

ASPEN
RIDGE PACK

The alphas

THE COMPLETE SERIES

LUNA WILDER

ASPEN RIDGE PACK: THE ALPHAS

ASPEN RIDGE PACK: THE ALPHAS

BOOK 5

LUNA WILDER

CONTENTS

[Want a free book?](#)

[The Alpha's Ward](#)

[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](#)

[The Alpha's Prize](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[The Alpha's Captive](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[The Alpha's Obsession](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Want a free book?](#)

[About the Author](#)

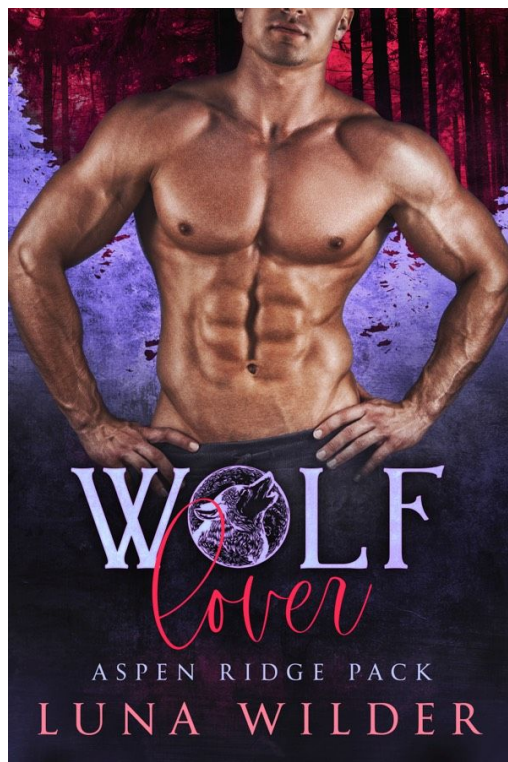
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THE ALPHA'S WARD

*

Unrequited love is the worst.

Emma:

I've been in love with Kane ever since he took me in.

Unfortunately for me, he doesn't seem to feel the same way.

When I finally get the courage to admit how I feel for him, and he rejects me, I know it's time for a fresh start.

Kane:

I've wanted Emma since I found her half frozen in the woods.

Instead of becoming my fated mate, though, she becomes my ward.

When she finally turns eighteen, I realize she's meant to be so much more to me.

Except, I think I messed things up before they even started.

Now I'm willing to do anything to keep my curvy little ward by my side.

I just hope that it's not too late.

ONE



Kane

MY PAWS DIG into the soft dirt as I run along the border of my pack's land. I'm out on patrol, doing one last check before I head home for the night. Bishop, the alpha of the north section of the Aspen Ridge Pack, has been taking in a few lone shifters. There was a fire a few miles east of our pack land, and we've been making room for any shifters that were displaced from their homes as a result.

We've all been running along the borders of our land to check for stragglers. I haven't found any in the last few days, and I think we've helped everyone who needs it. Still, I want to be sure.

I reach the part where my land butts up against Jonas's land to the south, and my wolf slows when he smells the scent of Jonas's bear. I stop when I see him headed my way through the trees and shift back to my human form.

"Hey," he says as he shifts back too.

"Hey, have you seen anyone?"

"No, I haven't had anyone new come my way for the last four days. I think that everyone either found other accommodations or is already here."

"Yeah, that's what I think too."

"Are you headed into town after this?" Jonas asks me.

“No, home. It’s been a long day.”

“It’s been a long week,” Jonas mumbles.

I wonder what’s going on with him, but I know that Jonas probably won’t tell me. He doesn’t like sharing or asking for help, but he knows that the other alphas of the Aspen Ridge Pack will always be there to assist him if needed.

“Get some rest,” Jonas says, and I nod as we both shift back to our animals and head off in opposite directions.

I head back toward my house and stop at the plastic storage chest by the big pine tree behind the guest house and shift, tugging out some clean clothes from the box and slipping them on.

I walk along the little dirt path toward the front of my place, careful to keep my eyes far away from the guest house. I moved into the Alpha’s residence six years ago when I became Alpha of the East Pack of Aspen Ridge.

I grew up here in Alaska, and my father was the Beta of this pack. The Alpha had a daughter, but she married into another pack further south and decided to move there instead of becoming Alpha of this pack. No one else stepped up besides me, so I became Alpha, and I’ve been in charge of the East Pack ever since.

My parents left the pack two years ago and moved down south. My mom wanted to live somewhere a little warmer, so they’re down in Colorado. I go see them once a year, and they come visit up here once a year too. We stay in touch more through weekly phone calls and Zoom calls.

I round the corner of the trail and jerk to a halt.

“Emma,” I breathe out, and she smiles up at me innocently.

My heart trips over itself, just like it always does whenever I’m around my little ward. I’ve been trying to keep myself in check around Emma ever since I found her, but it’s no use. Ever since I became Alpha and moved her into the guest house on my property, I’ve been avoiding her more and more.

Emma is one of the only humans who live in Aspen Ridge. Sure, plenty of humans come on vacation here, but it's usually too cold or too isolated for most humans. She's also one of the only humans to know all about shifters.

I found Emma when I was a teenager. She was half frozen in the snow, just a scared kid. I took her to the hospital here in town, and they helped her, but she never got her memories back, and no one ever came looking for her.

I had begged my dad and the Alpha to keep her, to take her in and protect her. There was just something about her that called to me, something that drew me in. Maybe it's because I found her so I felt responsible for her, who knows. Luckily for both of us,, though, they agreed to keep her, and she's been our ward ever since.

Now that I'm the Alpha, I'm in charge of taking care of her. She's my responsibility. At least until she turns eighteen.

I'm not sure what she'll do once she turns eighteen, but I think it might be best for me if she moved far, far, away. At least then, whatever hold she has on me would be broken.

"Are you all done with work for the day?" She asks me, and I nod.

"Yeah, I did one last check for other shifters, but I didn't see anyone."

"How are the survivors from the fire doing? Do they need anything?" She asks.

She's always so damn sweet, always trying to help everyone out.

"They're settling in well."

"Are you hungry? I was about to make myself something to eat if you want to join me?"

"No!" I blurt out, and she seems surprised.

Hurt flashes across her delicate features, and I hate myself. My wolf whines inside of me, and I clear my throat.

“No, I’m exhausted. I’m going to head in and get ready for bed.”

“Oh, okay. Get some sleep then.”

God, I want her.

As a shifter, I should only want my fated mate, but I can’t deny how I feel about Emma. That’s part of the reason why I’ve been throwing myself into my responsibilities for the pack and dragging my tired body home each night. I need to stay far away from her before I do something stupid and hurt us both.

I swallow hard as I stare down at her pretty face, taking in those big, clear blue eyes. Her long, dark brown hair is tied up into a ponytail tonight, and I want to tuck the few last strands behind her ear. I can’t touch her, though. I never touch her. That would be way too tempting. My fingers curl into my palms to keep from reaching for her.

I want her, but I can’t have her, definitely not while she’s still my ward.

Think of our fated mate, my wolf growls at me, and I clear my throat, schooling my features as I stare down at my curvy little ward.

“Good night, Emma.”

“Good night, Kane.”

She heads back toward the guest house, and I watch her go until she disappears before I let out a deep breath, try to shake off my attraction and infatuation with Emma, and head up to my own house.

My empty, lonely house.

TWO



Emma

HE HATES ME.

Unrequited love freaking sucks. I should know; I've been in love with Kane ever since he found me in the woods eight years ago.

He was the one who took care of me when I first got here. He was the one who fought for me, cared for me, and taught me all about shifters and living in this small town. It was impossible not to fall in love with him.

Half of the girls in town are head over heels with Kane. They're all hoping that when they turn eighteen, they'll find out they're his fated mate. They all want to be the Alpha's mate. It doesn't hurt that Kane is drop-dead gorgeous with those deep brown eyes that remind me of fine melted chocolate.

He looked tired tonight. He needs a wife or a mate, someone to take care of him. He's been so busy taking care of the pack and everyone else lately. He needs to start working on taking care of himself more.

I head into the guest house, sighing as I turn on the light in the kitchen and look around. I shouldn't be complaining; after all, this is a free house. I have no bills, and my only real job was to go to school. I graduated two months ago, though, and now I'm in limbo.

I've felt that way for a while. It's like I'm waiting until I turn eighteen for my life to begin. Too bad for me, I don't even know when my birthday is. I can't remember anything about my life before Kane found me.

My phone rings, and I know who it is without looking. There are only three people who call me or have my number and only one person who would call me this late.

"Hey, Maddie. What's up?" I answer.

"Can I come over? Maybe spend the night?" She asks, and I can tell that she's been crying.

"Of course. I'll make us something to eat. Do you need me to pick you up?"

"No, I'm in my car already. I'll be there in ten."

"Front door is unlocked."

"Thanks."

We hang up, and I head over to the stove, grabbing a box of macaroni and cheese from the pantry and filling a pot with water to boil.

Maddie is my only friend in town. She lives on the outskirts of town with her awful mother, but she spends the night over here at least three nights a week. I don't mind. It can get lonely being by yourself all of the time.

I've been a member of this town and pack for the last eight years, but most days, I still feel like an outsider. At least I have Maddie, Isla, and Willa. They're all humans too. We met in high school and bonded over our lack of shifter abilities. They were the only friendly ones when I first got to town.

