car for you if you want,” he suggested, pulling away from the curb.

She thought it was sweet of him to offer. “I don’t think I’ll need one, but if it turns out I do then we can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

As he drove to the alphas’ house, she asked, “How long has Acksel been alpha?”

“Four years. He and Brynn have been together since the fall. She’s human and grew up in Wilde Creek.”

“Is it a big deal that she’s human?”

“According to our old laws, it was a huge issue. The old laws said that wolves weren’t allowed to mate with anyone but another wolf. If a wolf chose another kind of shifter or a human for a mate, they were exiled from the pack.”

“That seems harsh.”

He shrugged. “It’s pack life. I guess Acksel and Brynn had a long history, but he was determined to never be with her because she was human and he’d have to leave the pack. Then his sister, Eveny, decided to mate with a human named Luke. Acksel opted to change that one law and allow pack members to mate with whoever they wanted, regardless of whether they shifted or not. The law change allowed Acksel to finally claim Brynn as his mate.”

She mused on that for a moment. “There was a time when bears only mated with other bears, and I think that was actually true of reindeer, too. From the little memory I have of my herd, they were all reindeers. I guess if you only stick to your own group then you eventually end up mated to one of your own. Personally, I’m glad I wandered through Wilde Creek.”

He smiled. “Me too, sweetheart.”

He parked on the street in front of a house. The yard was covered with snow, and the salt scattered on the freshly shoveled sidewalk glittered in the porch lights. As Dani looked at the house and thought about where she was and who she was going to meet, her nerves kicked in.

She was literally walking into a wolf’s den; and not just any wolf, but the freaking *head* of a wolf pack. Her pulse raced as Adam turned off the engine. The automatic doors unlocked, and the sound made her jump.

“Baby?”

“Sorry, this is just...a lot to take in.” She forced her hands to unclench.

Adam unbuckled his seatbelt and released hers, then pulled her into his arms. His spicy scent surrounded her and eased her fears. She slid her hands under his coat and gripped his shirt.

“I would never let anyone hurt you, Dani.”

“I know. My reindeer is just reminding me that I’m prey.”

A growl rumbled in his chest. “Because you wear my mark, even in your human form shifters would recognize you as one of their own kind, regardless of what kind of beast you shift into.”

He nuzzled her throat and kissed her pulse, which beat erratically. “The rational part of me knows that.”

“This isn’t the same as when you’re in your shift. There’s no danger here. This is my pack, you’re marked as my mate, and you’re covered in my scent.”

She inhaled and willed herself to relax. She did trust Adam to keep her safe, and although a deep, ancient part of her wanted to tuck tail and skedaddle, she wasn’t about to walk away from her mate for anything.

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” He tilted her face and studied her. “We can leave.”

His concern for her made her smile. “No, it’s okay. It’s just that I’ve only known bears. They’re predators, but not like wolves. I trust you.”

He kissed her briefly and opened his door, then walked around to her side of the truck and opened hers, offering her his hand. She loved how much of a gentleman he was. He always thought of her first, not just in bed but in all things. She mentally shook her reindeer out of the fear that kept trying to creep in and grab hold, and she walked purposefully up the sidewalk with Adam.

Adam knocked on the front door and it swung open a few moments later. A tall, dark-haired male stood in the doorway.

“Good to see you, Adam,” he said, extending his hand.

“Thanks, Alpha. This is my mate, Dani Grayson. Dani, this is my alpha, Acksel Moore.”

Dani stared at Acksel, who regarded her with gray eyes. He didn’t look at her like she was something furry to chase

through the forest and devour. “It’s nice to meet you,” she said.

“I’d shake your hand, but males can be funny about others touching their females,” Acksel said as he took a step backward into his home. “Please come in. My mate is in the kitchen.”

The door swung shut after they stepped inside, and Adam took her coat and hung it up next to his on hooks by the front door. A pretty woman, smelling of human and wolf, walked into the front room, brushing what looked like flour from her hands.

“I was trying to make gravy. It’s hard as heck,” she said. “You must be Dani. I’m Brynn, Acksel’s mate.”

“Thanks for inviting us to dinner,” Dani said, shaking Brynn’s hand and discreetly brushing flour from her own hand. “Can I help? My mom makes really good gravy.”

“Oh, wow, that would be great!” Brynn grabbed Dani’s hand and said, “Make yourself comfortable, Adam; we’ll be a few minutes.”

Dani smiled at Adam, and he winked at her. She was gently tugged into a large kitchen filled with the scent of roasted meat and vegetables. Her stomach rumbled and Brynn said, “I’m glad you’re hungry. I eat like six times a day because of the baby, and he likes red meat.”

“Congratulations on the baby. When are you due?” Dani asked as she stepped in front of a saucepan bubbling with gravy, which was an unpleasant dark brown color.

“June seventeenth.”

“Are you sure you’re having a boy?” Letting a drop of gravy fall on her finger, she tasted it and found it to be extremely bland.

“I want it to be a surprise, so we’re not going to find out until he’s born, but I’m pretty sure it will be a boy. Motherly instinct I suppose.”

Adding seasonings and milk until the gravy looked and tasted great, Dani turned to Brynn with a spoonful. Brynn took the spoon and popped the end into her mouth. Her eyes widened. “Oh, yum! How did you do that?”

“I had a good teacher.”

“Tell me about your bear family,” Brynn said as she lifted the lid from a slow cooker on the counter and spooned carrots and potatoes onto a platter.

“My parents were killed by a pack of natural coyotes when I was three. I’d been left with my aunt while the herd went foraging. Everything was fine, and then the coyotes found them. They don’t normally hunt in packs unless it’s a big group of prey, but it was my herd’s bad luck to be near the coyotes’ territory. My aunt shoved me up into a tree and tried to shift to protect herself, but she was killed.”

Dani blinked at the sting of tears. She had been thinking a lot about her people since she’d met Adam. She wished she had more memories of her family. She had vague, fuzzy recollections of what they looked like: her mom was blonde and her dad had dark hair. She remembered her mother loved to make handheld apple pies over the fire.

Brynn put her hand gently on Dani’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry, hon. What happened?”

“I hid in the tree. The coyotes knew I was there, but they ignored me. I was terrified. I clung to that tree, all night, crying. I climbed down later that morning. The coyotes had caused a lot of destruction, but one of the tents survived. I stayed there for a few days, hoping someone from the herd would come back, and when they didn’t I started walking. I don’t know how long I walked, maybe a day or two, before I ended up in Oakville. Fayar, the king bear, found me, and his mate Gloria took me in while they tried to figure out where I came from. Then Row’s mom Alice adopted me. She loved me from the start, and so did Row.”

“You were so young. It’s a miracle you didn’t die from the elements or get caught by another predator. I’m surprised you don’t hate *all* predators.”

Her brows rose. “I know they were natural coyotes running on instinct. I don’t look at shifters as being same as their natural counterparts. Shifters have a consciousness, a humanity that allows them to make choices. Natural animals don’t have that.”

“Did you ever find any evidence of your people or other herds?”

She shook her head. “Not of my herd. Just recently, though, we’ve learned that reindeer like to stay off the radar. Mom hired a private investigator to look for them, and it’s taken years to find a herd. Row was on his way with me to meet them when we got sidetracked here.”

“Fate is a funny thing, isn’t it?” Brynn asked. “You were on your way to one destiny and found a different path.”

“I’m glad we stopped.”

“Me too. It’s nice to see Adam happy. He deserves it.”

Brynn and Dani carried the food to the kitchen table and filled glasses with iced tea. “Adam said you weren’t going to go meet that herd. Aren’t you curious about your people?”

Dani shrugged. “A little. Reindeer are nomadic, so the herds don’t stay in one place for long. If I’d found a herd when I was younger, I might have been more willing to go and meet them, but Mom and Row are my family, and now so is Adam.”

Brynn smiled and sniffled, coming around the table to hug Dani. “I’m sorry your family is gone.”

Dani smiled. “It’s really okay. I know that my parents would have wanted me to be safe and loved, and I was. I think family doesn’t have to be about what you shift into, but who you love.”

Adam and Acksel came into the kitchen, both looking concerned. Brynn turned from Dani into Acksel’s arms and said, “Her story is sad but has a happy ending. You know happy endings always make me cry.”

Acksel chuckled and hugged her. “I know, baby,” he murmured.

Dani held out her hands to Adam and he linked their fingers. “It *is* a happy ending,” she said.

Adam smiled.

Brynn’s stomach growled loudly, and everyone laughed. “The boss has spoken,” Brynn said, patting her stomach. “Let’s eat.”

Adam pulled out Dani’s chair and pushed it in as she sat, joining her in the next chair. Acksel leaned over and kissed Brynn’s cheek. “Everything looks great.”

“You can thank Dani for saving the gravy.”

“It was my pleasure.”

As the meal progressed, they talked about the differences between the pack and the sleuth, and how strange fate was that both Dani and her brother had found their true mates after stopping for gas.

Adam cleared his throat. “I’d like to talk to you about me and Dani becoming stewards,” he said, looking at Acksel.

“Oh?” Acksel leaned back in his chair and put his arm around Brynn.

Adam nodded. “It makes sense. Dani can work with Honey on the household things for the retirees, and I can work with Jeremiah on the outside things. Right now Dade is assigning a lot of young teens, but there’s a lot of work to be done, and since they’re still in school, it’s eating into their productivity. We’ll be coming into spring soon, and that means gardening and lawn care, which are a lot of work.”

“I can’t make Dani a full pack member because it’s against our laws, but I can make her an honorary steward. It’s no problem to assign you as a steward if that’s what you’d like. You’ll need to talk to my dad because he’s in charge of them, and of course make sure that Jeremiah and Honey want the extra help, but I’m sure they will.”

“I think you need to change that law, Acksel,” Brynn said as she ladled gravy onto her third helping of pot roast. “Why can’t the mates of pack members be pack members?”

“Pack membership is for wolves only,” he said.

“I *know*, but why does it have to be that way? What’s the point of being alpha if you can’t change the laws?”

“I’ve changed a lot of laws since you came around.”

“Yeah, but this one is starting to become an issue. Your mate, Malachi’s mate, and Eveny’s mate are humans. We’re ‘honorary’ members, but not full members. And Dani’s an actual shifter, so it would make even more sense for her to be a full member. Plus, Kammie’s mate is a bear. He would make a great protector.”

Acksel exhaled with an exasperated rumble. “Every time someone gets mated in the pack we have this discussion.”

“Because you can’t get it through your thick head that I want you to change this law.”

“My head’s thick because I have to keep banging it against the wall,” he said, his lip curling up into a smile.

Brynn stabbed the air with her fork. “Watch it.”

Adam cleared his throat and said, “Making Dani an honorary member is fine, as long as she can work with me. We both want to stay in Wilde Creek, and we’d like to work together.”

“That’s so romantic,” Brynn said with a sigh.

Acksel rolled his eyes. “You can tell my dad that I said it’s okay with me for you two to become stewards. I understand about wanting your mate by your side. We’re working on getting the work of the omegas divvied up more fairly, but having you two as permanent stewards is a good idea.”

Acksel and Adam cleared the dishes while Brynn and Dani talked about the full moon celebrations. As they were getting ready to leave, Adam said, “I’d like to mate with Dani officially during the March full moon.”

“Of course,” Acksel said.

“I need help to keep her safe.”

Brynn's brows rose. "Won't she stay with the mates in our house during the hunt?" It was tradition that the mates who were unable to shift stayed in the alphas' home while the pack hunted.

"I like to shift, too. Adam's worried that someone is going to mistake me for a real reindeer," Dani said. Adam helped her on with her coat and then tugged his on.

"What were you thinking about?" Acksel asked.

"A privacy fence. Something tall, maybe eight feet, and reinforced so it couldn't be knocked down easily. My property is an acre, and I can stay with her on the full moon and shift in the yard with her. It's not quite the same as hunting with the pack, but then again I don't really do that now."

"How will you hunt if you're just in your yard?" Brynn asked.

"I don't need to hunt to be happy, I just need to be with Dani," Adam said.

Dani couldn't help her broad smile.

"I'll have Jerry Ferrity contact you in the next few days about putting up a privacy fence for you."

"Thanks, Acksel," Adam said.

"You're welcome."

Brynn and Dani hugged again, and then they said goodbye. As Adam helped her into the truck, she said, "That went really well."

"I think so, too. You're surprised?" he asked as he got behind the wheel.

"Not really. I wasn't sure what to expect, but they're very down-to-earth and sweet."

"We're lucky to have them as alphas."

She figured she was the luckiest reindeer around, not just because she'd found her truemate, but because she'd found a place to call home, somewhere she belonged. She hadn't ever

really felt like she fit in with the bears, but Adam's easy acceptance of her allowed everything else to fall into place.

"I'm going to make you so happy when we get home," she said, leaning against his shoulder.

"It would be pretty hard to top how happy I am right now."

"Challenge accepted."

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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The following morning, Adam took Dani to meet Dade. Dade was not only the head of the stewards; he was also Acksel's dad.

"Is Dade mated?" Dani asked as they pulled to a stop in front of Dade's house.

"He was. His mate died when Acksel and Eveny were younger. He never re-mated."

"Is it always that way for mated pairs?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if one dies, does the other one never mate with anyone else? My mom said that when her mate Nathaniel died she never wanted to mate someone else. I always wondered if she just hadn't found the right person or if she felt like she'd be betraying her mate's memory to mate again."

"I'm not sure if there's anything that's normal when it comes to loss. Some shifters may feel like they only have one mate and won't look for another. Others might eventually open their hearts. I guess it depends on their situation."

"Was Dade the alpha before Acksel?"

"No. The alpha position in Wilde Creek is determined by a fight. If a wolf wants to try to take over the pack, they have to defeat the current alpha and make him stand down from his position."

"What happens if the challenger doesn't beat the alpha?"

“Pack law says that the alpha can either kill him or just banish him. It works the other way as well. When Acksel challenged the former alpha, he let him leave town. In our pack’s history, there have been new alphas who haven’t been so kind.”

She shivered. “Pack life is harsh sometimes.”

He nodded. “Like anything in life, you have to take the good with the bad.”

They got out of the truck, and as they were walking up the sidewalk, the door swung open and Dade smiled and waved. “Come on in.”

Adam shut the door after he and Dani entered. “Dade Moore, this is my mate, Dani Grayson.”

Dade extended his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Dani. Come on in, I just brewed some coffee.”

After fixing their coffees, Adam and Dani settled on a couch and Dade sat in a comfortable recliner. “The scuttlebutt in town is that you’re a reindeer shifter, Dani.”

She smiled. “It’s true. My adopted brother, Row, is mated to Kammie.”

“You and your brother both found your mates here at the same time? That’s pretty neat.” He took a sip of coffee and said, “I have a feeling that you’re here on business. So what can I do for you both?”

Adam cleared his throat. “Dani and I spoke to Acksel last night. Even though Dani will only be an honorary pack member, Acksel said that she and I could both become stewards, and that we should speak to you about it.”

“Hey, that’s great! Jeremiah and Honey could use the help. The young people are fine, but they require a *lot* of supervision. Last weekend I sent a small group out with a four-wheeler towing a cart to pick up firewood, and I found them several hours later with the four-wheeler upside down in a ditch because they were goofing around.”

Adam chuckled. "I'm sure they had a good time while they were doing it."

"I'm very sure of that, too," Dade said, smiling. "Anyway, yes, we'd love to have you on the steward team. On the March full moon, when you two are officially mated, we'll have Acksel make you both stewards so it will all be official with the pack."

"We're not officially mated right now?" Dani asked.

"Yes and no. You're wearing his marks, so yes you're mated, but in the eyes of the pack it's not official until the alpha recognizes the mating."

"Thanks, Dade," Adam said. He hadn't doubted that the male would welcome them into the stewards.

"In the meantime, if anyone asks you to do something for them, be sure to tell them to talk to me or Acksel. You're a steward as of right now, and that means you're supposed to be focusing on the retirees."

"Sure," Adam said. "When do you want us to start?"

"Have you talked to Jeremiah yet?"

"We were going to catch up with him and Honey after this."

"I think you can start tomorrow. Check in with Jeremiah and then we can all meet tomorrow morning at eight at the retiree development. We'll divvy up the duties and you can get right to work."

Adam stood and shook Dade's hand. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. And welcome to the pack, Dani."

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"That was easy," Dani said after Adam got behind the wheel and started the truck.

"Did you think it wouldn't be?"

“I don’t know. I thought maybe he might ask us questions or tell us what the duties would be.”

“He knows me because of the pack. The duties vary from day to day, and with the seasons. There’s always something to be done. The stewards handle everything from the exterior home and yard upkeep to cleaning and repairs inside the home, and taking those who can’t drive shopping and to appointments.”

“Neat.”

He smiled at her. “I’m so glad you’re excited about the job.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s hard work at times, but I know I’ll enjoy getting to know the retirees. Plus I get to work with you, which is a huge bonus in my book.”

He turned into the retiree development and parked behind Jeremiah’s SUV in the driveway. “Ready, sweetheart?”

“You bet.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and she tilted her head quizzically. “What?”

“You’re beautiful.” He reached out and wrapped a lock of her pretty golden hair around his finger. “I look at you and I see kids with your blonde hair. Wolves who smell like peppermint.”

“Or reindeer who have amber eyes when they shift,” she said with a laugh.

He nodded. “Exactly.”

She unbuckled her seatbelt and scooted closer, wrapping her arms around his neck. “I wish we were home so we could talk more.”

“Me, too. I didn’t mean to get into a heavy conversation before meeting with my friends.”

“It’s okay,” she said, pressing her lips to his briefly. It was just the softest of kisses, but his wolf growled for more.

She smiled as she gazed at him for a quiet moment, and then she slipped back into her seat and reached for the door handle. “Let’s meet your friends and then we can talk more at home.”

After pushing his wolf back and shaking himself out of the desire to put the truck in reverse and rush them back home, he turned off the engine and got out.

“How long have you and Jeremiah been friends?” Dani asked as she met him at the front of the truck.

“Pretty much forever. He was one of the few guys who didn’t shy away from me or treat me differently after I was burned.” It had been a hellish time in his life and he didn’t like to think about it, but every time his leg ached, he couldn’t help but remember the cause. Dani didn’t seem to care about his scars, though. She treated them like they were just part of his skin, and not the definition of him.

“That’s cool. Row and I were always super-close. There are some female bears I’m friends with, but he was my best friend.”

Adam and Dani held hands as they walked up the sidewalk to the front door. When Adam lifted his hand to knock, the door swung open and Jeremiah greeted them. “Hey! We were just on our way out when we saw your truck. Come on in!”

“I’m glad we caught you,” Adam said. He and Jeremiah embraced briefly and Adam greeted Honey as she walked into the family room to stand next to Jeremiah. “Jeremiah and Honey, this is my mate, Dani Grayson.”

Jeremiah gave Dani a little wave and said, “You’ll understand if I don’t give you a hug hello. It’s nice to meet you.”

Honey stepped away from Jeremiah’s side and hugged Dani. “I’m so glad to finally meet you. We’d heard that Adam found his mate, but no one knew anything about you. Come on in and have a seat.”

“We didn’t mean to stop you from going to work,” Adam said as he sat with Dani on the comfortable couch and

Jeremiah and Honey sat on a matching loveseat.

“We were going to run some errands in town for a few of the retirees. It’s nothing that can’t wait while we catch up,” Jeremiah said. “So you met in the woods? That’s the rumor in town.”

Adam smiled as he put his arm around Dani. “Yeah, on the full moon. She and her brother stopped in town to get gas and she felt me.”

Honey sighed wistfully. “That’s very cool. It’s like how we found each other,” she said as she smiled at Jeremiah.

As the couples shared the stories of how they met, Adam was conscious of a growing sense of camaraderie that he hadn’t felt before. It wasn’t just that Jeremiah was his best friend; now he realized that he’d come to think of him as a brother of sorts.

“The reason we wanted to see you is that I talked to Acksel and Dade about Dani and I joining the stewards. They agreed, as long as both of you don’t mind the company,” Adam said.

“Seriously? That would be awesome!” Jeremiah said. “Honey and I were just saying the other day how it would be nice to have some more responsible stewards who actually wanted to do the work.”

Honey wrinkled her nose as she smiled. “The teen wolves are just not that interested in hard work, unless they’re doing it right in front of Acksel or one of the high-ranked males. They’re always wanting to impress them, but when it’s just us, they get powerfully lazy.”

“Unless there are teenage girls around,” Jeremiah said with a laugh. “Then they’ll do anything that makes them look strong.”

“Acksel said we could join the stewards now even though Dani won’t be made an unofficial pack member until the March full moon.”

“That’s great,” Jeremiah said. “Dani, do you understand what we do as stewards?”

She nodded. “You work with the retired wolves.”

“Right. When a wolf ages out of the pack, they often find themselves alone. Some retirees are still mated, but most of our retirees lost their mates and are alone. Because they don’t join in the monthly hunts, they can get lost in an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ way. When I was simply an omega, I used to take the time to check in on them. I felt like it was important, because I know what it’s like to be forgotten and overlooked.”

“When Jer was offered the opportunity to fight for rank, he got a little pissed that Acksel expected me to just take over all his duties,” Honey said. “Stewards are an old-school pack position. Most modern packs don’t have stewards, or even know what they are. They offered the position to both of us, and it was a no-brainer. I love working with the retirees, plus I get to work with my mate.”

“That’s so neat,” Dani said.

“How about we give you a tour of the development and we can introduce you to the retirees?” Jeremiah asked.

“That sounds great,” Adam said.

He and Dani followed them outside, and then he walked with Jeremiah ahead of their mates, who already were talking quietly together, their arms linked and smiles on their faces as if they were old friends. “Thanks,” Adam said.

Jeremiah patted him on the back. “It’s my pleasure. I’m glad you found your mate. Honey and I had been talking about asking Acksel to make you a steward so that you could help us out.”

Adam hummed. “I’m not sure he would have let me do that. There aren’t a lot of omega males who can do the work that needs to be done, but with Dani, it just made sense for us to work together.”

“I love working with Honey. The retirees will love to have another couple to help out. Honey and I have started to get backlogged.” Jeremiah reached into his back pocket and pulled out a rectangular magnet. “We’ll make up new magnets with

your cell phone number and Dani's, so they can call you in the middle of the night when the heat goes out instead of just us."

"Or when one of the old ladies hears something outside and wants someone to investigate," Honey said with a chuckle.

Adam glanced over his shoulder at Dani, and she smiled, her blue eyes dancing. He knew then without a doubt that it was the right thing for them to do. Dani had wanted to find a place in the pack where she fit in, and not being able to take part in the pack hunts on the full moon wouldn't help her feel connected to the group. But helping the retirees was a step in the right direction.

As they stepped onto the porch of the first home, Dani slid into his arms and kissed him. "This is awesome."

"I think so too."

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## CHAPTER SIX

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The next afternoon, Adam opened the door and Dani saw Brynn and two other women standing on the front porch. “Welcome wagon!” Brynn said.

“Wolfy welcome wagon,” one of the other women added.

Adam held open the door and said, “Sweetheart, this is Mia Slattery and her sister-in-law, Nila. Where’s Jack?”

“With Mal,” Nila said. To Dani she said, “Jack’s my son. He’s staying with my mate, Malachi.”

“Who likes to call him ‘carrot,’” Mia said as she stepped into the house and Adam shut the door.

“Who likes to call who carrot?” Dani asked as she accepted a hug from Brynn and shook hands with Mia and Nila.

Nila chuckled. “Jack’s favorite word is carrot. When he met Mal, he started to call him carrot, too. It’s a pack joke.”

“But you can only laugh about it behind Mal’s back,” Mia warned. “It’s funny as heck though.”

“We’re kicking you out, Adam. We need to welcome your mate to the pack properly,” Brynn said. She lifted a large wicker basket from where she’d placed it on the floor when she took off her coat.

“What’s the proper way?” Adam asked.

“With chocolate, of course,” Mia said.

Adam lifted his coat from the hook by the front door and slipped it on as he walked over to Dani. “I’m supposed to meet Jeremiah anyway so we can work setting up a better schedule for the retirees. I’ll be back in a few hours. You have my cell if you need me.” He kissed her and she smiled.

“I’m in good hands, I think.”

“Definitely,” Brynn said.

Adam grabbed his keys from the coffee table and waved at Dani before shutting the door behind him.

Brynn sat next to Dani on the couch, and Mia and Nila pulled chairs from the kitchen and settled across the coffee table from them. Brynn lifted a beige towel from over the contents of the basket and said, “Mia, Nila, and I want to welcome you officially to the pack, in a totally unofficial way.”

Mia rolled her eyes. “It’ll be officially-official on the full moon. But for today, we thought it would be cool if we hung out for a bit and maybe answered any questions you had. We’d like to get to know you.”

Dani made a clucking sound. “Aw, you guys are so sweet.”

“It’s our pleasure. Now, tell us about the night you met Adam,” Nila said as she opened a box of chocolates and handed it to Dani. “I think it’s so cool that you found each other in the woods!”

Dani told them about meeting Adam. “Everything changed for me in that moment when he came out of the shadows.”

“Were you afraid?” Mia asked.

She shook her head. “I knew he wouldn’t hurt me.”

Brynn fanned herself. “So freaking romantic. Acksel crawled into my bed in the middle of the night, drunk as a freaking skunk. *Not* romantic.”

“But he made it up to you later,” Mia reminded her.

“True. But I reserve the right to hold it over his head for all eternity.”

Nila laughed. “Mal had the nerve to buy me groceries and be amazing with Jack.”

“Such a brute,” Brynn teased.

Dani nibbled on a brownie studded with walnuts. “What about you, Mia?”

“I’m in romantic limbo,” she sighed.

“With who?” Dani asked.

“My brother’s best friend, Lucian. He’s human and in the military, so he travels all the time. I’ve been in love with him since I was a kid, but Malachi has always said that I was off-limits to him.”

“If you’re mates, why would your brother keep you two apart?” Dani asked.

“Because Mal thinks he knows best. He says Lucian’s life is dangerous. The heart wants what it wants, though, and so does my wolf,” Mia said. Brushing her hands clear of crumbs from a chocolate chip cookie, she said, “Let’s talk about the bears. What was it like growing up with them?”

Dani settled deeper into the couch and told her new friends about her old home. That fateful night when she’d been orphaned and her entire herd killed, she thought she would die in the woods all alone. “It was just luck, or maybe fate, that I wandered into Oakville and Row’s mom took me in.”

“What about other reindeer?” Nila asked. “Did the bears try to find people like you?”

“Reindeer, in addition to being nomadic, apparently like to stay off the radar. Mom looked for them for me. She even hired a private detective, but it was just recently that he actually found a herd. Of course, by now they could be someplace else, and we might not have found them. It doesn’t really matter, though. Adam’s my family now, and we get to start a new family together.”

“That’s so freaking romantic. I need a true mate,” Mia said, slumping in her chair.

“I think you have one already, you just need to knock him over the head to get him to realize it,” Brynn said.

“I know!” Nila said. “Next time Lucian is in town, I’ll make sure that he comes over for dinner instead of just stopping by their office. You can join us, and Mal will keep his opinions to himself, trust me.”

“That’s a great idea!” Brynn said.

Mia looked unsure. “What if he doesn’t want me? What if I’ve been longing for him all this time and it’s not meant to be?”

“It would be better to know now and able to move on, than spend another year wanting something you don’t have,” Nila pointed out.

“When you know, you know,” Dani said. “I knew the second I looked into Adam’s eyes that he was mine. Hell, I knew before that. I could *feel* him in the woods, and I couldn’t stop myself from finding him. If Lucian is yours, then your wolf will let you know. Take a chance. The worst thing that could happen is that you find out he’s not meant to be yours.”

Mia turned as white as a sheet.

Dani hurried on to say, “I mean, that at least if you know he’s not yours, then you can find the one who is.”

“That’s a good point,” Brynn said. She lifted her glass of iced tea and held it high. “Welcome to the pack, Dani.”

Dani clinked glasses with the girls and took a sip before turning her attention to the basket. Brynn continued to unload the chocolate goodies from its depths. “Wilde Creek’s my home now. Thanks for making me feel so welcome.”

“That’s what we do,” Brynn said, winking.

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Dani called Adam when the girls left two hours later and discovered he was out chopping wood with Jeremiah.

“Do you need some help?” she asked.

“You’re sweet to offer, but no, Jer and I have it handled. You could text Honey. She’s checking in on the widowed females.”

“Cool. Be safe. Don’t chop off your leg or any other part of your body I’ve become attached to.”

He laughed. “I’ll be careful. Have fun, sweetheart.”

She ended the call with Adam and dialed Honey. A few minutes later, Honey arrived in her car to pick her up.

“Jer said some of the females showed up to welcome you to the pack. Did you have fun?”

“Yeah, they’re sweet.”

“It’s definitely better than the pack I grew up in,” Honey said.

“What was your pack like?”

Honey grimaced and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “Very strict. More so than even what we’d call an ‘old-school’ pack. My mom died when I was little and my paternal grandmother raised me in my father’s house. I knew something was going on with my father, and even my grandmother seemed cautious. Then she died in her sleep, and he started acting strangely. I overheard some odd conversations that made me suspicious, so I ran away. I thought I was pretty slick and that he wouldn’t know where I was, but it turned out that he’d put a tracker on my car. I stranded myself in Wilde Creek and followed Jer’s scent to his house. Acksel called my father on my behalf, and my father threatened the pack if I wasn’t returned.”

“Why did he want you back so badly?”

“I wasn’t really his daughter. My mother had an affair. I don’t even know who my real father is, but the man who raised me killed them both. He planned to trade me to another alpha for a new mate. When I didn’t go home, he kidnapped me and Jer. Jer saved us and the Wilde Creek pack came to help. Even though we’re both omegas, I’ve never felt anything

but absolutely a part of the pack. They welcomed me and stood up for us when the man who raised me demanded I come home. I know the bears are different than the wolves, but this pack is a family and I'm proud to be part of them. You and Adam are mates, so that makes us sisters in the pack."

Dani smiled. "That's sweet. I always wanted a sister, and now I have Kammie and you."

"The high-ranked males are used to things being a certain way—the omegas work for them, because they do important things like keeping the pack and town safe. Kammie got a raw deal because wolves tend to think of physical weakness as a sign of inner weakness."

"Her scars don't keep her from shifting, though. They don't affect her like Adam's do."

Honey stopped the car in the driveway of her home. She unbuckled her seatbelt and turned to face Dani. "Sometimes being an omega is more about perceived flaws and weaknesses than actual ones."

"You mean because my shift is a prey animal? I worry about what the pack will think about my shifted form."

She scoffed. "I can't imagine it being an issue. First of all, you're a mate, and mates are precious to the males in the pack. Even as an honorary member, you would still be entitled to the same safeguards and protections as every other member. It won't matter to the males what you shift into, and a lot of that is because you're a female. Females are automatically omegas. Now, if you were a male and the wolf was a female? Then maybe some of the pack would give the female a hard time for having a mate who's prey."

"Because in wolf thinking, the male should be the strongest?"

She nodded. "Exactly. I've seen natural deer fight back with their hooves and horns, so I'm not sure I think that just because you're a prey animal that you're helpless. But wolf males tend to think in terms of black and white as far as what is acceptable and what isn't. Adam's scars actually do affect

how he moves in his shifted form. That matters to the males, and to an extent the females too. Males want to know that the male at their back is as strong as them, and able to fight if necessary. Females want to be with the strongest male. Being a truemate trumps all that ancient bullshit in my mind, though.”

Dani hummed in her throat. “I’m glad Adam’s not embarrassed by me.”

“He’d be an idiot if he was, and an asshole to boot.” There was a brief pause and then Honey said, “Jer is a *non*. Or, he was.”

“What’s a ‘non’?”

“A full-blooded wolf who can’t shift. When he was very emotional, he could sprout fur, but that was about it. That made him bottom-tier of the wolf pack. Adam’s scars make him an omega because he can’t run as fast in his shift as others. But you know what I think?”

“What?”

“I see how he looks at you. If you were in trouble, nothing would slow him down. I think packs start to see the laws as the be-all and end-all of life. They forget that underneath the laws are the people who are affected by them. Is Kammie less of a wolf because she has scars from childhood abuse? Is Jer less of a wolf because he’s a strange hybrid scary-movie-monster wolf? Or Adam because he’s got scars from a fire? Hell no. This is what Jer and I like to call hierarchy bullshit.”

Dani chuckled. “The sleuth didn’t have a hierarchy like that. It was just the king. Everyone did what he said, and everyone pitched in.”

“It would be cool if the pack was like that, but I think that in spite of the archaic laws there is something good about it. I think the laws have a place.”

“They remind us that we’re not human,” Dani offered.

“Exactly. Now,” she said, clapping her hands together, “are you ready to clean a kitchen and bundle up some old newspapers?”

“You bet.”

The two left the warm car and walked down the street to the home of a widowed she-wolf named Esrami. Honey knocked loudly several times and then opened the door.

“Ez? Are you decent?” Honey called.

“I’m *never* decent,” a woman answered.

Dani chuckled. She and Honey draped their coats over the kitchen chairs as they walked through into the family room, where a fire blazed brightly in the fireplace and a woman, gray hair piled high on her head, sat with fabric in her lap.

Honey bent and hugged the woman. “Esrami, this is Dani. She’s Adam Cruz’s mate.”

Esrami pulled her reading glasses off and looked up at Dani. “Well, hello. You’re a reindeer?”

“Wow, you can tell that so quickly?” Dani asked.

Esrami touched her nose. “Eyesight goes, but the nose sticks around. It’s nice to meet you.”

Dani shook Esrami’s hand. Honey pulled a chair over and said, “I’m going to start working on the kitchen. You talk to Ez. She’s a hoot. I’ll make some hot chocolate.”

“A hot toddy would be better,” Esrami told her.

“It’s too early to drink,” Honey said.

The old woman harrumphed. “Fine, I’ll wait until you leave and have two.”

Dani laughed. “What are you working on?”

Esrami blinked jade-green eyes at Dani and smiled. “I’m making a quilt for Honey and Jeremiah, for their first pup.”

“I’m not pregnant!” Honey yelled from the kitchen.

“I didn’t say you were,” she hollered back. To Dani she said, “It takes me so long to quilt nowadays I have to start *before* someone is pregnant, or I can’t finish in time.” She gestured to the quilts hanging on the wall and over the couch, loveseat, and recliner. “I’ve been quilting since I was a young

pup. My grandmother taught me. My Ralph and I never had any pups, but my sister had several and I was able to teach my niece how to quilt. She sent me that one for my last birthday,” she said, pointing to a pretty pink and mint quilt over the recliner.

“That’s so cool. I don’t know how to sew.”

“Your mom never taught you?”

“Well, my real mom was killed when I was little, and my adopted mom was a baker and not much for sewing.” She leaned forward and looked at the fabric in Esrami’s lap. The small squares were a mixture of pastel colors and patterns, ensuring it would be perfect for a boy or a girl.

“This is a patchwork quilt. It’s my favorite kind, because you can do anything you’d like with the pattern.”

“It’s beautiful,” Dani said.

“Would you like to learn?”

“I’d love to!”

The scent of pine cleaner drifted into the room and Dani chuckled as she stood to go help Honey in the kitchen. “Maybe not today.”

“Anytime.”

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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“*I* think we should pack Kammie up,” Dani said as she ended a call with her brother.

“Pack her up what?” Adam asked.

Dani smiled in that way she had that made everything inside him feel toasty warm. “Her apartment. She wants to stay in Oakville, and they’re heading back here with my mom to get her things. I think it would be nice if we packed for her so they don’t have to worry about it.”

He turned from where he’d been looking at the backyard and watching the workers from Ferrity Construction mark the boundaries for the privacy fence. Dani was wearing one of his t-shirts and a pair of lounge pants with pink hearts. He glanced at the coffee table, and the drawer where he’d stashed the engagement ring he’d bought for her a week earlier. He wanted to do something romantic when he asked Dani to marry him, but he hadn’t been able to think of anything.