Headlights flash through the front windows as I drain the macaroni, and I grab two bowls, splitting the macaroni between them.

"Hey," Maddie says as she comes in and locks the door behind her.

"Hey, problems with your mom again?"

"Yep," she says, collapsing onto the couch.

I carry the bowls over to her, passing her one as I sit next to her.

“Want to talk about it?” I ask quietly.

“No, it’s the same old crap. I can’t wait until I turn eighteen and can move out. I’m never going to have to see her again.”

“You can stay here more. Hell, move in,” I offer, but she shakes her head.

“I can’t. Alpha Kane would find out then and start asking questions. My mom would freak out if the Alpha came to her door for any reason.”

“I could ask Kane not to.”

“Would he listen to you?” She asks, doubt and worry clear in her green eyes.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“I can’t risk it.”

I nod, and we both start eating in silence.

“Have you asked him yet?” She asks, and I shake my head.

I don’t need to know what she’s talking about. My friends are well aware of my crush on Kane. They’ve been encouraging me to ask him how he feels about me or more questions about what would happen if we turned out to be fated mates.

“When are you going to?” She asks.

“Tomorrow or the next time I see him,” I promise her.

There are times when I don’t see him for days or even a week because he’s so busy. Maybe that will give me time to work up the courage to face him.

“Promise?” She asks, and I nod, sticking out my pinky.

She locks her pinky around mine, and we both lean in and kiss our hands, sealing the promise.

A knock sounds at the front door, and I frown. Maddie tenses, and I know we’re both wondering if it’s her mom.

“I’ll check,” I tell her, setting my bowl on the coffee table.

I peek out the window by the door, and my heart kicks against my ribcage when I see Kane standing there. He frowns when we lock eyes, and my stomach sinks. He’s been doing that a lot lately, and I hate it. It’s like he can’t decide what to do with me.

“Hey,” I say when I pull the door open.

“Is everything okay? I saw a car pull in.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s just my friend, Maddie.”

I open the door wider so he can see her, and Maddie waves from the couch. She shoots me a look, and I remember what I just promised her.

Crap.

“Okay, just wanted to check. You two have a good night,” Kane says before he turns and heads back.

“Night!” Maddie calls, and I see her tilt her head towards him in a follow him motion.

“Um, Kane! Hold up,” I call, stepping outside.

He tenses, and my stomach cramps with nerves.

“I, um, I had a question, actually.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Um, what happens when I turn eighteen?”

“I’m not going to kick you out. You’re welcome to stay here and in Aspen Ridge for as long as you want,” he assures me.

He starts to turn away, and I blurt out what I really want to ask.

“What happens if it turns out that we’re fated mates?”

He stiffens like I’ve shocked him, and I know that I’m not going to like his answer before he’s even turned around.

“That’s not going to happen, Emma,” he says, and he’s using his Alpha voice.

He sounds so sure of that, and I hate that the thought of me being his mate seems to repulse him so much. It's like he thinks that I'm so far beneath him that there isn't even a possibility of us being fated to be.

"How can you be sure?" I ask.

Stupid me. I should have kept my mouth shut, but I know that we'll never talk like this again. Maybe this is what I need to hear in order to move on.

"I mean, no one knows when my birthday is. It could be any day now. Plus, shifters have mated with humans before, so it's not totally unheard of," I continue.

"We're not mates."

"But how do you know?" I press him.

"I just do. We're not meant to be. For all we know, you're already eighteen, and that's just further proof that we're not fated to be."

"You don't want me," I say quietly, and I know that I need to get inside before I start crying in front of him.

"It doesn't work that way. You know that," he says, and I nod.

"Right."

"Goodnight," he says, and I nod again, watching him walk away like he didn't just break my heart into a million pieces.

His rejection is like a slap, and I can feel my heart splintering in my chest. I suck in a shaky breath as I back up. My back hits the door, and the tears start then. I reach blindly for the door handle and stumble inside.

"Emma!" Maddie calls, rushing to my side.

"He doesn't want me. It's not even a possibility for him," I choke out, and she hugs me tighter.

"It's his loss."

She tries to comfort me, and I cry into her arms until there are no tears left. She helps me into bed and holds my hand as

we both try to fall asleep. I'm not sure what she's thinking about, but I'm making a plan.

I know that Kane said I could stay as long as I want, but I just can't do that anymore. I need to leave and try to forget all about Kane and my silly, stupid crush.

I've been working in town at the Full Moon Diner for the last four years, and since I don't have many expenses, I've been saving up most of that money. It might be enough to hire a moving truck and get myself a little apartment somewhere.

Would I have enough in savings, though, to make it until I could find a new job? What about health insurance and everything else that I get for free because I'm the Alpha's ward? How would I pay for that?

I have a lot to think about, but I'll figure it out. Then I'll get my fresh start, and I can finally start living my own life.

THREE



Kane

THE NEXT MORNING, I still feel terrible for how I shot down Emma last night. I didn't mean to be so short with her, but she had caught me off guard. I'm used to a shy Emma who is always sweet, easygoing, and never asks any difficult questions.

I wonder how long she's been thinking about me and wondering if we were fated mates. If she asked, I have the feeling that she's been thinking that for a while.

My wolf perks up inside of me. She looked so pretty last night. She always looks pretty, but there was almost something different about her last night. I just can't figure out what was different.

"You're late," Mack says when I walk into City Hall the next morning for the monthly Alpha Meeting.

"I'm literally one minute late," I tell him, and he shrugs.

Mack was in the military for a few years. He got shot and came back to take over the West Pack from his father a year ago. He's still got some of the habits from the military, though. One of them being that if you're not five minutes early, then you're late.

I take a seat next to him at the table as Bishop and Jonas file in. Aspen Ridge Pack is a huge pack, and it's been split up into four territories for as long as anyone can remember. I'm in

charge of the East Pack, Jonas the South Pack, Mack the West Pack, and Bishop the North Pack. Jonas is a wolf shifter like me, Bishop is a polar bear shifter, and Mack is a black bear.

“Sorry that we’re late. We had a family come in from the Silver Spring Pack this morning,” Bishop tells us.

“I got them settled in my territory,” Jonas says before we can ask.

“Good. What needs to be discussed this month?” Mack asks us.

Jonas starts talking about permits and a new business opening up downtown, but I tune him out. My mind drifts back to last night with Emma, and I wonder if I should try to talk to her again. Maybe I could let her down a little more gently, but would bringing it up again just to reject her again only be rubbing salt in the wound?

“Kane?” Jonas asks, and I blink.

“Sounds good,” I lie.

I didn’t hear a word that they said, and I think they all know that, but they don’t call me on it.

The meeting starts up again, and I try to shake off thoughts of Emma and focus on what’s being discussed. We go over some more business about what to do with the Silver Spring Pack and where to build new houses. The meeting wraps up, and Mack stops me before I can leave.

“Let’s grab breakfast,” he says, and I nod, following him across the street to the Full Moon Diner.

I look around as soon as I walk in for any sign of Emma, but she’s not here.

“What’s going on with you?” Mack asks as we slide into a booth.

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

I sigh and grab a menu to try to buy myself some time.

“Kane,” Mack says firmly, and I glare at him.

“It’s Emma.”

“Your ward.”

“Yeah. She asked me last night if we could be fated mates.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That we weren’t fated mates.”

“You could be,” he points out, and I shake my head.

“But the chances of that are slim to none. I didn’t want to lead her on or hurt her.”

“So, you just hurt her last night instead.”

“It will be better in the long run,” I argue, and he snorts.

“Maybe.”

“What? You wouldn’t have done the same? What would you have done if it was Willa?” I ask him, and he looks surprised. “Yeah, I know about you and her.”

“Because you’re watching Emma, and they’re best friends,” he grumbles.

“And because anytime she’s in the room, you’re staring at her like she’s a juicy steak.”

“I do not.”

“Don’t what?” Willa asks as she comes over to take our order.

“Nothing,” Mack rushes to say.

He shoots me a warning look, but I would never tell his secret.

“Okay,” Willa says slowly.

She’s eyeing him like he’s grown a second head, and I smile.

“Do you know what you want to order yet, or should I come back?” She asks.

“I know what I want. What about you, Mack?” I ask, and he glares at me.

“I’m ready.”

“Okay,” Willa says, looking back and forth between us.

“I’ll have the Full Moon Breakfast,” I order. “Scrambled eggs.”

“Got it. And for you, Mack?”

“Same, but eggs over easy.”

“I’ll be right out with your coffee.”

Mack watches Willa walk away, longing and something that looks like love in his eyes.

“Why don’t you tell her that you love her?” I ask him.

“I don’t. Besides, she’s not eighteen yet. I need to wait until then.”

He’s so sure that she’s meant to be his. I wish that I had that confidence. Mack is so obsessed with Willa that part of me thinks he would bite her and force a mating bond between them if she wasn’t his fated mate.

“Here’s your coffee. Careful, it’s hot,” Willa warns as she sets the coffee down in front of us.

“When’s her birthday?” I ask once Willa has walked away.

“Forty-six days,” he says instantly.

“But who’s counting, right?” I ask, and I hide my smirk behind my coffee cup.

“Shut up,” he growls.

My wolf paws at me. All of this talk of fated mates has him desperate to find ours.

Soon, I promise him, and he starts pacing back and forth inside of me.

Mack and I eat breakfast and have an unspoken rule not to bring up either Willa or Emma again. We talk about the Silver Spring Pack and the weather.