She joined him at the window, wrapping her arms around his waist, and settling her ear over his heart. He cuddled her close and kissed the top of her head. “You’re very sweet.”

“Well, my mom’s already packed my stuff up to bring with them, so it’s the least I can do to make things a little easier on them here. Plus, I have a feeling that my brother is not going to be interested in staying in Wilde Creek very long.”

He inhaled Dani’s sweet scent, a mixture of sugar and peppermint, and rocked back and forth. “The full moon’s in two weeks.”

She tipped her face up and smiled. “You know the full moon doesn’t have any pull on reindeer, right? I can shift whenever I want to. Though I have a feeling that because of you, I’m going to enjoy the full moons very much.”

He grinned. “I’ll do my best to make sure you have a good time.”

She glanced toward the workers. “You know what I’d really love? A willow tree.”

“Why?”

“The leaves taste good.”

“You can have whatever you want, sweetheart.”

She tilted her head and gazed at him. “You’re all I need.” As he lowered his head to kiss her, she whispered, “And a willow tree.”

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The following day, Adam picked up a stack of DVDs and set them in a box on the coffee table in Kammie’s apartment. Dani was taking care of the kitchen items. Adam’s nerves kicked in every time he thought about meeting Dani’s mom. He wanted her to like him and to be happy that he was Dani’s mate. He didn’t have the best upbringing, but he’d overcome a lot and was determined not to make the same mistakes his dad had made. He would always put Dani first, and when they had kids, he would make sure that they knew how much he cared for their welfare.

“I hope she doesn’t mind that we broke into her home,” Dani said from the kitchen.

“It’s not breaking in if we used the key she hides over the door,” he pointed out, “and I’m sure she won’t mind not having to pack.”

Dani hummed a tune as she went back to work, and Adam smiled. She was the happiest person he’d ever met. She always had a smile for him, always had something sweet to say.

He heard a vehicle pull up outside, and Dani squeaked in happiness as she raced from the kitchen to open the front door.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” Dani exclaimed as she hugged a woman tightly.

“Oh, I missed you, sweet girl,” the woman, who was clearly her mom, said.

“Come and meet my mate, Mom.”

“Welcome back,” Adam said to Kammie.

“What did you do?” Kammie asked, her eyes wide.

“Don’t be mad,” Dani said, “but I told Adam that it would be nice for us to help you out and pack. I know you’re anxious to get back to Oakville. I would have been happy to send you your things, but Adam said you had to personally talk to the alphas about leaving so you would’ve needed to come here anyway.”

Kammie looked up at Row with a big smile. “Did you know about this?”

“No, but I’m glad. I hate packing.”

“Me too,” Kammie said.

“Me three,” their mom said.

Kammie moved to Dani and hugged her. “You’re the best sister I could have ever hoped for.”

“I always wanted a sister,” Dani said.

Kammie stepped away as Dani introduced their mom to Adam. Kammie and Row headed into the kitchen while Dani said, “This is Adam Cruz. Adam, this is my mom, Alice Grayson.”

Her mom smiled at Adam and hugged him. “Welcome to the family.”

Adam felt a little overwhelmed by her immediate acceptance. “Thank you,” he said, emotion rising within him. His own mother had died when he was ten. He remembered a

lot of things about her, but he especially remembered her warm hugs. Dani's mom hugged like his mom.

Dani squeezed his shoulder. Tears pooled in her beautiful blue eyes, and he let go of her mom with one arm and wrapped it around Dani, drawing her into a three-way embrace.

Both women sniffled, and Adam kissed his mate on her forehead and said to Alice, "Thank you for trusting me with your daughter."

Alice stepped away from him, but kept hold of one of Dani's hands. "I'm so glad that you found each other. This kind of truemating doesn't happen very often. Hold tight to each other."

Dani brushed a tear from her cheek and leaned against Adam as her mother turned to the stack of DVDs and began loading them into the box.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to Oakville to live?" he whispered in her ear. He wanted her complete happiness. He didn't think there was anything he wouldn't do to see her smile.

"Are you ever going to stop asking me? My home is here in Wilde Creek with you."

"I just want you to be sure."

"I'm sure." She looked up at him, her eyes glittering with unshed tears.

"You can visit in the spring," her mom said. "And hopefully you'll have some news about a grandbaby for me."

Dani blushed and smiled. "I like that idea."

Adam growled softly. "Me too."

Kammie and Row came out of the kitchen, and Kammie said, "We're going to stop at the alphas' house on the way to dinner so I can leave the pack officially."

"Sounds like a plan," Alice said. "Let's get to work."

"I didn't do your bathroom," Dani told her.

Kammie nodded. “Let’s start there.” She tugged Row with her down the hallway. When they were out of sight, Dani whispered, “The alphas are having a going-away party for Kammie tonight. When they stop by in order for Kammie to leave the pack, we need to go into the house with them.”

“How nice,” her mom whispered back. “I’ll just tell them that I want to meet the alphas because of you.”

“You’ll like them. Brynn is very down-to-earth and Acksel’s not too bad, either. We’d like you to stay with us tonight, Mom.”

She hummed. “So I can make you my famous chocolate chip waffles tomorrow morning?”

“That’s what I’m hoping for,” Dani said.

Her mom kissed her cheek and smiled fondly. “Whatever my baby girl wants.”

Dani cast her blue eyes to Adam and winked.

They spent the rest of the day packing. By the time they were ready to leave for dinner, everything was in boxes, except the sheets on the bed, two coffee cups, and the coffee maker.

“You can take whatever’s left in the fridge and pantry,” Kammie said as she buckled up in Row’s SUV. Dani was sitting between Adam and her mom, and he put his arm around his mate and squeezed lightly.

“Thanks, Kam,” Adam said.

Row parked in front of the alphas’ house, which was dark. “I’ll leave the SUV on so you guys don’t freeze out here.”

“I’d like to meet the alphas,” Dani’s mom said.

Row turned in his seat. “Why?”

“I’ve never met alphas before. Plus, I’d like to meet the people who run the pack that Dani’s a part of now.”

“I’m not really in the pack,” Dani pointed out, “since I’m not a wolf.”

“But you’re going to be working with Adam as a steward, and...oh really, do I have to explain myself? I’m your mother and I said I’m going,” she said, her voice huffing at the end.

Kammie chuckled. “It’s fine with me. Brynn’s really sweet.”

“I’m sure she is,” Alice said.

Row helped Kammie and his mom out of the SUV. Adam made sure that Dani didn’t slip getting out, and kept a firm grip on her elbow as they walked up the sidewalk. Kammie rang the bell. After a long moment, Acksel opened the front door and said, “Come on in,” then disappeared into the darkness.

As soon as Kammie crossed the threshold, an overhead light clicked on and a cheer rose up from the crowd that had gathered to say goodbye to her.

“So that’s why you didn’t need to explain yourself?” Row asked his mom.

She winked. “Sue me for liking surprises.”

Brynn and Acksel stood in the center of the front room, with a group of other wolves gathered around them. Brynn said, “We’re sorry to see you go, Kammie, and we wanted you to know that you’ll be missed greatly.”

Brynn and Kammie hugged, and Brynn pulled Kammie away from Row and into the crowd of pack members.

When Brynn had contacted Adam and Dani about the going-away party, she had told him that some of the protectors were going to be cooking and serving at the party. Her reasoning was that they should understand a little of what the omegas went through to put on a party and take care of others. Adam wasn’t sure that spending a couple hours making a cake or cutting up carrots for a veggie tray would make a difference to the males, but he was all for anything that helped even out the workload a little.

Adam took a moment to introduce Dani’s mom to Brynn and Acksel as the crowd mingled. When Jeremiah and Honey

appeared a little while later, he and Adam chatted while Honey and Dani talked like the best friends they were becoming.

“Without Dani, I wouldn’t have become a steward,” he said to Jeremiah.

“I was actually planning to ask Acksel if you could join us anyway. I wasn’t sure you’d like the idea, but I thought you would be a good fit. Turned out I was right on both counts.”

“I like working with the retirees, and I especially like working with Dani. She’s so happy here.”

“Honey’s thrilled to have her, too. We’d like you guys to come over for dinner on Friday night, if you’re available.”

“Sure.”

As Jeremiah talked about needing Adam’s help setting up a new sound system for their flat-screen television, an idea on how to ask Dani to marry him popped into his mind. “If I never told you before, thank you for being such a good friend to me.”

“You’ve been a good friend to me, too. I was worried about you for a while. I think you’ve found what you were looking for, though.”

“Right here in Wilde Creek.”

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The following morning, Adam woke early and found Dani’s mom in the kitchen, adding chocolate chips to waffle batter. “Is she still asleep?”

“No, she’s in the shower. I wanted to ask you something.” Adam’s palms were sweaty, and his heart was pounding.

She put down the bag of chocolate chips and turned to face him. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“Dani means the world to me. I was floundering and she saved me. I’d like your permission to ask her to marry me.”

“Of course!” She hugged him and said, “I’m so happy for you two. Even though she never said as much to me, I know that Dani’s been wanting a home of her own for a long time. Being left alone like she was—that’s not something a person can just get over.”

“She’s lucky she found your sleuth.”

“I’m lucky to have found her. I never wanted to take another mate, and Row wanted a brother or sister to play with. When Dani came into Oakville, I knew that our family would be complete with her in it.”

“She’s my only family now.”

“I hope you’ll come to think of me as family, too.”

“I already do.”

She smiled brightly. “Now I have two sons and two daughters. I can’t wait to have some grandbabies.” She winked and turned back to the batter. Adam couldn’t wait to have children with Dani, either, but first he needed to ask her to marry him. He wanted them to belong to each other in every way possible. On the full moon, Acksel would join them in front of the pack, and she’d be accepted as his mate, but he also wanted that legal piece of paper that said she was his and he was hers.

Because that was the truth.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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The following afternoon, Dani stood in the backyard and looked at the privacy fence. It was eight feet tall and made of reinforced metal which, from a distance, looked like real wood.

“What do you think?” Adam asked.

“It’s good.”

He joined her, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. “You don’t feel safer with it?”

She glanced at him and back at the fence. “You had a pretty view of the woods. It’s blocked now.”

“If you want to see the woods, you can go out on the front porch.”

“True.” She turned to him, leaning against his broad chest and sighing. “Thank you for messing up the view for me.”

He chuckled, the sound rumbling in his chest. “As your mate, I’m supposed to make sure that you’re safe at all times.”

“I feel very safe with you.”

“I’m glad, sweetheart.”

They stood embracing in the center of the backyard for several minutes. She’d never had a man care for her the way that Adam did. Yes, her brother loved her and wanted her safe, but Adam’s concern went beyond anything she’d ever experienced. He craved her happiness, as if he couldn’t even begin to think about himself until she was content. Just that

morning, he'd cooked breakfast for them both and then, even though she'd told him not to bother, he'd started their laundry while she was taking a shower. And in addition to all those sweet gestures she could see and feel deep in her own heart how much he cared.

She loved the way his eyes darkened when he was turned on; the way the corner of his mouth quirked up when he thought she was being silly.

She rose up on her tiptoes and brushed her lips against his. "I love you."

She'd been feeling those words for a while, and her heart began to beat rapidly as they tumbled from her lips. Adam nipped her lip and lifted her in the air until she could wrap her legs around his waist. "I love you, too, Dani."

She slipped her fingers through his short hair, tugging on the strands as she lowered her lips to his. She felt like everything was complete between them now. He'd marked her as his mate and now they'd shared their true feelings. Nothing could top how good she felt.

"Take me to bed," she whispered against his lips.

He growled and turned toward the house. He stopped kissing her long enough to navigate the steps into the house, and carried her straight into the bedroom.

---

Dani dressed for dinner at Honey and Jeremiah's home. She was reluctant to do anything but crawl back into bed with Adam, but she kept reminding herself that they needed to sometimes leave the bedroom, although at the moment she couldn't think why.

"What are you thinking about so seriously?" Adam asked as he buttoned his dress shirt.

"Sex."

He went very still and stared at her. "What?"

She laughed. “I’m trying to convince myself that it’s a good idea for us to leave the house sometimes and socialize, when what I’d really rather do is climb back into bed and climb on top of you.”

He growled. “I can call Jer and tell him we’ll be late.”

She shook her head and pushed the dresser drawer shut after taking out a pair of dress socks. “Oh please. If we go back to bed, we won’t get out of it until tomorrow.”

“At the earliest.”

“Tease.”

“Truth.”

“We should go out,” she said, giving him a stern look.

He knew he could turn her on in two seconds with a few well-placed kisses and some of that sexy growling she loved. “Fine, fine. Dangle your beautiful self in front of me, talk about sex, and then say no.”

“I’m not saying no, I’m saying later.”

He arched a brow at her and smiled. “Whatever my sweetheart wants.”

She finished dressing and met Adam at the front door. He helped her on with her coat before they stepped outside. The bracing chill in the air took her breath away, and she pulled her coat tighter around her. It was colder in Wilde Creek than it was in Oakville. Her winter clothing wasn’t as warm as she needed it to be.

“Remind me to get a better coat for next winter,” she said.

“You can wear mine,” he offered as he opened the door of his truck.

“Then you’ll be cold.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t. That’s why I love you so much.”

A man appeared suddenly behind Adam, and she screamed in surprise. Her boots slipped on a patch of ice, and she

banged her elbow on the open door as Adam caught her before she hit the ground. Her mate set her in the passenger seat and turned with a warning growl to face the man behind them.

“What are you doing here?” Adam demanded.

The man looked familiar, but Dani couldn't recall where she'd seen him before. He had dark hair and a few days' worth of stubble on his cheeks. He reeked of whiskey and body odor, making her nose wrinkle in disgust.

The man leaned to the side and smiled at Dani. Suddenly she realized who he was—Adam's dad!

“Hello, pretty girl. I'm Richard, Adam's dad.”

Adam snarled loudly and shoved Richard away. “Don't talk to her. Get the fuck off my property.”

“Son, son,” he said, putting his hands up in defense. “There's no need for violence. I came to wish you congratulations on your engagement.”

Adam froze, and then a lethal growl rumbled in his chest. “Get lost.”

Richard said, “Maybe I can talk to your fiancée. Maybe she's more reasonable than you.”

“We're not engaged, we're mated,” Dani said.

Adam glanced back at her. His face was bright red, his fangs were elongated, and his eyes shimmered with the amber of his beast. He turned his attention back to his father and took a menacing step toward him.

“Oh, I'm sorry, son. I didn't mean to spoil things.”

“How the fuck do you even know anything about me or my mate?”

Richard wrung his hands. “I have a friend at the bank, and he told me that you took out a large chunk of change and that you were heading to a jewelry store. Only one reason a fellow goes to a jewelry store.”

Dani's mouth fell open. Adam was going to ask her to marry him? Despite the weird circumstances, she couldn't help

but be excited.

“You need to get gone. Now,” Adam said sternly.

Richard coughed and rubbed at his neck. “You see, the thing is that I need some money. If you’ve got enough to buy a big rock for your girl, you can spare some for your old man, right? I did give you a roof over your head for eighteen years, not that you’ve ever said thank you.”

Dani’s mouth fell open again, but for an entirely different reason. She stood up, rubbing her aching elbow, and put her hand on Adam’s shoulder. “Leave and never come back,” she said firmly. “My mate told you to go, and I don’t want to have to explain to the police why you’re dead if you stick around.”

“I’m in trouble,” he said, whining.

“Not my problem,” Adam said. He guided Dani back into the truck and slammed the door with enough force to make the vehicle rock on its tires. “You don’t talk to my mate and you don’t ever come back here. You’re dead to me, and I won’t hesitate to make that literal if you show up again.”

Richard stared at Adam for a long moment and then trudged away to a beater car idling at the curb. Adam stared at the car until it pulled away and the taillights faded into the darkness. He seemed frozen in time, a murderous glare in his eyes and his lips pressed into a tight, white line.

Eventually he moved, joining her in the truck and turning on the engine.

“Adam,” she said.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said, hands tightly gripping the steering wheel as he stared out the windshield. “I never wanted you to meet him.”

She opened her mouth to say something reassuring, but no words came. Closing it again, she leaned against his shoulder. His muscles were tight, and she could see that his knuckles were pale.

“He can’t seem to stop ruining things in my life.”

“What’s ruined?”

“Come on, Dani. You heard what he said.”

“I’m trying to pretend I didn’t,” she said, smiling hopefully.

He chuckled mirthlessly. “Thanks for trying.”

“We can skip dinner if you’re not feeling up to being social.”

He shook his head adamantly. “No. If we stay home, then I’m not going to get a chance to do what I’d planned, plus I’ll just be wallowing in anger at him.”

“Okay. No more wallowing, then.”

He kissed her temple. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Dani. All I can think about is how many things in my childhood he ruined because of his gambling addiction, and I didn’t want him anywhere near you. He’s like a plague. Everything he touches turns to shit.”

He sighed deeply and shifted the truck into gear. As he turned toward Honey and Jeremiah’s home, he continued, “He promised me a birthday party when I was eleven. I had invitations and everything. When I got up that morning, he was gone. He’d never come home the night before and the money he’d set aside to pay for my cake was gone. I went next door to stay with the neighbors until he came back, which wasn’t for two days. When he came home, he apologized and said that *my* birthday made him miss my mom and he couldn’t deal with it.”

“Oh, Adam,” she said.

“He showed up at my high school graduation with a broken hand, doped up on pain pills. He’d failed to make a payment to a bookie and gotten beaten up for it. I found out he gave my car to the bookie as a down payment on the debt.”

“I’m sorry you had such a crappy childhood.”

He shook his head. “I feel like an asshole. Your family was killed. You could have died out in the woods when you were little. I have a dad, I have actual family, and I stopped trying to help him years ago, and that makes me feel guilty.”

“I don’t think your dad really wants help, Adam. I think he wants a way to stave off the wolves so he can keep gambling. Giving him money wouldn’t do anything but make the problem worse.”

“I sure as hell don’t want my father anywhere near us.”