“We should go for a run with our wolves soon,” Mack says as we head outside.

“Yeah. Tonight?” I ask.

“Sounds good. I’ll meet you at your place.”

I nod, and we head in opposite directions. I don’t have anything else I need to do in town, so I head home. I try to tell myself that it’s just to give myself a break, but I know that deep down, I want to see if I’ll run into Emma again.

I head up the walkway to my house and glance around. My wolf has perked up inside of me and listens with me, but there’s no movement coming from the guest house. She must be out. Her friend’s car is gone too, so maybe they’re spending the day together.

I try to shake off the disappointment as I head inside and upstairs to my room.

FOUR



Emma

KANE and I are back to avoiding each other. I'm not sure if that's on purpose or if he's just busy. Either way, it works out for me. I'm not sure that I could face him right now anyways. I'm still too embarrassed to look him in the eyes.

I talked to Maddie about my plan to leave. She's all for it. In fact, she's planning on leaving and joining me as soon as she turns eighteen next month. With the two of us working, we'll be able to afford our own apartment and the other bills.

I need to tell Isla and Willa about our plan to leave town and find an apartment for the two of us, but I'm hoping that I can be packed and leave by the end of this month. Just over two weeks, and I'll never have to see Kane again.

Packing and saying my goodbyes to people in town won't take that long. It's kind of sad to realize that I don't have much holding me here. This place has been my home for the last eight years, but it's not really *home*. I have friends here but no family and no real ties to the town. If I leave tomorrow, no one will be affected. No one except Willa, Isla, and Maddie.

I shake off the sadness that thought brings and try to focus on the positive. I'm excited to go out and try to find my home. I'm excited to date and build a family. I want to put down roots. I want to be happy.

I'm on my way to work, and I do the math in my head. If I make the usual in tips, then I should be close to my goal number. I'll have to try and see if I can pick up any more shifts this week.

I glance down when my phone buzzes with a text, and that's when I run into a brick wall.

"Umph!" I grunt as I stumble back a step.

"Easy," comes a deep voice as a pair of strong male hands reach out to steady me.

I look up, and I'm not sure how to feel when I lock eyes with Kane. That's a lie. My heart still races, and butterflies take flight in my stomach every time I'm near him.

His brown hair is blowing across his forehead, and my fingers itch to reach out and push it back. His eyes focus on me, and then he seems to remember himself and he looks away.

"Sorry about that. I wasn't watching where I was going," he tells me.

"Me either."

"Is everything good with you? Do you need anything?" He asks me, and I falter.

"No, I'm fine."

"Good. I'll see you later," he says, and my mouth drops open.

He turns and heads across the street, and I watch him go.

"That was cold," Isla says as she stops at my side.

"Yeah."

Part of me turns to stone, and the crush that I had on Kane dies right then and there. I had always thought that he was so sweet and kind. I've watched him take care of everyone and everything for years. He always seemed so generous, but he's been treating me differently for a while now. It's like he's pushing me away, and maybe he is. I thought he was just busy, but now I wonder if it's something more.

I had always hoped that we were fated to be. I wanted to be Kane's mate, wanted to be his wife, but not anymore. The image that I had of Kane in my head has been popped. He's not the caring, kind boy that rescued me. He doesn't take time to check in with me anymore. He doesn't eat with me or try to make me laugh anymore.

That was what I fell in love with. I wanted someone who saw me, who treated me like I was special and important. It's obvious now that Kane isn't going to be that person.

"I heard that you and Maddie might be leaving," Isla says, and I nod.

"We are," I say firmly.

"Where to?"

"I'm not sure yet. We're still researching places. We need to find someplace cheaper that also has a lot of businesses that are hiring."

"I'm going to miss you. Maybe I'll move closer," she says, and I smile.

"You can always move in with us. Or come visit anytime that you want," I offer.

"I might take you up on that," she says, and she sounds so wistful, maybe even a little sad.

I want to ask her what's going on, but before I can, she starts talking.

"Are you headed to work?"

"Yeah, I'm actually running late," I say when I see what time it is.

Willa was the one who texted me before I ran into Kane, and I smile as I read her message telling me to hurry up and get to work so that we can roll silverware together.

"I'll let you get going. Want to hang out tonight? We can have a movie night."

"Sounds good. My place? At eight?"

“Perfect. I’ll text Maddie. We can bring some snacks.”

“Want me to pick up a pizza? Or tacos?”

“Whatever you want is fine. Let me know if you need me to grab anything, and I can be on my way over.”

“I’ll tell Willa. I’m about to see her at work in a second.”

“See you later!” Isla says as she heads down the sidewalk, and I wave as I head up to the diner.

I do my best to look on the bright side and forget all about Kane. I’m going to have a girls’ night, have fun with my friends tonight, and in a few weeks, I’ll be moving onto my new life.

Maybe the pain of a broken heart will have passed by then.

FIVE



Kane

IT TAKES me about three seconds after I wake up the next morning to realize that I'm screwed.

Why couldn't this happen a week ago? Before I pushed Emma away.

Who cares? Go get our mate! My wolf snarls at me, and I jump out of bed and hurry to get dressed. My wolf is a growling, impatient beast inside of me, and I grit my teeth to hold him back as I head downstairs.

The lights aren't on in the guest house, and I wonder if she's still asleep as I head back there. The smell of her is stronger here, and I take long deep breaths of her sweet, cotton candy scent.

My wolf howls inside of me as we knock on the door and strain to hear any sounds of her moving around inside the house.

At least moving her things over to our house won't take long. We won't even have to hire a moving truck or anything.

I knock on the door again and press my face against the front window, trying to spot any movement inside.

My stomach drops when I see the boxes stacked up against the back wall of the dining area.

Moving boxes? She's leaving? Is that why she was asking about what happens when she turns eighteen? I told her she didn't have to leave, though, so why is she packing?

There's still no sign of her inside of the guest house, and I turn on my heel, following her scent around front and down the sidewalk. I'm guessing that she's at work at the diner in town, and I pick up my pace, jogging in that direction and following her scent up to the front doors of the diner.

As soon as I walk in, my eyes lock on Emma. She's busy bringing coffee and pancakes to a group of tourists in the corner.

"Alp, er, sir, I mean, Kane," Liam, the owner of the diner, greets me.

"Morning, Liam," I reply.

Stop making small talk and go get our girl! My wolf yells at me.

"Can I sit in Emma's section, please?"

"Of course."

He leads me over to an empty table in the back, and I nod as I take a seat. My eyes go back to Emma, and I track her as she heads back to the kitchen. She hasn't seen me yet, or if she has, she's avoiding me. Either option seems possible. I know that she's still upset with me for rejecting her the other night, not that I blame her for that.

I tune out the background noise and focus on my mate. She's wearing a pair of dark skinny jeans that mold to her thick thighs and hug her ass perfectly. My mouth waters as I watch her hips sway back and forth, and I'm hypnotized by the movement. She has a diner t-shirt on, and the cotton material stretches tight across her chest.

Her dark brown hair is pulled up into a high ponytail, and my wolf licks his lips at the sight of her bare neck. He wants to bite her, to mark that pale flesh so that everyone else knows that she belongs to me.

My cock hardens in my jeans at the image of her wearing my mark, and I grit my teeth, holding my wolf back.

Emma turns then, her eyes locking with mine, and I wonder if I look half as animalistic as I feel right now. I must because Emma's eyes widen in surprise as she takes me in.

"Hi," she says, her voice flat, and my heart drops.

"Hey, can we talk?" I ask her.

"Um, no, I'm busy with work."

She's looking at me, but it's like she's looking right through me. I hate it. I want those clear blue eyes to focus on me. I want her to smile at me, to be happy to see me.

My wolf whines inside of me, and I try to stay on topic.

"It will only take a moment," I tell her, and she frowns at me.

"Not right now," she says, turning and heading back to the kitchen.

I watch her go, wondering if I should follow her or not. I know that she's mad at me, and I don't want to piss her off even more. I need to win back her trust and keep her happy.

My wolf starts to pace inside of me, back and forth over and over again. My wolf has wanted our mate since before I could even find her. Now that I think about it, I started yearning for my mate more and more after I found Emma and she became part of this pack. I think that maybe I knew deep down that she was meant to be mine even back then.

Emma comes back out and heads around to her tables with a pot of coffee. I watch as she tops off a few customers' cups. She smiles at them, and jealousy bubbles to life in my bloodstream.

She should only be smiling at us like that! My wolf snarls, and I nod.

She will. Soon, I promise him, and he resumes his pacing.

I spend an hour in the diner, watching my mate bustle around, taking care of all of her customers except for me. She

avoids my table like the plague, and the longer I sit there waiting on her to acknowledge me, the tenser I become.

“Emma, take a break, kid,” Liam tells her when the big table of tourists finally leaves.

She nods, gritting her teeth as she shoots me a look. I’m out of my chair and following after her down the hallway and out the backdoor.

“Emma,” I start, and she turns to face me, closing her arms over her chest as she glares at me.

“What’s so important? You’ve been avoiding me for weeks, months even, and now you’re tracking me down and waiting to speak with me. What could have possibly happened?” She asks me.

“You’re my mate. I woke up and smelled you this morning,” I tell her, careful to make sure that there are no tourists or humans around to hear me.

She stares at me in shock, and I shift from foot to foot as I wait for her to process that information.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she mumbles to herself.

“It’s true,” I insist, and she waves me off.

“No, that’s not it,” she says, shaking her head.

She closes her eyes as if she’s trying to clear her head or get her thoughts in order, and I don’t interrupt her.

She smells so good, and I’m happy just to bask in her warmth. My wolf has settled inside of me slightly. He still wants to bite her and claim her as ours, but the need isn’t as strong now that I’m close to her. I’m sure it will get worse the closer we get to the full moon in a few days, but with any luck, I’ll have convinced Emma to forgive me, and we’ll be blissed out by then.

“Then I’m eighteen now, right? You wouldn’t have been able to smell me otherwise.”

“That’s right.”

“Then I’m no longer your ward,” she says, and it catches me off guard.

I thought that she would have more of a reaction to learning her birthday or that we’re fated mates. She looks like a weight has been lifted off of her, and I frown as she takes a step back.

My wolf whines, and I move to step forward to keep her close to me.

“Then I’m no longer your responsibility anymore,” she says, taking another step back.

“You’re my fated mate. You’ll always be my responsibility.”

“No, I don’t want to be your mate. If you had asked me a week ago or even two days ago, I would have tripped over myself saying yes to you. Then yesterday, you blew me off. You treated me like nothing more than an annoying gnat. I don’t want a partner who treats me like that.”

“Emma, wait,” I start, taking a step toward her.

“No. I have to get back to work.”

She moves to walk around me, and I stop her.

“Are you leaving town? I saw the boxes in the guest house.”

She pauses, pushing her shoulders back before she meets my eyes.

“Yeah, I’m leaving.”

“When?”

“Soon. Really soon.”

With that, she pushes past me and heads back into the diner. I watch her go, my wolf and I both at a loss on what to do now.

I never thought that my fated mate would reject me, and I’m not sure what to do now that she has, but I’m going to figure it out. I’m going to fix this.

And soon.

SIX



Emma

WELL, fate sure seems to have a cruel sense of humor.

If I had turned eighteen just twenty-four hours earlier, then I would be happily heading home with Kane right now. Instead, I'm stomping around the Full Moon Diner.

"What's gotten into you?" Willa asks me as she sets down her things in the back room and starts to twist her black hair up on top of her head.

"Kane found me this morning and told me that I'm his fated mate," I whisper hiss at her.

I can feel myself scowling as I say the words, and Willa's blue eyes widen.

"We're still mad at him, then?"

"Yeah, he's a jerk. He's been treating me like shit for months now, ignoring me and treating me more like a nuisance."

"Like his ward?" She offers, and I nod, but roll my eyes.

"Yeah, like I'm nothing but his ward."

"You *were* nothing but his ward," she points out.

"I know that! It's just... I want my partner to want me. I want him to treat me like he likes me and not like I'm just another box on his to-do list that he has to check off. Kane

doesn't. He never wanted me. Not until he woke up today and smelled me."

"I get it," she says quietly. "Happy birthday, by the way! We should go out and celebrate tonight."

"Maybe," I hedge, and she squeezes my hand.

"It will be okay with Kane. If you don't want to, then you don't have to be with him," she promises me.

I nod, but the truth is that I'm not so certain that I can resist him. We're three days out from the mating moon, and already I could feel it. As soon as Kane walked into the diner, it was like I was hyper-focused on his movements. When we were close, electricity skittered across my skin, and an awareness that I'd never experienced before settled over me.

I know that these feelings are only going to get stronger the closer we get to the full moon. I'm not sure what I'll do then.

I'm so screwed.

Maybe I should leave now. Even if it's only for a few days. I can come back once the mating heat has passed.

"How much longer is your shift?" Willa asks me.

"I'm off now."

"Want me to call the girls, and we can go out to dinner tonight or something?" Willa asks.

"Sure. I'm going to head home and take a shower. I smell like bacon," I joke, and Willa laughs.

"Yum! I'm about to smell like grilled cheese and burgers."

"Let's do something besides that for dinner then," I suggest, and she laughs.

"Sounds good. I'm off at four. I'll come by your place with everyone at five?"

"Okay, I'll see you then."

I grab my phone and keys from my locker and head out the backdoor and around to the sidewalk.

“Headed home?” Kane asks, popping out from behind a tree.

“Jesus!” I yelp, jumping. “You scared the crap out of me.”

I put my hand over my heart, and I’m not surprised that it’s racing. I’m just not sure if it’s from the shock of being scared or from being near Kane again.

“Sorry, I thought that you saw me.”

“I didn’t.”

“Sorry. Are you headed home?”

“Yeah,” I say, starting to head down the sidewalk.

“Got any fun plans for your birthday?”

“I’m going out with my friends.”

“Where to?”

“Dinner,” I say, trying to keep things vague.

“Where at?”

“I don’t know. I need to wait and see.”

“What time are you leaving?”

“Around five, I guess. Willa doesn’t get off of work until four.”

He nods, and we continue for a few minutes in silence.

“How was work?” He asks as he falls into step beside me.

“Fine. Busy.”

“Are you liking it? Working there, I mean?”

“It’s a job. It’s not what I want to do with the rest of my life or anything.”

“What do you want to do then? What’s your dream career?”

“Why do you care?” I snap at him as we turn onto our street.

“You’re my mate. I want to know everything about you,” he tells me.

I let out a humorless laugh, and he frowns. He reaches out, grabbing my elbow and pulling me to a stop.

“Emma, I’m sorry. What can I do so that we can move past this and be mates?”

“Nothing. You want me *now*. You want to get to know me *now*. You only want to do that because we’re mates. You didn’t care about me at all before this morning.”

“That’s not true,” he argues.

“It is. You’ve been ignoring me, brushing me off for months. Every time I tried to talk to you, you were busy. Every time I asked if you wanted to join me for lunch or dinner, you didn’t. You didn’t have the time or the interest in me until you learned that we were mates. If I wasn’t worth your time before, then you’re not worth mine now,” I snap at him.

I jerk my arm from his hold and stomp around the side of his house and into the guest house.

As soon as I’m alone and the door is locked behind me, I sink down to my knees. The tears are already spilling over onto my cheeks, and I sit back on my butt, wrapping my arms around my knees and crying.

This is all just too much.

I thought that unrequited love was the worst thing I could experience, but this is way worse.

Why couldn’t he just have wanted me before? Why couldn’t I have turned eighteen before I worked up the courage to ask Kane about us?

I cry until there are no tears left. By the time I stand and head for the shower, it’s already three o’clock, and I know that I need to hurry if I want to be ready for dinner tonight.

I was so excited for my eighteenth birthday because I was hoping that I would be Kane’s fated mate. Now that it’s my birthday and I’ve realized that I am Kane’s fated mate, I don’t care, I don’t want to be his mate anymore, and I don’t care

about it being my birthday. I just want this whole day to be over. I want this whole part of my life to be over.

Just another week and a half, and then it will be.

SEVEN



Kane

I KNOW that I messed up with Emma, but I'm determined to make it up to her. That's why I woke up early and made her breakfast. I got her flowers last night, and the bouquet is waiting to be carried out with her food.

Today is day one of trying to win her back. I take a deep breath as I gather up the tray and get ready to knock on her door.

My wolf sighs too. He doesn't understand this whole wooing process. He wants to just bite her and claim her already. His argument is that the full moon is in a couple of days, and he's sure she won't be able to resist us then.

I'm not so sure that he's right about that. She's not a shifter; she's a human. Who's to say that she feels the mating heat or the pull between us at all?

My wolf whines at that thought, and I try to comfort him as I head across the backyard to the guest house. I juggle the flowers and food to the side and knock on the door. I do my best to calm my racing heart as I wait for her to answer the door.

Emma pulls the door open, her hair piled up on top of her head in a messy bun. A few strands have escaped, and I want to push them back so that I can see her face clearer. She blinks, squinting up at me, and it's obvious that she was still asleep.

“Sorry, I didn’t even think about how early it was,” I apologize.

“S’okay,” she says through a yawn.

Her clear blue eyes are mixed with a touch of gray today, making them look cloudy, and I wonder if they look like that every morning. I’d love to find out.

My wolf nods in agreement, and I take a step closer to her.

“Late night?” I ask her, and she nods.

“Yeah, we went over to the Italian place by the ski lodge. It was a lot of fun.”

Jealousy eats at me, and I nod.

“That’s good. I wish I could have celebrated with you,” I tell her.

“We had fun. Now that we’re all out of school, we don’t get to see each other as much as I’d like to. It was nice to have a girls’ night.”

“Then I’m glad that you had a good birthday.”

My wolf whines, pawing at me. He’s reminding me that we should have been helping our mate celebrate her birthday.

I don’t need the reminder.

“I made you breakfast. I’m sorry that you had to work on your birthday, and I wanted to do something special for you.”

“Thanks,” she says, taking the tray from me.

I follow her inside, passing her the flowers when she sets the tray down.

“Thank you. They’re beautiful.”

“Just like you. Here, I got you a little something too,” I say, passing her the small present.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to.”

She smiles slightly, but it seems forced as she opens the wrapped present. The wrapping paper tears in strips and land

at her feet. She freezes when she sees the jewelry box, and I clear my throat.

“It’s not a ring,” I tell her.

“No, I know. The box is too big for that.”

She opens the lid to the box, and I watch her face as she lifts the necklace. I know that Emma likes necklaces. She never wears any other jewelry, not even earrings. She likes silver more than gold, so I bought her a silver necklace with a wolf and a heart dangling from the delicate chain.