“Me either.”

“Good.” He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, the tension melting from his body. “Let’s put this behind us and concentrate on tonight.”

“You got it.”

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Richard Cruz swallowed hard as three vehicles swooped in on him just outside of Wilde Creek and forced him to the side of the road. The car in front of him stopped short, and thankfully the shitty brakes on his beater stopped him before he nailed the back of the expensive sedan.

His door opened before he could even turn the engine off, and a large male who smelled like a mixture of grizzly and wolf grabbed Richard by the collar and pulled him from the car. Richard crashed to the cold pavement, his hands scraping on the gravel as he tried to get to his feet. A boot connected with his stomach, and he flew a few feet before landing in a pile of snow. Coughing and groaning, he rolled to his knees and gripped his side. He wasn’t wearing a coat, and his jeans and shirt were threadbare.

A pair of shiny black shoes came into his field of vision. He knew who they belonged to: Bradik, a grizzly shifter and the enforcer of the loan shark Richard was currently in the shit with. Richard looked up to see Bradik tugging on the cuffs of his dress shirt. “Boss wants to know why you think you can just skip town whenever the fuck you feel like it.”

Hands gripped Richard’s shirt and hauled him onto his knees. He shook his head as his vision swam for a moment. “I was trying to get the money from my son.”

“A piece of shit like you actually bred? I’m surprised you could get a female to touch you,” Bradik said, chortling. The two males with him—one wolf and one grizzly—laughed loudly.

Richard scowled. His mate had been a good female. Her memory was the only thing that kept him from putting a gun in his mouth some days. But he knew better than to say anything to piss off Bradik. The guy had a hair trigger.

“You owe fifteen grand. You’ve got twenty-four hours to come up with the cash or we’re going to start breaking bones.”

Richard shuddered. He’d had bones broken before. They did it slow, letting the pressure grow until the bone shattered. It was excruciating. He didn’t want to go through that again. His mind spun as he struggled to come up with a way to get the cash he needed to pay the debt.

Suddenly he knew.

The female.

“Make sure he remembers what will come if he misses the deadline,” Bradik said. He turned away, and Richard shouted.

“Wait!”

Bradik faced him slowly. “Yeah?”

“I know a girl the boss can have.”

He snorted. “He has zero problems getting girls.”

“No! I mean, she’s a unique shifter. I heard that unique shifters are worth money on the black market.”

Bradik’s brows rose. “That depends on how unique she is.”

“Reindeer.”

The wolf at Richard’s side gave him a hard shake. “Reindeer rarely stray from their herds, and they stay under the radar. No one’s actually seen a reindeer herd before. Tight-knit doesn’t begin to describe their people.”

“She’s mated to my son. I scented what she is—reindeer smell like peppermint.”

Bradik lifted a cell to his ear and took a few steps away from the small group. He spoke in low tones, and Richard held his breath, hope filling him. It was gonna work. It *had* to work.

Bradik turned and said, “Give us the address and a description of the female. *If* it turns out she is a reindeer shifter and we’re able to take her, the boss said he’ll forgive your debt.”

Richard blew out a relieved breath and rattled off the description of the blonde female who was mated to his son, and Adam’s home address. He had no regrets. If Adam had helped him like a good son, he wouldn’t *have* to trade the girl for his own safety.

The wolf pulled Richard’s arm up and wrenched it out of the socket. Richard shrieked in agony as he fell to the ground, pain shooting through his body.

“You’re a shitty father,” the wolf said.

Richard gasped. “I never wanted a kid anyway.”

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Dani loved Honey. She was the nicest woman she’d ever met; gracious and kind, with a sweet laugh and a silly sense of humor.

“I think being a steward is kind of like being a doctor,” Honey said, spearing several glazed carrots on her plate.

“How so?” Dani asked. The meal was delicious. Jeremiah had smoked ribs all afternoon and shredded the meat, which Honey soaked in their homemade barbecue sauce and served along with three-cheese pasta, glazed carrots, and buttered rolls. Dani didn’t think she’d eaten so well in a long time.

“Well, we have to be on-call all the time, and the hours can be strange. Last night, Jer and I were salting sidewalks until one a.m.”

Jeremiah cleared his throat. “I offered to let you stay in bed, love.”

She rolled her eyes at him with a sweet smile. “It was more fun to be out with you, and then warm each other up when we were done.”

Adam squeezed Dani’s shoulder as Honey and Jeremiah stared at each other intensely. She looked at Adam and cupped his face. With a whisper she said, “Lucky.”

“I am,” he said gruffly.

“I meant me,” she said.

“We’re all lucky,” Jeremiah said. “Dade told me that fewer and fewer wolves are finding their truemates, but it seems that recently, at least in Wilde Creek, it’s happening a lot.”

“I wonder if there’s something in the water?” Honey asked, her eyes dancing.

“Or the timing is right,” Adam said. “No one had found a true mate for quite a while in the pack, and then Eveny and Luke got together, which led to Brynn and Acksel, then Malachi and Nila, and then you two,” he said, gesturing to Honey and Jeremiah.

“I think it’s supposed to be this way. My grandma used to say that wolves found their mates in groups and had babies close together because it was the way that nature ensured the next generation was close in age. Brynn, Nila, and Eveny are pregnant. I can’t wait for the fall heat,” Honey said.

Jeremiah growled lustfully and Dani smiled as Honey blushed. “What’s the fall heat?”

“It happens in September. All females who are twenty-five or older and aren’t nursing a pup go through a heat. It lasts about a week. A female can go through the heat with a male and not get pregnant if he uses condoms, but that makes it last longer.”

“Condoms make the heat last longer?”

“Because they prevent pregnancy. It’s like the body gets angry because it’s not being allowed to conceive, so it takes it out on the female,” Honey said.

“Sounds painful,” Dani said.

Honey shrugged. “We are what we were made to be. Do reindeer have anything like that?”

“Nope.” Dani was thankful that she didn’t go through a heat the way that Honey described. It sounded painful and unpleasant. She couldn’t imagine expecting that sort of thing every year. She wanted to ask Honey what she-wolves did when they didn’t have a mate to tend to their needs, but she had a feeling that Jeremiah wouldn’t like the answer, so she tabled the question for later when she and Adam were alone.

After the meal was over, Adam and Jeremiah shooed her and Honey into the family room while they got dessert ready. Honey excused herself to the bathroom, leaving Dani in the family room alone. She walked to the large window and pulled back the curtain. The world was dark, the partial moon obscured by clouds. She felt Adam before he joined her in the room, and turned to face him, expecting Jeremiah to be with him, but he was alone.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he said gruffly, stopping in front of the couch.

She went to him, clasping his outstretched hands. They were trembling, and she had just opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong when he dropped to one knee. Her eyes widened as he let go of her left hand and reached into the front pocket of his jeans.

“I wanted to do something amazing so we’d have a sweet story to tell our kids, but I realized, after what happened at the house earlier with my...with *him*, that a flashy story doesn’t make it mean more.” He pulled a ring from his pocket and held it in front of her left hand. His eyes never left hers as he very slowly pushed it onto the tip of her finger. She could feel the weight of the ring on her hand, and her heart began to pound as she waited what felt like an eternity before he continued to speak. “I never thought I’d have a mate, let alone find my true mate naked in the snow. You don’t look at me like I’m broken. I feel like I can do anything when you’re by my side. You’re already wearing my marks, but I want you to be mine in every way. Marry me, Dani. Be my mate and my bride.” He swallowed audibly and said, “I love you.”

Her eyes stung with tears at his heartfelt words. “Yes, I’ll marry you!” He pushed the ring the rest of the way onto her finger and stood, catching her in his arms and lifting her off the ground. “I love you, too. I think I’ve loved you since you crawled to me on your belly in the snow so I wouldn’t be afraid.”

He kissed her, and tears slipped down her cheeks as her eyes closed. “You’ve made me the happiest wolf,” he murmured against her lips. “Thank you for trusting me with our future. I swear to be the best mate and husband to you.”

“You’re already off to an excellent start,” she said, giggling. He put her down but didn’t let go, nuzzling the side of her throat and kissing her. She stretched her hand out and admired the ring. A garnet sat in the center of a white-and-yellow-gold band, flanked by tiny diamonds.

“I picked a garnet because the color is such a deep red that it reminded me of how intensely I feel about you.” He clasped her hand gently.

“I love it.” She pressed against his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I love you.”

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye and smiled as Honey and Jeremiah came into the room. “Congratulations,” Honey said, hugging her.

“Thank you,” Dani said as Jeremiah and Adam hugged briefly, patting each other on the back the way that men did. Then both males grabbed their mates.

“How about that dessert?” Jeremiah asked.

He and Adam disappeared into the kitchen and Honey said, “I know he just asked you, but I wanted to give you something to think about.”

“Okay.” Dani turned to face her.

“Jer and Adam are best friends. They’re like brothers, really. Neither of them had good family lives; Jer was ostracized by his parents because he wasn’t able to fully shift. I’d like to think of you as my sister, if that’s okay. I know you have Kammie as a real sister-in-law, but she’s not living here

anymore. I don't have any family except Jer, and I think we could all use people on our side, don't you?"

"I'd really like that," Dani said. "Is that what you wanted me to think about? Because I don't have to think about it—I'd love it."

Honey smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "No. I wanted you to consider us having a joint wedding."

"Really?"

"I don't know if you'd like to do that, but Jer and I were talking earlier about it, and I think it would be sweet. Think about it and let me know. It's okay if you don't want to, but I hope you do. When I was little, there were twin sisters in our pack who had a joint ceremony and I thought that was the neatest thing. I always wished I had a sister."

"Me too."

Jeremiah and Adam returned to the family room with a tray of walnut-studded brownies and coffee, and they all talked late into the evening. After saying goodbye, she and Adam headed home.

She leaned against his shoulder and rubbed her palm along the inside of his leg.

"Honey suggested we have a joint wedding."

"Jeremiah told me as much. What do you think?"

"I think it would be really neat."

"Eveny and Luke are getting married in March, and Malachi and Nila are getting married in April. Maybe May would be nice?"

"Sounds perfect. What do wolves do for bachelor parties?"

He wiggled his brows at her. "Hunting."

"I wonder if reindeer have any special mating customs. I wish there was a way I could just do an internet search and find out anything I wanted to know."

“Maybe someday that will happen, but as long as your people insist on staying off the radar then I’m afraid you only know what you know.”

“Bears go into a cave on their mating night, and then they mark each other on the bicep with their claws in the shape of a crescent. They do a lot of celebrations during the crescent moon.”

He hummed. “Wolves are all about the full moon.” He slipped an arm over her shoulders and hugged her a little closer. “We can make our own traditions. We’re already mated, but we can do something special that’s just for us when we’re married.”

“I’d like that.”

He turned off the truck and tipped her chin up. “You know I’d do anything for you. Whatever you want or need, it’s yours.”

“I feel like I’m dreaming sometimes. Like you’re too good to be true.”

“I feel that way sometimes, too. Fortunately we’re real.”

“I’m very glad about that.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Adam rolled his shoulders after dropping a load of firewood for Alfonse, one of the retirees, into the firebox on Alfonse's back porch. The older wolf grinned as he observed Adam. "Antsy, huh?"

"What?" Adam asked.

"You're acting twitchy. I would have said it was because it's the night of the full moon, but I have a feeling it's because of your beautiful mate," he said.

Adam chuckled. He'd been feeling like he could twitch out of his skin ever since he and Dani parted ways that morning. He and Jeremiah met with Dade and then began to deliver firewood, while Honey and Dani went to a craft store to buy yarn and run other errands for the retirees. He wished she was by his side, but he could admit that if he saw her right now, he'd probably throw her over his shoulder and carry her home so they could be alone.

"I'd say it's a little of both," he said.

"I remember what that felt like. It's a potent combination: a full moon and a truemate."

Adam agreed. Brushing the debris from his gloves, he said, "I'll take a look at the filter on the furnace before I go. Did you see the cookies Dani had me bring? They're on the counter."

Alfonse smiled. "I already ate two. She's a sweet kid, and you're a lucky guy."

“I never forget that.”

It felt like an eternity, but eventually Adam finished the wood hauling and met up with Jeremiah before heading home. Dani opened the front door. “It’s the full moon!” she said, doing a little dance and shaking her cute butt at him.

He ran up the sidewalk and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her into the house and kicking the door shut. “It sure is, sweetheart.”

“I can’t wait to be outside tonight.” She wrapped her legs around his waist and pushed at his coat until he was able to slide it off, one arm at a time, so he didn’t drop her. Her fingernails scraped lightly against the stubble on his cheeks. “I like this. Very sexy. My thighs are still tingling from when you woke me up this morning with your talented tongue.”

He grinned and nipped at her throat. “You smell so good in the morning, like melted peppermints.”

“I think you smell good, too. Especially when you’re turned on.”

He carried her into the bedroom, his thoughts on the short length of time before they had to arrive at the alphas’ for their joining ceremony. “We have to be quick.”

“Good thing I’m prepared,” she said as he laid her down on the bed and lifted her shirt, revealing that she wore nothing underneath.

Lowering his head to her bare stomach, he kissed her navel and inhaled her sweet scent. “Mine.”

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Dani was excited and anxious about going to the alphas’ home. Adam could feel her nerves as she walked up the sidewalk next to him. “What’s making you so worried?” he asked in a low voice.

“I wonder what will happen when your people realize I’m a reindeer.”

“I think most everyone knows. You’ve been here for a few weeks, and you’ve met a lot of pack members. Word travels fast.”

She hummed, but said nothing.

Before he opened the front door, he pulled her close. She hugged him back immediately, sighing as they melted together in the way he loved the most. “You’re mine. The pack might not allow you to become a true member, but as my mate you fall under the alphas’ protection. Besides that, sweetheart, I’d never let anyone hurt you.”

“I know you won’t. It’s just...wolves are predators. There’s still this tiny part of me that feels like I should be on guard, even though most of me feels perfectly safe.”

He hated that she’d suffered as a child. He couldn’t imagine the terror and loss she had dealt with. “I wish I’d met you years ago, Dani,” he said, tightening his hold on her. “I wish I’d been there for you when you were scared and sad.”

“You’re going to make me cry,” she said.

Chuckling, he tipped her face up and brushed the tears away. “I think we both wish a lot of things were different, but we are where we are in our lives because of what we endured. You’re my family now, and I wouldn’t change anything about my past if it meant I didn’t have you in my life.”

Fresh tears surged over her cheeks. “I’m so glad you’re mine, Adam Cruz.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anyone else’s,” he promised.

After wiping the new tears from her cheeks, he kissed her gently and then opened the door to the alphas’ home. For many years, he had been at Acksel’s beck and call. He’d never felt put-upon or mistreated by Acksel or the alpha before him, but he’d never really felt like part of the pack. He always imagined that the ranked males—the ones who became protectors and held valued positions within the pack—felt like the pack was home for them. Now, with Dani at his side and their shared jobs as stewards, he felt like he had finally found a place to belong. He wouldn’t have thought he could find joy in

repairing fences, chopping wood, and shoveling snow, but knowing that he and Dani were both working for the pack—that she would be with him during the day and waiting for him at home each night—made even the most mundane job enjoyable.

As he watched Dani hugging the females in the pack who had embraced her as one of their own already, he smiled to himself. Things finally seemed to be going his way.

“It’s about damn time,” Malachi Slattery said as he came to stand next to Adam.

“What is?”

“You finding your truemate. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

Malachi turned to face him. “I don’t know if I ever told you this, but thank you for everything you’ve done for the pack.”

Adam frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, being an omega shouldn’t mean that you don’t get thanked. Kammie leaving the pack for the bear sleuth has made a lot of us take a hard look at our behavior. Brynn was upset to lose her, and she’s afraid that the current laws will force more omegas away.”

“I appreciate your thanks. It’s funny how we get used to things being a certain way, isn’t it? There’s a lot of ‘it’s always been this way’ in pack life.”

Malachi chuckled ruefully. “Yeah. Nila worries about what will happen when Jack grows up. If he can’t completely shift, then even if he’s a total badass he’ll be an omega.”

A wolf and a human’s child might or might not be able to shift; it depended on whether the child took more after the wolf parent or the human parent. “I think that when Acksel and Brynn’s kids reach the age of maturity, there will be changes in the law. If a pack doesn’t evolve with the times, wolves leave for greener pastures, like Kammie did.”

“Congratulations on your mating, Adam.”

“Thanks.”

Adam joined Dani where she stood talking to Brynn. “Would you really? That would be so cool,” Brynn was saying.

“What would be?” Adam asked.

“I offered to make a big batch of gravy and bring it over in freezer containers so she could have it whenever she likes,” Dani told him, smiling up at him.

“Your mate is a sweetheart,” Brynn said. “I hope you know that I’m going to trade the gravy for my famous black walnut cookies.”

“Famous according to who?” Acksel said, his nose wrinkling.

Brynn elbowed him. “Just because you don’t like black walnuts doesn’t mean they’re not awesome.”

“I love them,” Dani said.

“See? It’s just your screwy taste buds. You don’t like mushrooms or pineapple, either.” Brynn said.

“I know what I *do* like to eat,” Acksel said gruffly. Brynn shivered visibly and then smacked him on the shoulder.

“Gross! We’ve got company.”

Dani tried to hide her laugh, but even Adam found it impossible not to chuckle at Acksel’s disgruntled look. He clearly didn’t appreciate Brynn thinking anything he did was gross.

Adam kissed Dani on the temple and said, “Ready to be my mate in truth?”

“I already am. This is just a formality.”

Fuck, he loved her.

“Right,” Acksel said, clearing his throat with a growl, “let’s get you two officially mated so we can get on with the night.” He grabbed Brynn and pulled her close, whispering in

her ear. Her cheeks reddened, and her eyes flashed with heat as she gripped his wrist and let out a soft sigh.

Dani smiled at Adam. “I bet he explained why ‘gross’ wasn’t a good word to use.”

“I’m sure he did.”