“It’s so pretty,” she says, admiring the charms as they flash in the light.

“They made me think of you.”

My wolf chills out inside of me as she hooks it around her neck. We might not be able to have our bite mark on her neck just yet, but this will be a suitable filler until we can bite and mark her.

“It looks good on you,” I tell her as the necklace settles around her neck.

“Thanks.”

“Happy birthday,” I tell her, and she smiles.

She seems to be softening toward me, but I need to tread carefully still. I can’t blow this with her.

“What are you doing today?” I ask, changing the subject.

“I need to do laundry and…” she trails off, but her eyes drift over to the stack of boxes in the corner, and I can fill in the blanks.

My stomach sinks, and I swallow hard.

“Why don’t we go out and do something? I have a meeting with the other alphas here in a little bit, but I’ll be free after that.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’m sure that you’re busy with other things.”

“Not too busy for you.”

“Now,” she fires back, and I nod.

“I’m sorry about how I treated you. I swear that I’ll make it up to you.”

“It’s more than that. I’ve wanted you since I first saw you. You were all that I had for a while there. I couldn’t remember anything, and you were my lifeline. Then you just started pulling away from me, and I *still* wanted you, but you didn’t want me. You weren’t interested until fate declared it.”

“That’s not true.”

“Oh, really? Then how come you rarely checked in with me? How come you never took me up on my offers of lunch or dinner? How come you didn’t try to get to know me or spend time with me? If you wanted me, you would have done all of that, and you never did.”

She takes a deep breath, looking away from me, and I swallow hard. I want to reach for her, but I know that she would only push me away.

My wolf starts to pace inside of me. He knows that we’re close to getting kicked out of her place.

“I just, I wanted you to want me. I know you’re a shifter and love doesn’t really work that way for you guys, but it still sucks. I just wanted to know that you would have picked me too if fate didn’t exist.”

“I couldn’t,” I start to argue.

“I know. I don’t want to hear it. I need to get dressed, and you need to leave.”

“I can be a little bit late to the meeting,” I tell her, and she shakes her head.

“No, I don’t want you here. You need to leave.”

“Emma,” I start, and she shakes her head.

“Get out.”

My wolf whines low in his throat as we turn and head out of the guest house.

“I’ll be back,” I tell her, not giving up that easy this time.
“I’m going to make us some coffee.”

“No, that’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is. I’m going to prove to you that you’re wrong.
I’ve always wanted you, even before fate stepped in. I’ll prove
it to you tonight,” I promise her.

EIGHT



Emma

PART of me wonders if Kane will really come back for dinner tonight or if he'll be too busy for that. I know that he's trying to make up for how he's treated me the last few months, but I know Kane. He gets busy, wrapped up in a new project, and loses track of time. If he doesn't come tonight, it won't be on purpose.

Not that him flaking on me because he lost track of time is any better.

My phone buzzes on the kitchen counter, and I smile when I see Maddie's name on the screen. I told my friends about Kane being my mate yesterday when we went out for my birthday dinner. Well, actually, I didn't need to tell them. News had already spread around the pack.

We spent my dinner fielding congratulations and questions about me being the Alpha's mate. Luckily, we were in public so they couldn't be too prying.

A lot of the girls who came to ask me to confirm the news looked like they had been crying. They all looked so hopeful when they came up, and I could see them staring at my neck, looking for a bite mark. If they weren't looking hopeful, they were giving me death glares.

The constant interruptions kind of put a damper on the celebrations, but Maddie, Willa, and Isla helped to turn it

around. They kept me distracted and made me feel special. We didn't really talk about Kane or my feelings towards being his mate now, and I'm sure that Maddie is calling me now to discuss it.

"Hey," I answer the phone.

"Hey, feeling any older yet?" She asks, and I laugh.

"Still no."

She asked me that like ten times last night. It started as a joke when they found out that I hadn't really celebrated my birthday for the last eight years, but then, it turned into something else. It was like she was asking something else, but I'm not sure what.

"Have you talked to Kane yet today?" She asks.

"Yeah, he came by this morning. He brought me breakfast, some flowers, and a necklace."

"Aww, that was nice of him."

"Yeah..."

"Then what happened?"

"We got into a fight, and I kicked him out."

"What was the fight about?"

"He just keeps... saying the wrong thing."

"Yeah, I've heard that men do that."

I huff out a laugh and sigh as I sink down onto the couch.

"He wants me now, and I know in my head that this is just how it works for shifters, but my heart can't seem to get on board. I want him to want me. I want him to choose me."

"I know," she says softly.

"Like, if you turned out to be Jonas's mate, then no one would be surprised. He only has eyes for you. He wants you right now."

"No, he doesn't," she says with a laugh, and I roll my eyes.

"He does. Everyone can see it except for you," I tell her.

She scoffs, and I smile. I'm telling the truth. I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if Jonas and Maddie were meant to be. She doesn't want to face it, not yet anyway, and I'm sure that it's because she wants to leave town, and being with an Alpha from that section of town would just tie her to this place even more.

"He claims that he can prove that he wanted me before fate told him that I was his mate," I say, changing the subject.

"How's he going to prove that?" She asks me.

"I'm not sure yet. He's supposed to come back and make dinner for us tonight and tell me then."

"Do you think that he can?"

"I'm not sure. He seemed pretty confident this morning."

"Do you want him to be able to prove it? Do you want him to win you back?" She asks me, and I swallow hard.

That's the million-dollar question. I can't deny that I still want him. It's a small part of me, but it's still there. I'm still attracted to him, but that's not enough to keep me here.

"I don't know. I guess I'll have to see what he has to say."

"Listen, if you decide that you want to stay here instead of moving with me, I get it. I won't be mad or anything," she says.

"You won't be able to afford it without me."

"I have some money saved," she whispers, and I know that she doesn't want her mom to hear her.

"We'll have to see what happens with Kane first."

A knock sounds on my door, and my heart takes off, beating out of control against my ribs as I stand to answer it.

"I've got to go. He's here."

"Call me if you need anything," she tells me.

"I will," I promise. "I'll talk to you later."

We hang up, and I take a deep breath as I pull the door open. Kane is standing there with two plates in his hands, and

I step out of the way to let him in.

“I made dinner for us. Salmon with roasted potatoes and a Caesar salad. Your favorite.”

He’s right. That is my favorite meal.

“Is that your proof? Cause it’s pretty weak.”

“No, I have more.”

We take a seat at the tiny kitchen table, and I take a bite of salad.

“Did you know that I was the one who convinced my dad and the Alpha to keep you here?” He asks me.

I glance up at him, and he goes on.

“They wanted to send you to the hospital to be checked out and then have you sent to Anchorage because there would be more resources to care for you and a better chance of you finding your family. I begged them to let you stay here, to take you in. I knew then that you were going to be something to me.”

“So you say,” I whisper.

“I also wrote it,” he tells me, taking out an old notebook and sliding it across the table to me.

“I had to do an assignment for school. It was to write a paper on someone who has had an impact on our life. I wrote mine about you,” he tells me.

My appetite vanishes, and I reach out with shaky fingers to take the old notebook. I flip it open to the marked page and scan over the page. Kane’s handwriting is messy, a typical high school boys style, and I clear my throat as I start to read.

IT’S hard to pick just one person who has had an impact on my life. I could say my mom or dad, who certainly have helped form me into the person that I am today, but if I had to pick someone who had the biggest impact on me, I would say that it was Emma.

She's new to town and so brave. She lost her memories, and that has to be terrifying, but she never lets it get her down. She's strong, so much stronger than I think she even realizes.

She's smart too and so nice. She has the biggest heart of anyone that I've ever met.

I could list out a thousand of her good qualities, but the topic was about her impact on me, an impact that has been profound.

She's the first thing that I've ever fought for. I've always been happy to do as I'm told, to go with the flow, but the thought of Emma being sent off by herself was the first thing that wasn't okay with me.

There's something about her that clicks with me, and that click has changed me on a deep level. I'm willing to fight now for what I want, for what I think is right.

I've learned to be brave, like Emma, to always try to look on the bright side like she does.

She's the best thing that has happened to me and to this town.

THE PAPER GOES ON, but I've read enough. I've softened toward him. I can't believe that he did it, that he proved to me that he's always wanted me. I didn't think that he would be able to do that.

That crush that I had on him is back in full force, and I clear my throat as I look up at him.

He's watching me, his stare intense as he studies my reaction.

"Okay, I believe you," I tell him.

"I've always wanted you, Emma. It got harder over the years, and I think I started to avoid you then to avoid feeling that way. Unrequited love sucks," he says with a wry smile.

"Tell me about it."

We share a smile, and he scoots closer to me. A tingling sensation skates across my skin, and I can't help but wonder if this is the mating heat. The full moon is tomorrow night, and I've heard stories about how intense the mating pull can be.

Looks like I'm finally going to get to experience it.

"I'm sorry for pulling back from you. I shouldn't have treated you that way. It was just hard to be around you when I wasn't sure if you were mine or not. I felt guilty for wanting you when I could find my fated mate at any moment. It didn't seem fair. I was wrong to push you away, though. I'm sorry."

I nod, and he reaches out, taking my hand in his. His thumb rubs back and forth across my palm, and I shiver.

"What happens now?" I ask him.

"I'm going to romance you. I'm going to make up for avoiding you. Then, tomorrow..." he says, trailing off.