“Just for the record, I love everything you do to me. And I especially love that you let me sex you up whenever I want.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked as he stepped out onto the snow-covered back deck and slipped her coat from her shoulders. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Acksel and Brynn joined them, and the pack filtered into the backyard as the sun set and a deep chill settled into the air. Adam tossed his coat onto the railing with Dani’s.

Hollis, an elder of the pack, held a large leather-bound book in his hands. He stood between Acksel and Brynn on the deck, where flickering torches had been lit.

“On this night,” Hollis spoke in a loud, clear voice, “Adam Cruz brings Dani Grayson before the alphas, the elders, and the pack, to declare her as his mate. The laws of our people are clear: a wolf may claim a person who is not a wolf shifter as his or her mate, and that person is welcomed as an honorary member of the pack. If there are any among us who would disagree, speak now or remain silent forever.”

There was silence for a brief moment. Adam’s wolf was ready to bust heads if anyone had a problem with their mating. Not that he expected there to be issues. Wolves were generally happy for one of their own to find his or her truemate.

Acksel spoke. “As Alpha of the Wilde Creek Pack, I recognize Adam and Dani as truemates, and welcome Dani Grayson as an honorary pack member, under the authority of the alphas and the protection of the pack. I welcome Adam and Dani into the ranks of the stewards. Welcome to the pack.”

Acksel lifted his head and howled, and the pack joined in. Adam howled loud and long—his wolf celebrating that Dani was his mate in truth now, his forever to love and protect. As the pack voiced their approval, Adam pulled Dani into his

arms and kissed her. His wolf rolled under his skin, anxious to shift and run with her. “I’m yours, Dani. Good, bad, hell or high water. I’ll drag the moon from the sky if you ask.”

“I just want you.”

The pack dispersed, and Adam grabbed their coats. “Thanks for everything,” Adam told Brynn and Acksel, who were standing in a tight embrace on the deck.

“Make sure you take the day off tomorrow,” Brynn said. “It’s your mating night, and you deserve a little time to yourselves. The alpha said so.”

“She damn sure did,” Acksel said, grinning. “Take two days. Turn off the phones and shut the blinds. I’ll send some of the young males to meet with my dad and take over for you.”

“Thank you, that’s so nice!” Dani said. She tugged on Adam’s hand. “Let’s hurry. I can’t wait to play in the snow with you.”

They said goodbye to the mates who were staying in the alphas’ home while their wolves hunted with the pack, and hurried to the truck. He was anxious to shift, too. Even though he wasn’t going to do any hunting, he knew his wolf would be content to just be with his mate in their shifts.

“The backyard is calling, sweetheart.”

She smiled brightly. “I think if reindeer had fangs I’d be flashing them right now, I’m so happy.”

“I’m happy, too.”

“Are you sure you won’t mind not hunting?”

“Of course not. I want to be where you are. If I went out to hunt, I’d be worried about you.”

“I’m sure I’d be safe within the fence.”

He shook his head. “This isn’t a hardship for me, sweetheart. I always went off on my own anyway. That I can be with you in our shifted forms, even in our yard, is more than enough to make me happy.”

“Aw.”

He pulled his truck into the driveway and turned off the engine, getting out swiftly and joining Dani. The sun had set completely, and the full moon cast a pale glow on the world. They walked through the house and out onto the back porch, where they stood in silence for a brief moment, hands clasped and gazes locked together.

“I’m so fucking crazy about you,” he growled, hauling her close and lowering his mouth to her throat. The sweet peppermint scent of her surrounded him, exploding on his tongue as he licked her throat and touched the mating marks with his tongue. She shivered with a soft moan, her arms wrapping around him as their bodies connected.

“I’m crazy about you, too. Head over heels, send-me-to-the-nuthouse crazy.”

He chuckled. “Let’s shift, sweetheart.”

They separated just enough so they didn’t bump into each other as they stripped, after she took off her engagement ring and put it in the front pocket of her jeans. Because he’d been there when she got dressed earlier, he knew she wasn’t wearing anything under her sweater and jeans. Her beautiful body was bared to him, the moon highlighting the curves he knew intimately.

“I love when you look at me like that,” she said huskily.

“How?” he asked as he draped his clothes over a chair next to hers.

“Like you could eat me up.”

He glanced toward the house. “I could.”

“Hold that thought until later.” She chuckled and touched his face, going up on her toes and kissing him. “Love you.”

“I love you, too, Dani.”

Hands clasped together, they walked out into the snowy backyard and shifted. He’d only ever seen wolves shift, so watching his beautiful mate turn into a reindeer captivated him. She was beautiful, with a pretty brownish-gray hide

dotted with paler patches of white. Her nose looked like it had been dipped in white paint.

He stretched to warm up his muscles. Dani watched him intently, steam billowing from her nostrils. He shifted as soon as he was able to, his muscles burning as they normally did, but he wasn't burdened by them anymore. He'd found acceptance with his mate. He'd stopped looking at his scars as a liability their first night together, when Dani had kissed them tenderly. He knew she didn't see him as an injured male, and he had decided to stop looking at himself that way, too.

He pawed the ground as he stretched, his claws digging into the snow and cold earth as his tail snapped back and forth. He lifted his muzzle and scented the air, loving the way the night smelled on the full moon. Among the scents of trees, snow, and frozen ground was the sweet peppermint of his mate, which was his very favorite scent.

Dani nudged him gently with one horn, scratching his fur with the blunt tips. If he could have, he would've smiled as she hopped away suddenly, the snow fluffing up around her. He chased after her as she tore around the yard. She tried to hide behind a shrub, her head bowed and her haunches in the air, as if he wouldn't be able to see her. He chuffed at her and she peeked around the shrub, her ears twitching and her eyes glimmering with happiness.

He flicked his tail at her and bounded off in the opposite direction. She gave chase, her long legs eating up the distance between them. He'd never been happier.

Suddenly Dani made a soft, pained sound and Adam spun and rushed to her side. She swayed, shaking her head and trying to remain upright. He could see a feather-tipped dart sticking out from her neck and he growled in alarm.

Something whizzed by him, and he felt a stinging pain as his skin was grazed. He looked to see a second feather-tipped dart embed in the side of the house. He spun with a growl toward the sound of feet hitting the ground. His vision swam and he heard Dani fall to the ground with a thud. Baring his teeth, he struggled to remain upright, but his paws began to

tingle and paralysis swept quickly through him. He felt himself fall into the snow, and saw four figures racing through the yard to them. Inhaling deeply, he found the intruders to be humans and shifters, smelling of cigarettes and whiskey. Then his brain shut down and everything turned black.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Dani woke to tingling in her limbs and a metallic taste in her mouth. Her vision was blurry, but it sharpened as she blinked. She was still in her shifted form. A heavy collar sat around her neck; she could feel spikes digging into her throat, and knew it was meant to keep her from shifting back to human.

A man she didn't recognize squatted down in front of her. The man had a thick scar along his cheek, and he reeked of cigarette smoke and booze. "The collar will hurt you if you try to shift. You seem like a smart girl, so you probably figured that out already."

Another male voice said, "I can't get her into the harness while she's lying down."

"I don't think her legs are working right," the scarred man said.

The other man grunted and then kicked her. She bellowed, her legs unable to move more than a few pathetic times because of whatever they had used to drug her.

"See?" the scarred man said.

They left her alone. She moved her head as much as she could to see her surroundings. She was in what looked to be a horse stall in a large barn. A wooden gate enclosed her stall, and through the slats she could see antlers moving around and heard curious noises. She tried to move, but her legs were still numb. Dropping her head to the straw-covered floor, she closed her eyes and thought about Adam. It had happened so

fast. They'd been playing in the snow, and then something had hit her and she'd passed out. She didn't know if Adam was okay or if he'd been hurt. Worry over her mate made her struggle to get to her feet, despite her wooziness and the painful sensation in her legs. Her head spun as she struggled to her knees and pushed herself up by leaning against the rough wooden wall.

Panting for breath, she shook her head and waited for the spots in her vision to clear. She tried to put all of her weight on her legs, but her knees buckled, so she leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes, willing her body to force whatever drugs she'd been given out. The sooner she was able to stand, the sooner she could figure out a way to escape. She might be stuck in her shift, but she sure as hell wasn't sticking around.

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Adam swam out from under the drugs by sheer force of will. His wolf had been snarling for what felt like hours, angry that they were paralyzed while their mate had been taken. As his vision returned and the paralysis left his body, he began to howl for help. He couldn't move yet, but his voice worked, and he made as much noise as he could, hoping that his pack members would hear him and come help.

After an eternity of anxious waiting, he heard someone come into his house and race to the back, throwing open the door.

“Fuck, what happened? Where's Dani?” Malachi demanded. He looked around, his eyes darting as he took in the scene. Wolves surrounded them, scenting the air and growling.

Adam snarled, wishing he could shift into his human form so he could talk.

Malachi put his hand on Adam's head and said to Zander, one of the protectors, “Go find Doc and get him the fuck here right now.” He turned his attention back to Adam. “I smell humans and shifters. They took Dani?”

Adam nodded.

“Damn it,” he growled. Pulling his cell from his pocket, he dialed it and said, “Luke, tell Brynn to go out onto the porch and yell for Acksel. Dani’s been kidnapped, and Acksel always stays close to the house. I need him at Adam’s right away.”

Ending the call, Malachi said, “We’ll get her back, man.”

Adam struggled against the drugs in his system. He could barely lift his head from the ground. Worry for Dani’s safety was driving him insane, his wolf clawing at him to find her.

Doc, the pack doctor, appeared and knelt in the snow in front of Adam. Malachi had searched the area and found the feathered dart, similar to the one that had hit Dani, embedded in the side of the house. “I think he was hit with this.”

Doc sniffed at the dart and wrinkled his nose. “Uh, no. He wasn’t hit or he’d be dead. I recognize this drug. It shuts down the body—first paralyzing the muscles and then spreading quickly organ by organ until the recipient dies.”

“Where do you know it from?” Malachi asked.

“When I was in college, I took a course on how to recognize toxins, and this stood out as one that has no remedy because it works so fast.” He searched through Adam’s fur. When Adam winced as his fingers grazed his shoulder, Doc said, “Here, there’s a scratch. Whoever shot him must have thought they hit him straight-on and that he was as good as dead. He was very fortunate.”

“Since he didn’t get the full dose, can you counteract it?”

“Maybe,” Doc said, opening his medical bag and moving objects around within it. Adam heard glass bottles tinkling and plastic crinkling. Then Doc lifted a small vial and a syringe. He filled the syringe with a green-tinted liquid, spread the fur on Adam’s foreleg, and sank the needle into his flesh. The liquid burned as it was pushed into his body, but almost immediately he felt the drug within him begin to dissipate.

“Ah, what do you know? It seems to alleviate the symptoms. Give yourself a few minutes, Adam.”

“The fuck he’s going to do that, Doc. His mate is missing.”

“Shit.”

Malachi nodded.

By the time Acksel arrived with Ren and Sam, the beta and theto of the pack, Adam had shifted into his human form and dressed. He grabbed the engagement ring from Dani’s pocket and put it on his pinky finger. Having the piece of jewelry on him made him feel a little closer to her.

He led Acksel and the others to the outside of the fence and followed the scent of the males and Dani. There was little breeze now, so their scent was easy to track until they reached the road. Depressions in the snow and mud at the side of the road told them that there had been two vehicles waiting.

“How did the protectors miss this?” Acksel demanded. “There were two vehicles in our territory at the fucking edge of the woods and no one saw a damn thing?”

Adam wondered the same thing. Letting loose a growl, he thought over what had happened and if he’d seen anything that should have been a clue that things were about to go to shit.

Just as he thought the word ‘shit’ he realized what must have happened. “My dad.”

“What about your dad?” Acksel asked.

“I think he’s behind it. He came to us a while ago and asked for money. I turned him down, but he was pretty desperate.”

“Check your cell. Do you have a ransom demand?” Ren asked.

Adam looked at his phone, but there was no activity since Dani had been taken.

“What if it’s not about *who* Dani is, but what she is?” Sam asked.

“What do you mean?” Adam asked, unease rising within him.

“She’s a reindeer. You said that she’s unique because her people are nomads and stay off the radar. What if someone would pay for her because she’s a reindeer shifter?”

Acksel growled darkly. “We need to reach out to the police and find out if they know of any groups in the area who might be inclined to traffic in shifters.”

“A better idea is to find my dad and figure out what the hell he did to my mate,” Adam growled.

“Let’s find your dad and ask him a few questions.” Acksel cracked his knuckles, and the males around him readied to leave. Adam was grateful for his pack’s help.

“Thank you,” he said, emotion welling inside him.

Acksel shook his head. “Thank me when she’s safe. This is what the pack does. Rank doesn’t matter when lives are on the line.”

Vehicles appeared in front of the house as Adam dialed his grandmother’s number. He hadn’t spoken to her in years. After his dad had run down to their pack to escape the bookies, Adam had declined to continue being a part of their family. They had always given into his dad’s whims and bailed him out when he was in trouble. He wasn’t sure why he thought they’d help him, but it was worth a try for Dani’s sake.

“Grandma, it’s Adam. I need your help.”

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Dani kicked at the gate to the stall. It rattled on its hinges but didn’t open. She kicked again and again, until her hoof broke one of the slats and her skin scraped on the jagged pieces. She winced, extracting her foot and scenting blood. Hours had passed since she’d woken. Whatever drugs had been in her system had taken ages to leave. She wasn’t sure where she was or how long she’d been gone, but she could see sunlight around the edges of the barn door.

The other stalls were empty, except for one reindeer who met Dani’s gaze and subtly shook its head. She didn’t know if

the reindeer was a shifter or if she'd imagined the head-shake, but real or imagined, she decided to take its advice and settle down.

The barn doors opened and two men strode in. One of them carried a harness.

"What's this?" the first one asked, bending over and picking up the broken slat. He gave her a dark look, and she recognized his voice as belonging to the man who'd kicked her when she was paralyzed. "Feeling feisty, bitch? Maybe you need another dose of drugs."

"She's not going anywhere," the scarred man said, hefting the harness over the wall of the stall and dropping it to the straw. He reached over the wall and grabbed the collar around her neck, jerking her forward. The metal spikes dug into her flesh, and she screamed, the sound coming out like a bellow. "The collar is electric. If you leave the barn, you'll be shocked so badly your skin will burn and it will knock you out." He pulled her forward roughly until his lips were by her ears. "You will do as I say or you will suffer. The buyers don't want you harmed, but I'll do what I have to do to get you to them."

He released her with a shove, and she stumbled back a few steps. "You're not going to give us anymore problems, are you?" the other man asked as he put his hand on the gate.

She shook her head and lowered it. She'd have to think of something else. If the collar was a shock collar, than maybe she could find a way to disable it. Her mind spun with possibilities as the gate opened, just far enough for the man to enter, and swung shut with a clang behind him. He buckled the harness on her, strapping it tightly around her torso until she made a pained sound. He chuckled, slapped her on the rump and said, "Be nice and I'll give you a carrot."

"Is that what you call your dick now?" the scarred one asked as he let the other man out of the stall.

"Fuck you."

"We'll be back in ten minutes to put you in the truck. Try anything funny and we'll find out how loud reindeer can

scream when they're being tortured," the scarred man said. Dani had no doubt from the hard look in his eyes that he knew exactly what reindeer sounded like when they were hurt, because he'd done it before and would do it again.

The harness was uncomfortably tight. Dani rubbed against the wall of her stall, trying to dislodge the buckle, but it didn't budge. She tried to grab the collar with her teeth, but it was too far up her throat for her to even touch the edge of it. The ten minutes slipped by quickly, and at the end of them the back of the barn opened, two huge doors swinging outward. A beeping noise sounded as a horse trailer backed up into the barn and stopped. Seven men came into the barn from the front doors. Two had cattle prods, and moved to stand at either end of the barn where the doors were. One moved to the stall with the reindeer who had shaken its head at Dani, and pulled it out, leading it to the trailer.

Richard Cruz stopped in front of Dani's stall. His eyes were bloodshot, and the whiskey and body odor scent of him was almost enough to make her throw up. He was holding one shoulder as if it was injured.

He sniffed. "If your mate had given me money when I asked, you wouldn't be here. This isn't my fault, it's his."

Dani lunged, snapping her teeth at Richard and nearly taking his nose off. He stumbled back with a shout, falling to the ground and scrambling away as the others laughed at him.

"She's crazy," Richard said, climbing slowly to his feet.

"They all are at first. She'll settle down," the scarred one said. "If she doesn't, there are drugs that will settle her down just fine."

Another man moved in front of Dani and hooked a lead onto her bridle. He opened the gate and gave a hard tug on the lead, and she followed him out of the stall, toward the trailer. As she was led to the trailer, she watched as the other reindeer, wearing a collar similar to Dani's, was pushed up a ramp into it.

Dani inhaled quietly, sorting through the scents around her and picking up a sweet burst of peppermint that told her the other reindeer was a shifter. The reindeer was small like her, so she figured she must be a female or a young male. She'd seen pictures of bucks, and they were normally quite big. Dani wanted to cry. She'd finally met another reindeer, and it was because they were both being kept prisoner.

The lights went out suddenly, plunging the barn into complete darkness. The men shouted, and there was a rush of wind as people moved around her. The man holding her lead made a pained sound, followed by a thud. Dani scented the air and found the smell of peppermint was much stronger now.

Screams and shouts surrounded her. Dani kept perfectly still, afraid to move in case she got in the way. The peppermint scent had to mean more reindeer. But how had they found her?

She stood frozen for what felt like an eternity until the lights came on. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the brightness and found herself in the company of a dozen males, all wearing black. They were huge, tall and broad, wearing tactical gear with weapons strapped to their bodies.

In front of her, a large male stood in the trailer and carefully undid the collar around the reindeer's neck, speaking softly. He met Dani's gaze, his eyes glistening with tears.

"I think she's one of us," a male said as he came to stand in front of Dani. "The collar's like Tesli's."

"Get it the fuck off her," the male said gruffly as he threw the collar away and the reindeer began to shift. He removed his vest and shirt, covering the shifting woman.