I can read between the lines, and I nod again. Excitement and nerves bubble in my blood, and I swallow hard.

"We should eat before it gets cold," I say, and he nods, sitting back in his chair.

"What did you do today?" He asks me as we start to eat.

"I did laundry and picked up around here. Maddie called me, and I talked to her for a bit."

"Maddie, that's Jonas's girl, right?" He asks me, and I grin.

"Yep."

"She turns eighteen in a few weeks, doesn't she?"

"Yeah, three weeks."

"That should be interesting."

"I know, right? Maddie doesn't think that he likes her."

"Seriously? Is she blind?"

I giggle, and he grins at me.

"I'm sorry that I missed your graduation. How was it?"

“Boring. It was over fast. I ended up going out with the girls after for dinner.”

“I was supposed to go and give the commencement speech,” he says, and I blink.

“Really?”

“Yeah, but then the fire happened, and I ended up helping out with the people who were trying to get away from the smoke. I ended up driving people to the hospital here in town until the early hours of the morning.”

“Well, at least you had a good excuse for missing it.”

He nods, and we both finish off our food.

“I can help you with the dishes,” I offer, and he shakes his head.

“I’ll get to them later. You relax.”

“Thanks for cooking.”

“Of course, it was my pleasure.”

We relax into small talk, and it’s just like old times. He’s the funny, caring man that I fell in love with.

It’s dark when he stands to leave, and I walk him to the door.

“Thanks for dinner,” I say shyly, and he smiles.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says, and I nod.

He stares down at me for a beat like he’s deciding on something. I watch him, my eyes widening when he leans down, his lips hovering above mine.

“Emma,” he whispers, and I nod.

His lips land on mine, and the world ceases to exist. There’s nothing but Kane and his lips on mine. He tastes like man, and I love it.

His hands grip my waist, and I lean against him, pressing my body against his. I get a wild thrill as I feel the hard muscles of his body on mine.

He pulls back, and I sway toward him.

“Good night, mate. I’ll see you in the morning with breakfast.”

“You don’t have to make me breakfast.”

“I want to. I want to take care of you.”

I melt toward him, and he smiles down at me softly.

“I’ll see you in the morning. Sleep tight.”

I nod, closing the door as he heads back toward the main house. I lean back against the door and smile to myself.

I can’t wait to see what Kane has planned for tomorrow.

NINE



Kane

WHEN I KNOCK on Emma's door the next morning, she's already up and rushing around.

"Come in! It's open!" She calls.

My wolf growls inside of me. Neither of us likes that she left her door unlocked last night. Something bad could have happened. Aspen Ridge is pretty safe, but there is still some crime here.

"You should lock your door from now on," I say as I open the door.

"Why? What's going to happen to me? Who would be dumb enough to do something when I'm literally in the Alpha's backyard?" She quips.

"Still," I say, closing the door behind me.

"Fine, your concern is noted."

"And you'll lock your doors in the future?"

"Yes," she agrees.

She rolls her eyes, and I want to call her on that, but let it go. After all, with any luck, she'll be in my bed tonight and every night after. We'll keep her safe.

My wolf nods in agreement, pleased with my plan, and I smile as I follow her into the kitchen.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I ask her.

“What? Oh, no. I forgot that I agreed to take Tracy and Kayla’s shifts today. They were just mated and wanted to spend the whole day with their mates. I need to be at work in like twenty minutes, and I can’t find my work shirt.”

My stomach sinks when I realize that we won’t be able to spend much time together today since she’ll be at work.

“I brought your breakfast. Why don’t you eat, and I’ll find the shirt?”

“Thanks. It’s got to be around here somewhere,” she says, digging through the laundry basket of clothes.

“Are these dirty or clean?” I ask as I start to dig through the basket.

“Clean. I just didn’t get around to putting them away last night.”

I nod, trying to find the maroon color of the shirt for the diner. I try to ignore my reaction when I touch her panties and bras.

When I woke up this morning, my wolf was almost feral inside of me. The mating heat was already so strong, stronger than I thought it would be. It was hard to concentrate on making breakfast for us or anything else, especially since I had to hold my wolf back from racing over to the guest house the whole time.

Her scent is driving us crazy, and I swallow down my desire as I finally spot her shirt and tug it out of the pile.

“Here we go,” I say, passing it to her.

“Thanks,” she says, popping a bite of scrambled eggs into her mouth before she takes the shirt and heads back to her bedroom.

I take a seat at the table and try not to envision Emma changing. I can hear the sound of her shirt slipping over her head, and I close my eyes, trying to tune it out.

Fuck, I want her. I want her so badly that it's hard to breathe and impossible to think of anything else.

"Thanks for breakfast, but I really have to get going," she says when she comes back into the kitchen.

"I'll walk you," I offer as she hurries to eat the last of her breakfast.

"Okay," she says, and I grab my toast before I follow her to the front door.

"About tonight," Emma starts as we head down the path.

"I'm not expecting anything from you," I interrupt her. "I know that I still need to make up for ignoring you this last year. I'll wait as long as you want to."

"I can feel it," she says softly, and I nod.

"Me too. I was starting to feel it last night, but it's so much stronger today."

"What are you going to do today while I'm at work?"

"Hang out in the diner," I tell her.

She laughs like I'm joking, but when I don't join in, she stops.

"Wait, really?" She asks, and I nod.

"Of course. I want to spend time with you, and this way, I'll be there if things get slow or when you go on a break."

We reach the diner, and I follow her inside.

"Which section is yours?" I ask her, and she nods to the left.

"You can sit there. I'll be with these tables."

I nod, taking a seat in a booth with the best vantage point. This way, I'll be able to keep an eye on her throughout her shift. I think that having my eyes on her is the only way to keep my wolf calm for the rest of today.

Emma heads to clock in and set her things in her locker in the back. I tap my fingers on the table until she walks back out. She smiles at me and heads over to my table.

“Did you want anything? Besides your toast?” She asks me.

“Sure, can I get a coffee?”

“Anything else?”

“Pancakes and bacon, please.”

“Got it. I’ll get that in for you.”

She walks away, and I watch her go. This isn’t how I imagined today would go. In fact, I had a whole day planned for us. I was going to take her breakfast and then up to the lake. I know that she loves it up there, but she doesn’t go that often.

I was going to bring a picnic lunch, and we could hang out by the water and eat. Then maybe take a hike or a stroll around the lake’s edge.

After that, we’d head home, maybe get cleaned up, and I would make us dinner. We could have a romantic meal, and then, well, then I had hoped that we could finally be mates.

Instead, I’m about to spend the next eight hours in the Full Moon Diner, begging for scraps of my Emma’s time. It’s at that moment that I realize that I’m in love with her.

Emma comes out behind the counter and heads my way, a pretty smile curving her full lips, and my heart flips over in my chest. My wolf sighs happily inside of me, and I know then that everything is going to be perfect between us.

TEN



Emma

I CAN'T BELIEVE that Kane actually spent the whole day at the diner. I could feel his eyes on me the entire time, and I'm not sure if it was that awareness or maybe the mating moon, but I was ready to tear his clothes off and beg him to take me.

The feeling only got stronger as each hour passed. Now that it's after seven at night and Kane and I are alone and on our way home, all I can think about is Kane biting me and then rutting inside of me.

Kane is the only one that I've ever fantasized about being with. He's the only man I've ever wanted, and it feels like a dream to finally be at this point with him.

"Are you tired?" Kane asks me.

"No."

"Hungry?" He tries again.

"Nope."

He takes a deep breath as his house comes into view.

"Emma."

"I need you to bite me," I tell him, and he tenses.

My voice barely sounds like mine. It's lower and filled with heat and just a touch of desperation.

Kane stops and turns to face me. I pause too, but my body is restless. I squeeze my legs together, needing the pressure to help dull the ache between my legs.

“Are you sure?” Kane asks me, and there’s no mistaking the tinge of excitement and desperation in his own voice.

“I’m positive. I want you.”

“Thank fuck,” he says, his shoulders sagging with relief.

I laugh, but it gets cut off when he grabs my hand and takes off toward the house. I’ve only been in the Alpha’s house once when Kane first moved in, and I had brought him a casserole.

I barely look around to see if anything has changed, not that Kane gives me much time. He’s in a rush as he pulls me upstairs and down the hallway toward the master bedroom.

His room is spotless, and I’m not surprised. Kane is a clean, neat guy and his place reflects that. His bed is made, and his clothes are hanging perfectly in the closet.

“Wait,” I say when he tugs me toward the bed.

He stops instantly and gazes down at me in concern.

“Can I... well, I’ve never seen your wolf. Can I meet him?”

I was never invited to any of the pack meetings and if Kane shifted, it was always in the woods. I rarely venture out that way. It brings back bad memories of when he found me. I had been so cold and scared before Kane rescued me.

“Of course,” he says, and I take a step back as he starts to strip off his clothes.

I try to keep my eyes on his face, but it’s too much temptation, and they drift south, snagging on his erect cock. Heat courses through my body once more at the sight of his tan skin, and an ache forms between my legs. I press my thighs together, trying to ease the pain, but it doesn’t help. If anything, it only seems to make the pressure stronger.

“Does it hurt?” I ask, forcing my eyes back to his face and trying to remember what’s supposed to be happening here.

“Shifting?” He asks, and I nod. “No, it’s natural. It happens fast too.”

I nod, staring at him, and he stares back. I’m starting to get used to the feeling I get every time his eyes are on me, and I settle on the bed, back against the pillows, as I watch him.

“Are you ready?” He asks, and I nod again.

I watch with wide eyes as he nods and takes a deep breath. He takes a step back, and then it starts to happen. His skin starts to change, fur growing as his face shifts, his nose lengthening as his teeth and nails grow. In less than a few seconds, he’s gone from the strong man I’ve grown used to over the last eight years to a giant gray wolf.

My breath catches in my throat as I take in the stunning animal before me, and I slide to the edge of the bed. The wolf walks up and rests his head in my lap, nuzzling me. My fingers sink into his soft fur, and I scratch his ears before I run my hand down his body.

The wolf lets out a sigh as he steps in further to me, rubbing up against my legs. I smile as it tickles against my bare skin. I scratch under his chin before he sits back on his haunches.

Kane’s wolf jumps up on the bed, curling up on the mattress beside me, and I lay back to look at him. I know that it might seem a little strange to be lying in bed with a wolf, but it feels natural.

This animal is part of Kane; it’s what makes him whole. I already love him, just like I love Kane.

I scoot up a bit more and lay my head down on the pillow and watch as Kane shifts back to his human form. He’s lying naked in bed beside me, and I blush as I stare at his thick cock that’s pointing right at me.

“Kane,” I moan, and he seems to understand me without me having to say anything else.

He reaches for me, tugging at my clothes as his lips land on mine, and I moan as he pushes my yoga pants down my legs. They get tangled around my ankles, and I kick them free, coming up for air as Kane pulls my shirt over my head and tosses it across the room.

“Watching you walk around in these tight pants, that full ass swaying back and forth, Jesus, Emma. You drove me wild.”

My temperature spikes at his words, and I reach behind me, unhooking my bra and tossing that aside next. Kane dives on my breasts, his large hands molding my breasts as he trails kisses all over them. His beard brushes against my sensitive skin, but it only acts to heighten the passion between us. I arch into his touch, offering more of myself to him.

His skin is hot against mine, like a brand, but it’s not the one that I want.

“Kane, please. I need you to bite me,” I beg him, and he nods.

He kisses his way up, his cock nudging against my opening, and I spread my thighs wider to make room for him.

“I’m going to mark you, mate. Don’t worry about that. Let me love you a bit first, though.”

I whine, and he grins, kissing me before he licks a path down my neck. A high-pitched sound escapes me as his tongue runs over my collarbone, and his fingers tease my nipples, pinching and rubbing over the stiff peaks until I’m dripping wet for him.

“Please!” I plead with him, and he continues his slow path south.

He elbows my thighs apart as he settles between them, and I feel his warm breath fanning over my drenched core.

I expect him to tease me even more, sure that he’s trying to drive me out of my mind, but Kane must be just as close to the edge as I am because he buries his face between my legs and eats me like he’s a starving man.

His beard rubs against my thighs and the delicate skin of my core. His tongue licks up my center, and I almost shoot off of the bed as he licks over my clit.

“Fuck!” I shout up to the ceiling, and I hear his dark laugh as he pins me to the bed and uses his mouth, teeth, and hands to drive me crazy.

My first orgasm hits me out of nowhere, catching me off guard. I’ve tried to get myself off a few times over the years and never had any luck. Twenty seconds beneath Kane, and I’m going off like a rocket. Maybe he was the missing piece the whole time.

He doesn’t stop after that, and he uses his tongue to lick up my juices and then eats me to another orgasm.

“Kane! Please, please, I need you,” I say, tugging on his arm to try to drag him up my body.

When he looks up at me, his eyes are glowing, and he looks like a wild animal. His cock nudges against my pussy, and he kisses my neck.

“Ready for me?” He whispers against my neck, and I nod, turning my head so that he has better access.

“Bite me, mate. Make me yours.”

His cock presses against my opening, and I feel the sharp sting of his teeth on my neck. It seems like time stands still as I wait for him to bite me and mark me as his.

He thrusts into me at the same time that he bites me, and I cry out, not in pain though, in pleasure. Another orgasm rolls through me as he licks the bite mark, sealing the wound.

“Kane,” I breathe, and he kisses me.

He starts to move slowly at first, letting me adjust to his size and the feeling of him inside of me. Soon though, he starts to lose control, and I can feel his pace grow harder and more erratic as he starts to lose himself in our lovemaking.

A scream gets lodged in my throat as he changes the angle slightly, his cock brushing over my clit with each thrust, and he growls above me.

“Give it to me, mate,” he snarls at me, and I gasp.

“Kane!” I scream, an orgasm rushing through me.

I come for minutes, hours, and days. All I can focus on is Kane and the place where our bodies are joined.

“Emma! Mate,” he groans as he finds his own peak.

I feel him come inside of me, his release hot as it hits my womb.

“Fuck,” he grits out.

He rests his forehead against mine as we both try to catch our breaths, and he huffs out a laugh. His brown hair is damp with sweat and sticking to his forehead slightly.

“Mate. Mine,” he whispers, and I nod.

“I’m yours,” I say, and I feel his cock swell inside of me.

We share a smile as he kisses me and starts to move inside of me once again. I have a feeling that it’s going to be a long, wonderful night.

ELEVEN



Kane

I WAKE up with Emma wrapped around me, and it's the happiest my wolf and I have ever been. My cock is still hard and buried between her legs. I can't resist taking a few shallow thrusts into her tight channel.

Emma moans, stirring on top of me, and I brush her hair away from her face.

"Good morning, beautiful," I murmur, and she gives me a sleepy smile.

"Morning. What time is it?"

"Um," I say, turning to grab my phone and check. "Just after seven."

"I can't believe that we're already awake. We barely slept last night."

"I've always been an early riser," I tell her, and she snorts.

"Figures."

"What about you? Are you a morning person?" I ask her.

"I am if you're inside of me," she says, grinding down on top of me.

"Fuck, mate."

She lets out a breathy moan, and I grin.

“I love it when you make that sound,” I tell her.

“Yeah? Make me make it again.”

“Your wish is my command.”

I roll her under me, and her pussy tightens around my length. Emma buries her face in my neck, nipping at my neck, and my cock twitches inside of her.

I give her a few lazy thrusts as my mouth finds hers, and she sighs against my lips. We make out slowly, our tongues twisting around each other as our bodies join together over and over again. Sweat coats our bodies as we continue to rock together, both of us straining to reach our peaks.

Her pussy starts to cinch up tighter around my length, and my dick hardens even more. My balls start to draw up, and tingles race up my spine as my own release starts to hit me.

“Emma,” I choke out, and she moans as she comes.

My pace falters, and I pound into her hard until she breaks apart around me. We find our release together, moaning into each other’s mouths as I release deep inside of her.

I roll us onto our sides, keeping us joined together as I stare into her clear blue eyes. Her dark brown hair is ruffled up in some places and matted on the side she was sleeping on. Seeing her soft and love drunk does funny things to my heart, and I can’t hold back the words anymore.

“I love you, Emma,” I whisper, and her eyes widen.

“You do?” She asks, and I grin.

“Of course. How could anyone not love you? You’re so sweet. I’ve seen the way that you help people. Every time there’s a food drive or anything for the community, you’re the first to volunteer to help out.”

“I want to help out the pack. I’m not a shifter, so it’s not like I can do much around here,” she says, and I shake my head.

“You have a big heart. A big, good heart.”

Her cheeks start to turn pink and my wolf and I both melt at how pretty and sweet she looks.

“I love you more than anything. I’m going to show you every day what you mean to me.”

“I love you too,” she says, and tears start to form in her eyes.

“Mate, don’t cry,” I object, rushing to dry them as a few spill onto her cheeks.

“I can’t help it. I’ve wanted this for so long. I just can’t believe that it’s finally happening.”

“It is. I’m going to give you everything that you want. I swear. I’ll be the best mate there is.”

“I know,” she says, wiping away the rest of the tears.

I wrap my arms tighter around her, rubbing my nose against hers.

“Now, does that greedy pussy need my cock again?” I ask her.

She gasps, her eyes darkening with lust, and I feel a fresh wave of wetness coat my cock.

“Can I be on top this time?” She asks, and I nod, rolling her on top of me.

“Anything that you want,” I tell her, gripping her hips.

She braces her hands on my chest as she starts to ride me, and I groan, my hold on her tightening.

“Goddamn,” I grit out. “You wouldn’t believe that I popped that good girl cherry just last night with how drenched and horny you are for it.”

She cries out at my words, and I know that she likes my dirty words, so I keep going.

“You can’t get enough of this big dick, can you, mate?”

“Kane!” She cries out, and I reach up, cupping her tits in my hands.

They're big, spilling over my palms, and my cock hardens as I watch them bounce and jiggle.

"Love seeing this curvy body riding my dick. You're going to come all over it, aren't you, mate?" I ask, and just like that, she falls over the edge.

She comes all over me, her juices sliding down the side of my cock and coating my balls. Feeling her go off around me has me reaching my own peak and I come with her.

"I love you, Emma," I say as she collapses on top of me.

"I love you too, mate," she says with a wide smile.

She slips off of my chest and rolls onto her side. I tuck her up against me and smile as she wraps her arms around my waist.

"What happens now?" She asks me, and I rub my fingers through her hair.

"Now we get you settled into this house, this room. We'll have to have a mating ceremony soon to announce my mate to the pack. Do you want to get married too?"