Dani really did want to cry now as the male in front of her undid the collar. It tightened only briefly before loosening completely, and he carefully lifted it from her. She was so happy she could have jumped for joy, but she wanted to shift and find a phone so she could call Adam. She hoped he was okay. She didn't know what she'd do if he was hurt...or worse. Shoving those dark thoughts away from her mind, she waited until the harness was off her and then let go of her shift.

A warm shirt was laid over her shoulders as she crouched on the ground, and she looked up at the male who had unhooked her collar. “Thank you.”

She saw a large tattoo of a reindeer over his pec and an oval symbol on his left bicep. He offered her his hand and she took it, standing slowly and slipping her arms into the shirt so she could cover herself completely.

“What’s your name?” he asked, his brows drawn.

“Dancer.”

“Are you kidding me? Who named you after one of the myths?” another male asked, coming to stand next to the one who had helped her.

“My parents,” she said, frowning. “My herd was killed by natural coyotes when I was a child. I was taken in by a bear sleuth and raised. My adopted name is Grayson, but my real last name is Hayvlin.”

The male who had helped the other female growled. “All this reclusive bullshit is why our people are dying out.”

“Now is *not* the time,” the man nearest her said. “My name is Trey, Dancer. Our leader is outside closing this fucking place down for good. Is there someone you can call, or are you alone?”

“I have a mate,” she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

He smiled and took his phone out of a vest pocket. “Here you go. Tell him that we’ll stay with you until he comes. We’re in Crowley. Where do you live with your mate?”

“Wilde Creek.”

One of the males whistled. “That’s about two hours from here. How the hell did you get here?”

“I was kidnapped. They drugged me when I was in our backyard; I have no idea why they took me.”

“We’ll find out from these scumbags for sure, but it’s our belief that our sister and you were taken because reindeer are unique—especially females, who are born less frequently than

males. There are evil people in this world who would kidnap and sell a female reindeer to any number of sick weirdoes out there.”

She shivered at the thought of being sold off because she was a reindeer, and dialed Adam’s cell. She stared at the center of the barn, where most of the kidnappers who had been putting her and Tesli into the trailer were piled on top of each other, bloody and unmoving. “Are they dead?” she asked Trey.

“Yeah. There is one human who is still alive, so we can get answers from him.”

“Good.” She could see Adam’s dad among the dead. She turned her back on the scene when Adam’s voice came over the line. She was so relieved to hear his voice that she started to cry.

“Dani? Dani! Are you okay?” he demanded, his voice a low growl.

She tried to answer, but she couldn’t stop crying. Trey took the phone from her and said, “My name is Trey Parks. My herd rescued Dani from the Little Lambs Petting Zoo in Crowley. She’s safe, and we’re securing the park. How soon can you get here?”

Adam answered as Dani struggled to get her emotions under control.

“Okay. Yes, she’s okay. We found her when we were searching for our king’s sister. We’ll keep her safe until you’re here.”

Trey held out the phone to Dani and she accepted it, taking a few deep breaths and trying to calm down. “Adam?”

“Sweetheart, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Are you okay?”

“Don’t worry about me. We’ll be there in less than two hours. Hold tight.”

“Hurry,” she said. She clutched the phone, her knuckles cracking with the pressure.

“I will,” he promised.

The call ended, and she forced herself to let go of the phone. “Thank you.”

Tesli came over, her arm around the waist of the male who had set her free. “This is my brother, Liam. Are you hurt? Do you need medical attention?”

“I’m okay.” She looked at the male with his arm around Tesli. “You’re the king of the herd?”

“I’m his younger brother. Dragos is outside securing the park. The owners are about to lose their investment in this fucking place.”

“You curse too much,” Tesli said.

He kissed the top of her head. “Can’t help it. I’m happy to have my baby sister back.” He eyed Dani. “Did I hear right? Were you really orphaned as a kid?”

She nodded. “My adopted mom kept trying to find a herd. It wasn’t until recently that she actually found one, through a private detective. I was on the way to meet them when I found my truemate.”

“Wilde Creek is wolf territory, so I’m guessing your mate’s a wolf?” Liam asked.

Dani bristled. “Yes. Is that a problem?”

“Whoa, calm down, Dancer, it’s fine. Finding a mate is a good thing, regardless of whether they shift or not, or what they shift into.”

A hush fell over the barn as a huge male walked inside. He wore the same black military garb as the others, but he clearly was an important male.

“Tes,” he said as she ran to him and he folded her into his embrace. “Are you well?”

“I am now. How long was I gone? The days and nights blended together, and they kept me drugged up for what felt like a long time.”

“Nearly a week. Last night we caught a break in the search. Did they...harm you?”

“No,” she said. “They kept me in my shift and made me wear a really nasty collar that kept me from shifting into my human form. Remember when we were kids and Mom and Dad talked about microchipping us in case we were ever kidnapped? I vote we do that now.”

Dragos smiled. “Whatever my sister wants.” He looked at Dani. “I’m Dragos, king of the herd. I understand you’re waiting for your mate. How long have you been here?”

“They came for me on the full moon, I think that was just last night.”

“It was,” he said. “Let’s get you the fuck out of the barn. My men will find out what the human has to say about your kidnappings. I think we can find some clothes in the storage unit, and we’ll wait for your mate in the main office.”

“Let me carry you,” Trey offered. “You’re barefoot and it’s freezing.”

Dani accepted. Trey lifted her into his arms and carried her, falling into step behind Dragos, who carried his sister, and the other males. After stopping in the storage building and donning janitorial uniforms with cartoon lambs on the back, they sat down in the main office and waited for Adam.

She watched out the window and saw a lot of males dressed all in black, carrying buckets back and forth between all the buildings.

“What are they doing?” she asked, turning to look at Liam and Dragos who were sitting on top of a metal desk.

Liam said, “They’re soaking the buildings with accelerant. It will ensure that the bodies left behind are difficult to identify.”

A reindeer male walked into the office, introduced himself as Rell, and then turned to Dragos. “This place hasn’t been in operation for years, but according to the human, a local mob run by shifters used the barn to hold abducted shifters until buyers were located. They were going to sell Tesli to become a

sex slave out of the country. They were on the way to pick her up when they were told about Dani. They held off on Tesli's sale for her."

"Shit," Tesli said. "If you hadn't been spotted I would have been gone."

Dragos growled. "It's shameful what sick minds will do."

Rell asked, "Do you know who took you?"

"No. I have no idea who they were. My mate's dad was among the dead. He said that I was here because he needed money, so I guess he knew whoever these kidnappers were."

"They're dead now, but make sure your mate knows to keep an extra eye out for you just to be safe. Scumbags like these tend to have friends in low places," Liam said.

Turning her attention back to the window, she watched as three of the reindeer males carried containers of accelerant toward the barn. She rubbed at the space between her eyes, her mind slipping back to the past without her consent.

*She'd been sitting by the bonfire in front of her family's tent with her aunt, trying to stay awake until her family returned with the herd. They'd gone foraging in their shifted form. The sun was starting to set, and everyone was supposed to be back before full dark. It was dangerous for reindeer to be in their shift after nightfall. Their vision wasn't as sharp in the dark as a predator's and they could easily miss a wolf or mountain lion stalking them. She wasn't old enough to shift yet, but she looked forward to spending the time with her family out in the woods.*

*She'd turned to her aunt to ask if she could have another cup of hot chocolate when the unmistakable sound of coyotes howling echoed around them. Her aunt leaped to her feet, her eyes wildly scanning the area as she pulled Dani to her feet and shoved her behind her.*

*Coyotes stalked through the trees toward them. Her aunt lifted Dani in the air toward a high branch and she grabbed hold of it and pulled herself up just as the coyotes attacked. Her aunt tried to shift to protect herself, but the coyotes*

*chased her into the swiftly falling darkness. She'd tried to block out the sound of her aunt's screams by covering her ears, but that hadn't stopped it. She stayed perched on the branch with her arms clinging to the trunk until the sun rose. The coyotes had come back and circled the tree for a while. She'd stared down at them, and knew she was looking at natural coyotes and not shifters. After what felt like ages, a loud howl broke through the air, and they slunk back into the trees. She thought perhaps their leader was calling them home.*

*She'd waited on the branch until she almost fell off as exhaustion tried to claim her. After climbing down, she'd found the herd's belongings destroyed by claws and fangs. She thought the coyotes were probably looking for food, but that hadn't made anything about the situation easier. She took refuge in one of the tents and stayed for a few days, and then she salvaged what she could—some food, clothes, a blanket—and began to walk. As she wandered through the woods, she scented the metallic peppermint of her people's blood and knew she'd hit the killing ground. Her people had fallen here, including her mother and father. The herd was small, only fourteen, and she was the only child not old enough to shift.*

*Days later, after the food ran out and she was exhausted and sore from sleeping in trees and worrying about predators, she stumbled right into a group of bears. They were enormous, with big black claws and huge fangs. She'd thought she would die right there, after surviving the killing spree of the coyotes and managing to walk who-knew-how-far on her own. She'd dropped to the ground, too tired to flee or put up a fight. Someone picked her up, and she blinked weary eyes at the man who held her. It was the bear king, who took her to his wife, Glory, who took her to Alice, the woman Dani would come to think of as her mother. Alice had loved her from that moment, even though she'd tried for years to find any link to Dani's family. Reindeer, however, never used human-run hospitals or doctors, or dealt with the government—there was no record of Dani's birth or her parents. She was a ghost and an orphan, until Alice adopted her, and Row had promised to be the best big brother to her.*

“Are you okay, Dancer?” Tesli asked, putting a gentle hand on Dani’s shoulder.

“You can call me Dani, and yeah. I was just thinking about my herd.” She touched her cheeks and found them wet with tears she hadn’t realized she’d been crying.

Tesli sat down. “Herds are nomadic by nature. I think it’s an instinct thing from our natural ancestors, you know? Like how birds fly south for the winter.”

“We’re technically winter animals,” Liam pointed out.

She snorted. “We’re nomads like our ancestors, but now we drive RVs and caravan like circus people.”

Liam’s brow arched. “Seriously? Did you just compare us to circus people?”

“Or gypsies. Is there such a thing as circus gypsies?” Tesli asked, her voice teasing and her eyes glittering with mischief.

“Good grief,” Dragos said.

“My mate fenced in our yard and said he’d plant willow trees for me. I think you can have safety and freedom at the same time.”

Dragos’s dark brow arched. “I don’t have to remind you that you said you were stolen from your own backyard.” He gestured to his outfit. He looked ready to go to war. “We train from youth to be fighters. Nothing is more precious to us than our herd and our family. I can fight in my shift as well as my human form. Our horns and hooves are deadly.”

“You can’t fight against drug-laced darts or guns,” Dani pointed out.

His lips tightened in a frown, and Dani wondered if she’d crossed a line. He blew out a sharp breath and said, “You’re right. Tesli was stolen from us when she was grocery shopping. Her guard was nearly killed trying to protect her.” He looked over her head out the window, his eyes focusing sharply on the movement of the males outside.

“Why are reindeer nomadic?” She rubbed at her arms to stave off the chill she felt. It wasn’t that it was cold in the

office, it was that she found herself feeling like that little girl lost out in the woods again, and she couldn't shake it. She needed Adam. She wanted him there so she could make sure he was okay, but also so she could stick herself to his side with industrial strength adhesive.

"It's the way things have always been," Dragos said.

"Even a devastating change like the death of my herd and my family can bring about something wonderful as time passes. Without being adopted by the bears, I might never have found my truemate. It was painful to lose my family." She stopped for a long moment, watching the males carry more accelerant, dousing the buildings inside and out. "I wouldn't wish that pain on my worst enemy. But I love my mate, and I'm blessed to have him in my life."

Dragos smiled at her when she looked over her shoulder at him. "You're very sweet."

"You probably think I'm naïve."

He shrugged. "You know about love. I know about war. I've been fighting my whole life to keep the herd safe. It's tempting for me to want what you have with your mate—a place to call home that is never changing—but I still fear it's too dangerous for us."

"I wonder if there are orphans like me out there in the world, with no way to contact herds for help."

Liam said, "That's not a bad idea."

"What isn't?" Tesli asked.

"Having a website. I need to think about it a little more, but we should have a way for our people to keep in contact with each other. We have no clue how many reindeer there even are in the States, because none of the herds keep in touch with each other. If we'd been available before, your bear family would have found us and we could have helped."

"None of us should have to be alone," Tesli said.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Adam couldn't stop his constant, rumbling growling. His wolf was agitated and prowling. He believed that Dani was safe with the reindeer, but he wouldn't feel remotely at ease until he held her in his arms and was sure that she was okay. His knuckles popped as he clenched his fists together.

"She's safe. That's what you need to focus on right now," Acksel said, turning from the passenger seat of the SUV and looking at Adam.

"I know," Adam bit out.

Jeremiah, who was sitting next to Adam, put his hand on his shoulder, but said nothing. Adam closed his eyes and ran his thumb along the underside of the engagement ring that was still on his pinky finger. It helped him feel a little connected to her in spite of the circumstances, as if he could touch her through the metal.

"We're going to make changes to ensure Dani's safety. We'll do whatever we need to so you both can rest easy. I've already called my partner Lucian, and he's coming in to help me set up safety protocols for your property," Malachi said.

Adam didn't know much about Malachi's human partner except that he worked for the military. He wasn't even sure he'd ever seen the male around town. Adam sighed as he thought about security cameras on the fence, and perimeter alarms, and who knew what else Malachi and Lucian would suggest. He didn't want Dani to feel like she was living in a prison, constantly monitored and fearful.

“I can see where your train of thought is going and you need to put the brakes on. Dani’s safety is paramount to anything else now.” Acksel said. “Do you think I enjoyed knowing that Brynn was tortured because of me? That I couldn’t keep her safe?”

“Nila was taken right in front of me,” Malachi said.

“Honey and I were both kidnapped and nearly killed,” Jeremiah said.

Acksel shook his head. “I never realized how many of our mates have been hurt because of their association with us.” He blew out a breath. “But the important thing is that Dani’s safe. *All* our mates are. Wounds heal, memories fade, bad guys get dead. That you can hold Dani in your arms is what you need to focus on.”

“I might kill my father,” Adam said. The words popped out of his mouth before he could censor them.

“We’ll cross that bridge with you when you come to it. You’re not alone here, Adam; the whole pack is behind you. Mates are precious and to be protected at all costs. What your father did is inexcusable.”

Adam turned his attention to the window and watched as the scenery blurred by. Dani had been away from him for hours. His arms actually ached to hold her, to touch her soft skin and look into her beautiful blue eyes. She’d become an integral part of his life so quickly, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to survive if something happened to her.

It felt like an eternity before he finally saw the sign for Little Lambs Petting Zoo in the distance. The entrance had been blocked off by several vehicles, and large males wearing ill-fitting Little Lambs security uniforms stood in front of the vehicles.

Acksel rolled his window down. “We’re here for Dancer.”

One of the males pressed a communication device in his ear and said, “The wolves are here, Sire.” After a brief moment, he gestured to the left and said, “Park there and we’ll escort you inside.”

Adam's heart was pounding as they pulled into the parking lot and got out, following the males through the gates and into the park. Under any other circumstances, Adam might have been amused by the cheerful decorations, but all he could think about was that his father had engineered all of this to pay a debt.

Earlier, when he'd gotten his grandmother on the phone, he'd been surprised by her response.

"I was expecting to hear from you," she said.

"You were?"

"Your father came here a few days ago and he was pretty beat up. He wouldn't tell us who did it, but we can guess." She sighed deeply, the sound of a mother wondering where she'd gone wrong.

"I believe he had my mate drugged and kidnapped," Adam said, a vice squeezing his chest as he wondered what Dani was going through. "I need to find him so I can find her."

"Oh, Adam, I'm so sorry." She sounded genuinely upset, but Adam couldn't think past how they'd enabled his dad to be such a mess for such a long time.

There was the sound of the phone being covered, some whispered conversation, and then she said, "I'm texting you the address of our car."

"What?" He shook his head, wondering if he'd heard wrong.

"A few months ago, your dad gave our car to some lowlife to get out of getting his legs broken for a bad bet. Your grandfather got a locator installed when we got it back after paying off the debt. It disappeared last night. We were hoping he would bring it home today, but so far he hasn't. It's in Crowley." There was a brief pause, and she said, "I know you think that we screwed up with your dad, and you took the brunt of the fallout. I know we failed you as grandparents, but there's just something about having your only child crying and pleading for his life that we couldn't ignore."

Adam's lip curled, and his wolf rumbled in anger. "If my mate's hurt..."

"Just don't leave us in the dark, whatever happens," she said, her voice cracking with emotion. "I'm sorry for all you suffered, Adam. I hope you get your mate back, and I hope that someday you can forgive us."

The snow crunched under his boots, bringing him back to the present. It was easy to blame his grandparents for the current situation, for his shitty childhood and the bad luck of the draw he'd gotten in his dad, but the truth was that he'd failed Dani. It was all on him that someone had drugged her in their own damn backyard and he didn't know if he'd ever get over the sight of her falling to the ground, helpless.

A door creaked, and Adam saw Dani as she raced toward him, calling his name.

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Dani thought Adam would never arrive. Time seemed to slow to a snail's pace as she stared through the window toward the gate. After the reindeer were finished dousing every building with accelerant, they changed into security uniforms they'd found and stood at the barred front gates to deter anyone who happened by.

She saw the gate open and the uniformed guards walk through with a small group, and she knew it was Adam and the pack. Without a word, she opened the door and rushed outside. The scent of gasoline hit her full force; the air was saturated with it. Her eyes watered, but she ignored the sting and screamed Adam's name.

He broke through the group of wolves and raced to her. They met, arms immediately wrapping around each other and lips pressing together. She couldn't stop the tears that fell from her closed eyes as Adam held her tight, a growl rumbling in his chest.

He cupped her cheek, his eyes the bright amber of his beast. "Are you hurt?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked at the tears that obscured her vision. “No. Are you?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“Can’t help it.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “It was my dad. He gave you up to get out of a debt.”

“I know. He’s here, in the barn.” She burrowed against him, opening his coat and sliding her arms around him.

He went very still, and she lifted her head and peered at him. His face was stony, but his eyes were blazing the amber of his wolf. “Is he alive?”

“No.”

His arms tightened around her and his expression darkened. “We were on the way here when you called. My grandparents had put a tracker on their car, and my dad took it.”

Releasing his hold on her with one arm, he traced her jaw with trembling fingers. “I was scared out of my mind, sweetheart.”

That made the tears spring back. “Me too.”

He kissed the tears from her cheeks and hugged her close. She could have stood there forever, but she knew they needed to leave.

A throat cleared and she lifted her head. “You must be Adam,” Liam said.

“You helped my mate?” Adam’s arms tightened around her a fraction.

“We were looking for our sister Tesli, and found her with Dani.”

“Where are the people who were running this place?”

Liam’s eyes narrowed slightly, but then he nodded. “They’re in the main barn. We waited until you arrived, but we’re planning to torch this place. Before we killed him, one

of the humans who was instrumental in both Tesli's and Dani's abductions told us that this place is no longer in use, and their gang took it over as a way-station for abducted shifters."

Adam frowned. "Why were they abducting shifters?"

"From what we were told, it was a new venture. They were looking for rare shifters to sell at an underground auction. Whether they would have become brides or sex slaves or who the hell knows what else isn't certain, but we were very close to losing Tesli forever."

She pushed against Adam's weight when he moved to release her. "What are you doing?"

"I need to see my dad."

"He's not alive," she reminded him in a low voice.

He stared at her for a long moment and said, "I still need to see."

She rose onto her toes and kissed him, his fangs pressing against her lips as he growled, his chest heaving with emotion. "Go see. I'll stay with the pack."

"Jeremiah!" Adam barked. His friend joined them, and Adam said, "Keep her safe."

With a final glance at Dani, Adam followed Liam toward the barn where she'd been kept captive. Acksel joined them, and Malachi came over to stand with her and Jeremiah while the two uniformed guards went back outside the gate.

"It hasn't even been twelve hours," she said.

"Feels like an eternity, doesn't it?" Jeremiah asked. "When Honey and I were kidnapped, time felt like it slowed to a crawl. It felt like days, but it had only been hours."

"Dani?" Tesli called from behind her.

"Come and meet my pack," Dani said, holding a hand out to the young woman. After being introduced to Malachi and Jeremiah, Tesli handed a piece of paper to Dani.

"I wrote my information down for you. Liam and Dragos are talking about starting up a website for our people to

communicate through, but in the meantime, I don't want to lose touch with you. I like what I heard about pack life."

Malachi's brow arched, but he said nothing.

Tesli laughed. "I don't mean joining the pack, I mean that I like the idea of being in one place and taking care of each other. Being on the road all the time is a hard way to live, and no way to raise a family."

"I'd like to stay in touch," Dani said.

"Good. I know we can't replace the family you lost, but I think you can never have too many friends, especially if they know where to get reindeer moss wholesale." Tesli's brows wiggled and Dani laughed.

"Do I even want to know what that is?" Malachi asked.

"A reindeer delicacy," Tesli answered with a wink.

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Adam's head pounded from the scent of accelerant. It was everywhere—puddled on the wooden floor of the barn and dripping from the rafters. Underneath that smell was the metallic tang of blood and the sickly sweet scent of death. He hadn't wanted to leave Dani's side, but he trusted Jeremiah to keep her safe, and he absolutely didn't want her to suffer any further by being back in the barn where she'd been a prisoner.

Males wearing park uniforms were pulling bodies off each other and making a line in the center of the barn. It looked like a psychotic game of dominoes.

"This is my brother and the king of our herd, Dragos," Liam said as he stopped twenty feet from the first body. A large male turned from where he was watching the males work with the dead and faced them.

He extended a hand to Adam. "I'm sorry your mate was taken, but I'm thankful we were able to free her when we found Tesli. Our sister was abducted a week ago. I've had many sleepless nights trying to find her, but I can't imagine

the hell you suffered with your mate being taken in front of you.”

Adam shook his hand. “Thank you for freeing Dani.”

Dragos snapped his fingers and the workers stepped back. “Take your time.”

Adam wasn’t sure what to expect, but staring into the lifeless eyes of a dozen males wasn’t among them. It hadn’t surprised him to see that the men who had captured Tesli were dead. Judging by the well-armed, muscular males who were pushing around bodies like they weighed nothing, Adam thought that the fact they were prey in their shifted form was clearly irrelevant. They were most likely deadly in their shifts, too. Which made him want to find out how to teach Dani to protect herself. Not that he planned to let her ever be harmed again.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, he concentrated on the dead. He didn’t recognize any of them, until he reached a very familiar face. Richard’s arms were folded over his torso, and his eyes were closed as if he was sleeping, but there was no doubt that he was dead. A crimson stain had spread out from a hole in his chest. Wolves healed quickly, but there were some injuries that were too severe, too deadly.

Relief and sorrow churned together inside him. He was thankful that Dani was safe. The people who had taken her were dead, his father among them. Adam had been planning to put his father down himself, to meet him in a death match and come through on the other side victorious. That had been taken from him, and in a way it closed the door on his past, while also leaving a gaping wound because he would never get to reconcile his feelings with his father.

“I hate what you did to me,” Adam said in a low voice. “I hate that gambling was more important to you than me, your only son. I was just a kid, for fuck’s sake, and you got in so deep someone tried to kill you with a firebomb that ruined my leg. Then you tried to take the most precious thing in the world from me. You died too fast. You deserved to suffer for a hundred years. It’s not much comfort to me that you’re not

breathing anymore, but I'm walking away from you today, and I'm not going to let the shadow of your ugly behavior rule my life anymore."

He lifted his head and howled. Triumph. Regret. Hope.

The sound echoed in the barn. Adam stared for a moment longer at his father and then he turned and walked away. He didn't say anything to the males as he passed by them, their heads lowered in a gesture of respect. When he was out of the barn, he looked up at the morning sky and took a deep breath of the crisp winter air.

He moved to Dani, and she jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs and arms around him, dropping her head to his shoulder and weeping. He held her close and stood for several minutes in silence, thankful to have her back.

Acksel, who had been speaking to Dragos in the barn, joined them with Dragos and Liam. "We should get on the road. The herd has business to take care of," he said.

"I need to find my grandparents' car so I can get it back to them," Adam told him.

"It needs to be cleaned to make sure there isn't anything that will lead someone back to us," Liam said. He opened his cell and said, "If you give me your grandparents' address, we'll deliver it to them in a few days."

"I need to tell them about...him."

"Of course. We'll just leave it outside of their home with the keys in it."

Adam had to use his phone to look up their address, which he rattled off to Liam. Then he said, "Thank you for freeing my mate and keeping her safe."

"Tesli wants to keep in touch. Perhaps if we ever come by Wilde Creek we'll be able to visit," Liam said.

Dani lifted her head. "I'd like that."

"Me too," Adam said.

Dani and Adam said goodbye to the reindeer and followed Malachi and Jeremiah back to the SUV. Acksel spoke to Dragos for several more minutes before joining them. Dani didn't want to let go of him, so Adam carefully got into the second row of the SUV and held her on his lap.

"If I never see a petting zoo again, it'll be too soon," Malachi said as he made a U-turn in the street and left the park behind. Adam glanced behind him and saw a plume of smoke billow into the sky. The park was out of the way enough that no one would notice the smoke for a while. With her abductors dead and the park about to be destroyed, at least no other shifters would be abducted and sold from that location.

"I love you," Adam whispered, nuzzling Dani's throat.

"I love you too."

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Although Adam wanted to put the whole ugly business behind them, he knew he needed to tell his grandparents what had happened. He called his grandmother, wanting to get it over with so he could close this chapter of their lives.

"You found him?" she asked, but he could hear in her voice that she didn't hold out any hope of him being alive.

"He was killed with the others who had kidnapped my mate." He opened his mouth to say something comforting, but he realized he didn't have anything nice to say. He hadn't been there when his father drew his last breath, so he didn't know—had he begged for his life, had he tried to promise to change his ways so the reindeer would let him live, did he ask for them to let his mom know he loved her?

"It's okay, Adam," his grandmother said, drawing him from his dark thoughts. "You don't have to tell me anything more. I knew one day that we would get a call like this. Parents always hold such hope for their children, and I always wished that he would have a change of heart. Losing a mate is an awful thing for a wolf to go through, but he shouldn't have let his grief take over his life the way he did. And we failed

you. I understand that you might hate us for the male he became, but if you ever want to come see us, know that you can and that we'd welcome it."

"Take care," Adam said, ending the call.

Dani burrowed against him and rested her face against his throat. He could feel the warmth of her breath as she spoke quietly. "You don't want to see them again, do you?"

"No."

"Good. You're amazing, and they don't deserve to be in our lives."

"Our kids will have your mom to be their grandma."

She lifted her head and stared at him, her blue eyes luminous. "Do you think our kids will be reindeer or wolves?"

He tucked a lock of her golden hair behind her ear. "Wolf DNA is dominant, but it would depend a lot on whether they took more after you or me. Either way, we'll love them and protect them."

"I hope they're fierce like their dad."

"And beautiful like their mom."

She smiled, and it made all the darkness inside him dissipate. Things could have gone so differently; instead of seeing his father dead, it could have been Dani. He wrapped his arms more securely around her and released a deep sigh. They were going home, together, and that was all that should matter.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Dani blinked at the bright morning light when she awoke as Adam carried her from the SUV toward their home. She hadn't meant to fall asleep, but she'd found it impossible to stay awake after the stress of her kidnapping. Jeremiah walked ahead of them and opened the front door. She yawned, and Adam whispered, "Let me put Dani to bed and I'll be right back."

She hugged her arms around his neck a little tighter and chuckled. "Aren't you supposed to stay with me if you put me to bed?"

"You need to rest, and I have to talk to Jeremiah about a few things."

She couldn't keep from yawning again. "Okay. But you have to promise to join me as soon as you can."

"As if I could stay away from you long," he murmured as he lowered her to the bed and began to gently strip her out of the clothes the herd had given her. "I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to get rid of these things."

"That's fine with me."

He pulled the blankets over her and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'll be right back."

She thought she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep, but she had no trouble slipping back into a deep slumber, nestled in her mate's warm bed. When she woke several hours later, Adam was lying next to her, one arm around her and one bent

behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. She snuggled closer, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

His hand tightened on her shoulder. “Malachi’s security company is in the backyard putting in safety measures. I’ve been listening to them for the last few hours.”

“Are you mad?” She went up on her elbow and looked down at him.

“Of course not. I’m just disappointed that it never occurred to me to do it in the first place. If I’d had perimeter alarms or motion lights, or if I’d even thought for a heartbeat that *he* would be so callous as to turn you over to save his own neck, I would’ve done more, and you never would have been taken.”

“We can spend all our time worrying about what we could have done differently, but the truth is it’s in the past. I know you were terrified for me, and I was scared, too, but they didn’t hurt me. It could have been so much worse than it was. You came for me.”

He stared at her intently. “I love you.”

“I know. I can feel it all the way deep inside of me. I love you, too.”

He got up from the bed and scooped her into his arms. She giggled in surprise and threw her arms around his neck and kissed the space under his ear. “Where are we going?”

“Shower.”

She hummed. “Together?”

“Of course.”

He set her on the counter and turned, pushing the shower curtain aside. He bent to turn on the water, and she smiled at his cute butt. At the moment it was encased in black boxer briefs, but she still thought it was really sexy. She’d never really thought much about butts before, but Adam’s was great. He looked over his shoulder at her, one hand testing the spray.

“See something you like?” he asked, his voice a deep rumble.

“I like everything I see.”

He straightened, and she could see his erection through the thin material of his briefs. She was naked, and the air in the bathroom was cool. Her nipples pebbled, but it had nothing to do with the temperature. He closed the distance between them, pushing her thighs apart roughly and then tugging her against him with a growl. She lifted her face to him, anxious to feel his mouth against hers, and he didn't make her wait. Their lips met and parted, their tongues tangling in a heated dance that made her shiver with anticipation. She slid her hands down his back to the waistband of his briefs, and pushed down on them until she could free his erection.

He smiled against her mouth and nipped at her lower lip. He pulled from her and cupped her face, his gaze serious. “Are you sure?”

“About what?”

“We don't have to do anything right now.”

Grasping his erection, she stroked his thick length slowly. His eyes narrowed, and he growled softly. “This begs to differ,” she teased.

“Dani,” he said roughly.

She stopped stroking him and grasped his hips. “I know we don't have to make love right now, but I want to. We were supposed to run around in the yard last night and then make love until dawn. I feel cheated by what happened. We need to celebrate that we're safe and together and no one is going to separate us again.” She kissed his lips and then trailed kisses down his chest, lightly biting his nipple. “Remind me why having a wolf true-mate is so awesome.”

She flicked her gaze up at him, and he gave her a look hot enough to melt her panties, if she'd been wearing any. He slid his hands up her thighs and then jerked her forward on the counter until her pussy was bare inches from his cock. She skimmed her hands up his back and tipped her face up for a

kiss. When their lips met, he growled possessively and spread her pussy lips apart with one hand and began to lightly rub her exposed clit with his thumb.

She moaned into his mouth, her hands tightening on his hips. She tried to pull him forward so he could enter her while he played with her clit, but he remained immobile, holding himself away from her while he rubbed and flicked, driving her wild.

Her pussy clenched and her belly fluttered as he worked her, moving rapidly until she was hovering on the edge and then easing away. Her body throbbed with need.

“Adam,” she whimpered, pressing her forehead against his chest.

He teased the opening of her pussy with two fingers. “So wet. I love how your body responds to me.”

Her nails dug into his flesh, and she gazed up at him as he slid two fingers into her. She gasped. “Only you.”

He snarled possessively. “Mine.”

She moved her hips, wiggling on the counter as he began to fuck her with his fingers. His thumb latched onto her clit, and he placed his hand on her lower back and held her in place while he fingered her.

Letting her head drop back, she gave herself over to the pleasure that coursed through her. Adam was done teasing her, his body tense as he pushed her toward climax with his fingers. Heat pulsed through her, and she screamed his name as her body gripped his fingers and she came.

His cock replaced his fingers, sliding into her pussy as he lifted her from the counter and turned, pressing her against the wall. His arm protected her back as he began to pound into her, his face buried in her throat as his teeth latched onto her flesh. A growl vibrated in his chest as he took her, and she hung on for the ride. She closed her eyes and lost herself in the pleasure he gave her, pushing her further and higher, until heat crescendoed inside her and she cried out again.

He bit down on her neck and she shuddered as another spike of pleasure pulsed through her. Lifting from her, he shouted her name as he came, his cock thickening inside her as he rocked into her once more and held her tightly.

She went limp, resting her head on his shoulder. Her heart was racing, and her limbs felt like jelly. “I love what you do to me, how we are together.”

“Me too, sweetheart.”

Nuzzling her neck, he kissed the mark he’d made and then carried her to the shower. They were still locked together when he stepped under the spray, which had long since gone cold. She curled her toes with a gasp as the icy water hit her.

“Sorry baby,” he said with a chuckle as he eased her away from him and she put her feet on the ground. “We’ll have to shower fast.”

“And maybe invest in a bigger hot water tank.”

“If I’d had any blood left in my brain, I might have turned the shower off before we played.”

She ducked under the showerhead, biting back a squeal at the frigid water. After washing as quickly as she could, she hopped out and grabbed two towels.

“Brr,” Adam said as he shoved the faucet off with a little more force than necessary. Dani smiled, her teeth chattering as she handed him the other towel.

When they’d dried off, they dressed and walked into the family room. She prepared hot chocolate with lots of marshmallows while he made a fire in the fireplace. She carried the mugs over to the coffee table in front of the fireplace and set them down, settling onto the couch and watching him stare intently into the flames.

“Fire used to bother me,” he said. “For years, actually. Even the scent of burning wood would make me panic.”

He stood slowly and rubbed absently at his thigh. She recognized the motion as something he did when his leg hurt.

“What did you do?”

“I had a teacher in high school, her name was Mrs. Gracin. Her husband was a psychiatrist and she brought him to school to meet with me. The pack doesn’t like it when humans intervene in wolf affairs, so we kept the meetings a secret.”

He dropped heavily onto the couch next to Dani and put his arm around her. She wiggled close. “Why wouldn’t the pack want you to have help? You were very seriously injured because your father was an asshole.”

He kissed the top of her head. “It’s a wolf thing, I guess. I saw Doctor Gracin twice a week during my lunchtime for two years. In the summer, I would call him and we’d talk on the phone when my dad was gone. Without that help, I think I would have spent my whole life being afraid of being burned again.”

She kissed his cheek and hugged him. “I’m glad your teacher saw that you needed help.”

“You had the bears. Were you ever scared of losing them the way you’d lost your family and herd?”

She leaned back, resting her head on his arm. “For a while. The first time Alice shifted to go hunt with the other females, I panicked. I was so scared she was going to be killed. Fayar felt bad for me, and he sent some of his best guards to follow the females. The guards were in their human form and had rifles. He promised me that they wouldn’t let anyone hurt Alice or the other females. Row and I stayed in Fayar’s house with his sons and waited until the females came back. When they were home safe, Fayar said to me, ‘I told you I’d keep them safe, and I’ll keep you safe, too, little reindeer.’”

“I’m glad you found them.”

“Sometimes I think about how dangerous it was and how easily I could have died out in the woods all alone.” She looked at her mate for a long moment. “Even when I was living with the bears, I always figured I would someday mate with a reindeer and have kids, and I’d end up being nomadic like my herd had been.”

“I wish I could have met your family.”

“Me, too. I know they would have liked you.”

She leaned forward and picked up their mugs, handing one to him. The marshmallows had mostly melted, forming a glossy white surface on the top. “I have a lot of wishes about things that could have been different about my past and yours, but I feel like if anything was different we wouldn’t have met. I wouldn’t trade you for anything.”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t trade you either, Dani.”

They tipped their mugs together until the edges clinked. “To fireplaces and hot chocolate.”

“To us and the rest of our lives.”

She took a sip of the hot brew and sighed happily, leaning against him. It was her turn to stare into the fire, watching the orange and amber flames as they licked at the wood. A day earlier, they’d been getting ready for the full moon. It was hard to believe that so much could have changed in twenty-four hours. She was glad that some things had changed; she and Adam were still together, and their bond was even stronger than it had been before she’d been taken.

Being taken hadn’t made her fear being with Adam. She knew he cared about her safety. Something out of his control had happened, but she had no doubt he would make sure nothing of the sort ever occurred again.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Later that night, Adam stood outside in the dark with Malachi and his partner, a human male named Lucian.

Mal held up a tablet and said, “I set this up for you. It’s synced to your phone and Dani’s, too. We’ve got perimeter alarms at a quarter mile into the woods surrounding the house. If someone triggers the silent alarm, a digital camera will take a ten-second video and e-mail it to you. There are more cameras one hundred feet into the woods, and some actually on the fence. If someone triggers the fence cameras, floodlights will illuminate them as well and an alert will be sent to our company, as well as me and Lucian.”

“Obviously,” Lucian said, “you’ll want to be paying attention to any of the alarms. If you see something suspicious, it’s better to err on the side of caution and call someone to check it out. Mal said that you weren’t sure if the people who engineered your mate’s kidnapping were all dead or not?”

Adam’s gut tightened. “I know there were a lot of bodies. Whether they represented the entire organization or whatever bullshit my father was involved in, I’m not sure.” He looked toward the house. Inside, Dani was making pot roast for dinner, because she knew it was his favorite meal. He didn’t want her to be afraid that someone would come for her again.

Lucian cleared his throat, and Adam turned his attention back to him. “I checked into the reports of what happened at the park, and according to what the police on the scene said, it doesn’t seem likely that anyone would be able to connect you, Dani, or the Wilde Creek Pack to anything that happened

there. The herd torched everything, from the buildings to the grounds. There wasn't any evidence left behind except the bodies."

"That's probably not a complete relief," Mal said.

"It's better than nothing."

"Vigilance is the key," Lucian said. "If you need anything at all, call me or Mal and we'll do whatever we can to make sure you have no trouble keeping your mate safe."

Adam shook Lucian's hand. It was the first time he'd ever met Malachi's friend and partner in their company, L&M Security. The male was clearly human, but there was something *other* about him, too. Mal had said he was in the military, but Adam suspected there was more to the large, tattooed male than either of them let on. Not that he actually cared, because the only person in the world that mattered to him was standing over the kitchen stove making gravy.

"Thanks for everything," Adam said as he shook Malachi's hand.

"You're welcome." Malachi handed the tablet to Adam and the two left, leaving Adam in the backyard alone. He looked at the tablet. The screen showed that everything was quiet in the woods around them. He tilted his head up to the sky, where the bright moon felt like it was centered completely over the yard, highlighting the place where Dani had fallen while Adam had been helpless to protect her.

Arms wrapped around him, and Dani let out a soft sob as she moved in front of him and buried her face in his chest. He held her close, resting his cheek on the top of her head.

"It'll be okay now, sweetheart," he said.

"I don't want to be afraid of the backyard."

"I know. I don't want that for you, either." He gripped the tablet in one hand and held her close with the other. "Tell you what. Let's shift."

She looked up at him and rubbed at her wet cheeks. "Now?"

“Yeah. Look up there, baby. The moon is so bright, and it’s just for us.”

She blinked a few times, her brows furrowing slightly, and then she smiled. “Okay. I can face anything with you by my side.”

They walked over to the porch, and he brushed the snow off the small table and laid the tablet on it. He turned to face Dani and saw her staring at the security fence and chewing her bottom lip. “We can do this,” he said.

“You’re not nervous?”

“I am a little, but if I stayed afraid of fire I wouldn’t be able to hang out with the pack on the full moon when they have bonfires in the summer. I wouldn’t be able to go in there tonight and stoke the fire so I can warm you up properly after we shift.”

Her gaze softened and then she smirked. “You always tempt me with sex.”

He wiggled his brows. “It works.”

She rolled her shoulders back and let out a deep breath. “Okay. I’m not going to be afraid to shift. This is our yard and our home.”

“You got that right.”

They stripped quickly and shifted. Adam saw Dani hesitate only once as she shook herself out from her shift, her gaze darting along the length of the wall as her nostrils flared and steam billowed from them. Then she took a few steps into the yard and looked at him.

He chuffed at her in encouragement.

She lowered her head, dug one of her antlers into the snow and chucked a pile of it at him. He barked a laugh and raced toward her, and she bleated and hopped away. He could have caught her, but he just wanted to chase her. He’d catch her later, when they were naked and in the warmth of the house. She darted from one corner of the yard to the other, her tail twitching and her hooves kicking up snow. He pursued her

lazily and then sat in the center of the yard and listened to the night around them. He could hear everything, his wolf intent on Dani's safety above all else.

He had no doubt that they were safe now. He wasn't sure how he knew; he just felt a peace that he couldn't explain. Maybe it was knowing that their property was wired to the gills with technology that would make it impossible for anyone to sneak up on them, or maybe it was knowing that the people who had taken her were dead and there was nothing to tie either of them to the deaths at the park.

Whatever it was, Adam would take it. Keeping Dani safe and making a haven for them for the future was all that mattered. Someday their kids would be with them, shifting in the yard in one form or another, and he never wanted them to doubt that Wilde Creek was a safe place to live.

After Dani had leaped and run her fill, she nudged him gently with her antler and tilted her head toward the house. She didn't have to tell him twice. They shifted together, their bodies morphing from beast to human with ease. Adam swung her up into his arms and carried her into the house, stopping only long enough to grab the tablet from the table.

Her hands were cold as she slid them into his hair and kissed a line down his neck. "That was fun."

"Not scary?"

"Not with my protector watching out for me."

He opened the sliding door and stepped inside, sliding it shut and flipping the lock. "I had a vision of our sons standing with you, watching over their sisters and me while we forage."

He grinned as he knelt to set her down gently on the carpet. His leg burned slightly from the exertion of shifting. "How many kids are you thinking about, sweetheart?"

He pulled some logs from the basket, used the poker to open the screen, and then put the wood on the low flames. The fire blazed to life, and he closed the screen. Dani straightened from spreading out a blanket on the floor and went to her knees in the center of it. "I don't know. I'd like to have a big

family. Neither of us had that, and I can't think of anything that would make me happier than to have a bunch of little Adams running around."

"And Danis," he said, kissing her gently as he cupped her face.

"Definitely." She gripped his hips and moved closer. They tumbled to the floor, putting thoughts of the future on hold for the time being as they warmed each other up, ate cold pot roast, and then warmed each other up again.

It was one of the best nights he'd ever had.

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Thursday morning, Adam held open the truck door for Dani as she got in, carrying a tote that was overflowing with yarn. Although she was enjoying learning how to quilt, she'd really taken to knitting, and was determined to make matching scarves for the two of them before the ground thawed. She used every moment of her spare time to work on the black and gray garments.

"Heloise said she'd help me bind off your scarf today, but first I have to help her organize her pills for the week. That woman is all about natural stuff, vitamins and minerals I've never heard of."

"You shouldn't be surprised that wolves like natural things."

"I guess not. She's a sweetie, even if she does smell like garlic from the tablets she takes."

He chuckled as he shut the door.

"What are you and Jer doing today?"

"Delivering wood."

"Sounds exciting," she said with a wink.

"It's a laugh riot."

He'd just shifted the truck into gear when a black SUV stopped in front of them. For a heartbeat, he wasn't sure what was going on, but then the passenger door opened and Liam got out. He waved at them and Dani said, "Oh! It's Liam!"

Adam rolled the window down as Liam walked over to his side. "Hi. What's going on?"

"Hey, I have some news. Can we talk inside for a minute? Tesli is here, and she'd love to say hi to Dani if you have the time."

"Sure. Let me text my friend and tell him we'll be late," Adam said. He rolled up his window and then texted Jeremiah to tell him that they were meeting with friends unexpectedly and would be at the retirees' residences as soon as they were finished.

"What do you think they want?" Dani asked.

"Let's find out," he said.

When Dani got out of the truck, Tesli squealed and raced over to her, grabbing her in a hug and nearly taking them both down on the slick sidewalk. "What are you doing here?" Dani asked with a laugh as they regained their balance.

"We were passing by, and we have some good news. How are you doing?"

"Really good. You?"

"I'm okay. I'm so glad to be home."

"I am, too."

Liam and Dragos joined Adam, Dani, and Tesli as they walked into the house. "Can I make you guys some coffee or tea?" Dani asked.

"No, we can't stay long. The herd is waiting outside of town for us. There's a winter storm coming and we want to be on the way before it hits." Dragos said.

The reindeer sat on the couch, and Adam pulled Dani onto his lap as he sat on the oversized chair.

Liam cleared his throat. “A member of our herd is very good with computers, and he did some tracking of the men who had been part of the kidnapping. It confirmed what the human told us before he died; they’re part of a group that I can only describe as a gang. There was a main man at the top, and his henchmen. The petting zoo was a front for the operation, a way to launder money and a headquarters of sorts. Since the petting zoo was closed, the main barn was used as a holding area for abducted shifters.” Liam said. He paused for a moment and Adam knew he wasn’t going to be happy with what he said next.

“I think you probably already figured out that your father offered Dani in exchange for a debt. The reason we know that is because Tesli overheard the humans discuss bringing in a new shifter in repayment for a debt. They had at least one buyer who wanted a rare shifter, and they were trying to get more buyers for an auction.”

Dani shivered, and Adam held her a little tighter.

Dragos said, “We dropped off your grandparents’ car. It was cleaned of any and all evidence that could have possibly linked it to what happened there. We also found the tracking device they had installed and disabled it. With the organization destroyed, there’s no reason to believe that anyone else will come for you or Dani.”

“Where will you guys go now?” Dani asked.

“We’re going north. We’ve decided to find a place to call home permanently. I think our people have been nomadic long enough. When we settle, we’d like to invite you to come visit,” Dragos said.

Liam leaned forward and handed a business card to Adam. “I set up a website. You can send us a message anytime if you need us.”

“Would you be willing to come to our wedding?” Dani asked. “We’re not sure when the date is yet, but I’d like to have some of my own people there.”

Dragos nodded with a smile. “We’d be honored. Send us the details when you know them and we’ll be sure to be there. Tesli can tell you about our mating traditions, so you can add them to your ceremony if you’d like.”

Dani smile. “I would.”

They said goodbye to the herd. Dani and Adam stood on the front porch and watched their SUV until it was gone. She turned to him and he held her. “Did you want to go with them?” he asked.

Her head snapped up. “What?”

He touched his thumb to the corner of her frown. “I don’t mean without me, love. I mean, did you want us to go and live with the herd?”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because they’re your people.”

She nipped his thumb and smiled softly. “You’re my people—you and the pack. I don’t need to be where other reindeer are.”

“I’d go anywhere for you, Dani. I just want you to be happy.”

“I’m happiest here,” she said, standing on her tiptoes and kissing him.

He was glad she wanted to stay in Wilde Creek, but he would have gone anywhere she wanted if she’d asked. He looked down into her beautiful eyes. At that moment, he could see their future clearly: children, a home full of love, waking up to her sweet face every morning forever.

“I’m the luckiest wolf to have such a beautiful and loving mate.”

“When you’re ready to start on our family, let me know,” she said, lifting an eyebrow suggestively.

He reached behind her and opened the front door, pushing her gently back into the house. “How about now?”

She giggled. “What about work?”

“I’m calling in sick for both of us.” He tugged his phone from his pocket and gave her a hot look. “Get. Naked.”

She gave him a saucy salute as her coat dropped to the floor and she toed off her boots. “Yes, sir.”

She darted off to the bedroom, dropping clothes in her wake. He texted Jeremiah as quickly as he could and then shut off his phone so they wouldn’t be disturbed. He glanced at the door and flipped the deadbolt before shedding his coat and boots. He was thankful that the reindeer had stopped by to share that Dani was safe from the people who had kidnapped her, but Adam had no intention of ever taking Dani’s security for granted again. He’d made an error once, and it could have cost his sweetheart her life. He’d be damn sure that never happened again.

“Adam,” she crooned, her voice low and sultry.

He growled softly, ripping his clothes off as he drew closer to the bedroom, where he found her naked and waiting for him. The sight of her, lush and aroused, always made his brain stall out, and he found himself struck dumb by how gorgeous she was.

Her hips flexed as she ran her hands down her sides, and her eyes, always such a gorgeous blue, flickered to the burnished gold of her beast. “Mine,” he growled.

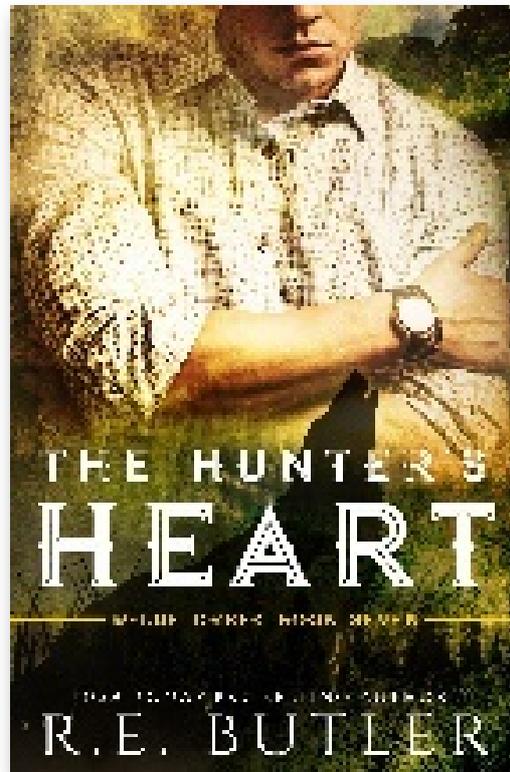
“I am. Entirely.”

Pouncing on her with all the grace of a moose in a ceramic store, he took her good-natured laughter with a snarl, silencing her with kisses as they tumbled to the bed. It was a great way to start their family—with love, laughter, and growling.

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Thank you so much for reading *Dancer’s Heart*, Book Six in the Wilde Creek Series. I hope you enjoyed visiting the wolves in Wilde Creek. The Wilde Creek Pack stories continue in Book Seven, [\*The Hunter’s Heart\*](#), coming October 19<sup>th</sup>, exclusively on Amazon and FREE in Kindle Unlimited. *When*

*Mia is taken by a dangerous shifter group, can Lucian save her before she's lost to him forever?*



She-wolf Mia Slattery has loved Lucian since she was a little girl, but her brother's human best friend has always been forbidden fruit. Deciding that it's better to move on than pine for someone she can never have, she opts to go on vacation with her parents, hoping Mr. Right will happen to be where she's going.

Lucian has been crazy about Mia for as long as he can remember. As a hunter who specializes in finding law-breaking shifters, his life is as dangerous as it comes, and he would never put Mia in jeopardy.

When the family of a shifter Lucian put away comes for revenge, Mia is caught in the crossfire, and Lucian will have to turn against his fellow hunters in order to save her life. Saving Mia comes with a price, but Lucian's willing to do anything to protect her – even if it means giving up his future.

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If you're looking for a sexy series about hybrid shifters looking for love, check out my [Cider Falls Shifters](#) series!

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Read on for an excerpt from The Hunter's Heart.

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## EXCERPT FROM THE HUNTER'S HEART

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She blinked a few times in surprise. “Are you mad at me?”

He let out a short growl. “Shit, Mia. You’re Mal’s baby sister.”

“I’m my *own* person, Lucian. Nila was trying to help. I didn’t ask her to, but she offered.”

“Fine, then say your piece.”

He crossed his arms over his chest in a way that felt like he was erecting a wall between them.

Her mouth went dry, and her heart pounded. She’d had this conversation in her head a million times, but now words were failing her. This wasn’t how she’d pictured it happening, with him looking furious after she caught him trying to sneak away. She was tempted to leave, but she had a feeling that if she did, she’d never see him again. It was now or never.

“I think we’re mates,” she blurted out. Her cheeks flamed at the abrupt words, which had flown from her mouth like they had minds of their own. That was *definitely* not anything she’d planned to say.

If he was surprised by her admission, he was a very good actor, because he showed zero emotion at her outburst.

“I’m human, Mia.”

“So?”

“Humans don’t have mates.”

“Malachi would disagree.”

He snorted. “I’m not him.”

“I know that.”

“Then know this,” he said, stepping close. “My life is as dangerous as it gets. There is not, and never will be, room in my life for a mate or a wife, or whatever the hell you want to call it. If you believe we’re mates, then you’ve never been more wrong. You’re my business partner’s sister and of no consequence to me.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Lucian.”

His upper lip curled, and she swore she saw his teeth lengthen. “Goodbye, Mia.”

He spun and disappeared into the woods, leaving her alone in the darkness. She stared after him until her eyes watered and her heart cracked. He wasn’t playing a joke on her, rushing back and swearing he’d been in love with her since they were kids and he’d taught her how to roller skate. This wasn’t the first day of their life together; it was the moment her whole idea of love had been shattered by someone she’d thought she knew.

The screen door creaked and her brother joined her, slipping his arm around her shoulders and giving her a one-armed hug.

“I’m sorry, kiddo. It’s better this way.”

“For you?”

He scoffed, turning her until she faced him. “No, not for me. Lucian’s life is on the line all the time. The people he works with never get married because it’s too dangerous for them. He loves his work. He wouldn’t give it up for anyone.”

The tears that she’d been too shocked to let fall now slipped over her cheeks. She leaned against her brother and wept. This was how it was supposed to be, then. She’d wanted to know once and for all if Lucian was the male for her. Now she had her answer.

Her wolf protested, but she pushed against the feeling. If Lucian didn't want her, it didn't matter how much she wanted him.

It really was time to move on.

She just hadn't expected it to hurt so much.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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R. E. Butler is a USA Today Best Selling Author of Paranormal Romance such as the Were Zoo and Cider Falls series. She lives on the water in New Jersey with her husband, kids, and furry pup.

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