"You would do that? I didn't think that shifters really cared about all of that," she says.

"I would do anything for you. Plus, I like the idea of you wearing my ring and having my last name."

"Alright, but I expect an actual proposal."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I want a dog."

"A dog?" I ask, wrinkling my nose.

"Yeah, and I'd like to at least go to part-time at the diner. And to offer the guest house to Maddie."

"You have a lot of demands."

"Is that a problem?" She asks me, and I grin.

"No, I love it. Anything that you want, mate. It's yours," I promise her.

She smiles, cuddling against me, and I know that our future is bright. Emma and I are meant to be, and I'm going to give her everything that she wants. I'll do anything to make my mate happy.

My wolf curls up inside of me; for the first time in forever, he's just as at peace as I am. Content now that we have our mate.

An image of Emma pregnant with our baby fills my head, and I grin. I can't wait to see what the future has in store for us.

TWELVE



Kane

SIX MONTHS LATER...

“I DON’T UNDERSTAND why this is necessary,” I grumble as I climb out of the car.

“It’s going to be fun. This can be a huge milestone in a couple’s relationship,” Emma tells me.

“We’re in a fully committed relationship. We’re mated. We’re married. We’re having a baby!” I argue.

“Yeah, but this will just be another tie to each other. Are you really that grumpy about it?” She asks me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

My wolf practically purrs inside of me as our mate presses her body against mine. He turns into a teddy bear every time she’s close to me.

“If you want to adopt a dog, then we can adopt a dog,” I give in.

“Yay!” She squeals, and I smile.

I would do anything to make my mate happy. Including adopting a dog with her. My wolf snorts inside of me. He’s not exactly happy with the idea of adopting a little furball, either. He wants to be the only animal that Emma loves.

I rub her little baby bump, and she smiles down at her stomach. She's pregnant with our first. We found out we were expecting about a week after we tied the knot. It was a small ceremony in town with just the other Alphas and Emma's friends in attendance.

We had a mating ceremony where I introduced my mate to my pack and the rest of the Aspen Ridge Pack two days later. I think Emma was a bit uncomfortable being the center of attention, but she handled it well.

In the months since, she's been such a help with the pack. She's always willing to lend a helping hand to anyone in need. She's organized plans for a community park, and set up arts and crafts projects to bring the pack together and strengthen bonds. She even set up a monthly pack run. Comradery among my pack has never been higher and I owe all of that to my Emma.

"Let's go pick out a dog," Emma says, taking my hand and leading me into the animal shelter.

There aren't many animals here in Aspen Ridge, mainly because shifters don't really have much use for pets since we already have an animal within us.

Emma frowns when she walks in, and we pass by the first two empty cages.

"There might not be any," I warn her.

A dog whines, and she perks up.

"This way!"

I let her drag me down one aisle and up the next. The animal shelter is small; only two rows and a section up front for cats and smaller animals.

There are two cages with dogs in them down this aisle, and Emma grins as she looks down at their furry faces. My stomach sinks, and I sigh. I know before she says anything that we're about to adopt both of them.

"Aren't they cute?" She asks me, and I nod.

To be honest, they are pretty cute. They're both mutts, and it's hard to tell what they're a mix of. One looks like it's at least part cocker spaniel, and the other has to have a bit of terrier in it. The one on the left cage is the terrier, and they're black and white with long wire hair. The other one is a golden reddish color, and it wags its tail as Emma crouches down to pet it.

"Can we get both of them? They can be best friends," she coos as she sticks her fingers through the fence. "Plus, I hate to think of one being here all alone. That seems so sad."

"Yeah, we can get both."

"I wonder if they take volunteers here," she says as she pets the terrier next.

"I'll ask. Let me go find someone, and we can start filling out the paperwork."

Emma nods distractedly, and I head toward the front to find a worker.

"Alpha Kane!" Simon says, sitting up straighter behind his desk. "I didn't know that you were here, sir. I'm sorry; I should have greeted you when you came in."

"It's fine. My mate wants to adopt the two dogs you have here. She was also interested in volunteering."

"Of course! We'd love to have her. Let me grab some forms."

I wait as Simon grabs a few sheets and a clipboard and then lead him back to where Emma is still cooing over the dogs. I reach down, helping her to her feet.

"Mrs. Marnie, it's so good to see you again," Simon says.

"You too," she says with a smile as I tuck her against my side.

"Let me get you two collars and leashes on the house. I just need you to fill out these forms," Simon says.

I take the clipboard and start to fill out the information as Emma goes back to the dogs.

“I always wanted a dog. I remember being jealous of my friends when they got a puppy,” she says quietly.

Some of Emma’s memories from when she was a kid started to come back to her. It’s always vague things, nothing that would help her remember who she used to be or who her family was.

“I remember wanting one when I first got here too. I wanted a friend,” she says quietly, and my heart drops.

“I should have been a better friend to you then,” I say, and she shakes her head.

“It’s fine. You’re plenty nice to me now. Plus, we’re getting two more furry friends today.”

She wraps her arms around me, and I smile softly down at her. Emma has forgiven me for how I treated her before, but it still doesn’t stop me from trying to make it up to her every chance that I can get.

“I love you, mate. I’d do anything to make you smile.”

“I know. I love you too. Now, let’s take our new family members home.”

I nod, dropping a kiss on her curved lips before I turn back to the little pups.

“Yeah, let’s go home.”

THIRTEEN



Emma

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“YOU HAVE FUN, HONEY,” I tell my son, Rylan.

He’s got his dad’s brown hair, and I’m sure that he’s going to have his height. He’s already tall, especially for a four-year-old. Rylan got my blue eyes, though, and I smile as his twinkle up at me.

“Bye, mommy!” He says sweetly, and I kiss him goodbye before he races past Maddie’s legs and into their house.

“Big plans for tonight?” Maddie asks me, and I rub my swollen stomach.

“Well, if this guy doesn’t come tonight, then I’m hoping for a bit of peace and quiet,” I tell her.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” she says wryly as the kids run by behind her screaming and laughing.

“Thanks for watching Rylan for us tonight.”

“It’s no bother. I’ll have you return the favor in a month or two,” she says with a wide smile, and I laugh.

“Deal. Call me if you need anything; otherwise, one of us will be by to pick him up tomorrow morning.”

“Have a good night!” Maddie calls, and I wave as I head back to the car.

Kane is still at work. He’s helping out with setting up the blood drive at the hospital, though he should be done soon. I wonder if I’ll beat him home.

“Oh!” I gasp as a cramp hits me.

A spasm hits my lower back, and I let out a slow breath, rubbing my pregnant belly as I start down the road toward our house. I officially moved into the Alpha’s house after Kane and I were mated. Kane could barely wait until after the full moon to get all of my stuff moved into the master bedroom.

I pull into the driveway and park in my usual spot. Kane still isn’t here, so I head inside. I’m going to get a drink of water and maybe take a quick nap before he gets back.

Another cramp hits me, and I sigh.

“You’re not going to let me take that nap, are you, little one?” I ask my stomach and give it a little pat.

Another contraction hits, as if to say no, and I breathe through it before I head inside to grab the packed diaper bag and car seat. The nursery and everything have been ready for our newest addition to the family for months now. Kane likes to be prepared. I also think that he was just in a rush to get things done so I didn’t try to do them myself. Every time I even looked at a piece of furniture, he would jump to assemble it first.

I carry everything out to the backseat and climb behind the wheel to head to the hospital. At least Kane is already there.

The contractions are already coming closer together as I drive through town. My phone rings, and I hit accept.

“Hey, are you home?” Isla asks.

“No, I’m headed to the hospital,” I tell her, gasping as another contraction hits.

“Is it time?!?” She shouts, and I laugh.

“Yeah, it’s time.”

“Do you want me to come up there? Do you guys need anything?”

“Can you call Willa and Maddie and tell them what’s going on?”

“Of course. What else can I do?”

“Maybe help Maddie with Rylan tomorrow. I’m not sure when I’ll be ready to be sent home.”

“Got it! Let us know if you need anything else. Or when we can come visit!” She says.

“I will. I’m pulling in now, so I’ll talk to you later. I’m sure that Kane will text you updates.”

“Good luck! You got this.”

I hit end on the call and pull into the first open parking spot I find.

“Emma!” Kane shouts as he comes running out of the front doors.

He must have just been wrapping up the blood drive. I’m lucky that he was still here.

Asher and Roman, two doctors that work at the hospital, are right behind him, and I’m sure that he has the rest of the staff standing by. Everyone here treats me like I’m royalty. I guess, to them, I kind of am.

“I’m fine. We’re fine,” I promise him, and he frowns.

“Let’s have the doctors check and make that diagnosis.”

I roll my eyes as he takes the overnight and diaper bags from me and leads me over to where Roman is waiting with a wheelchair.

“Mrs. Marnie,” he greets me with a smile.

“You should have called me,” Kane says.

“I’m fine. I was dropping off Rylan, and the contractions started. They’ve been going on for like ten minutes.”

“How close are the contractions?” Asher asks.

“Four to five minutes.”

“Emma,” Kane growls, and I pat his hand.

“We’re fine,” I tell him again.

He grits his teeth, and I know that he’s going to be bossy and worried until our baby is born safely.

“Mr. and Mrs. Marnie! Are we ready to have a baby tonight?” My doctor, Kelly, asks as we’re wheeled into Labor and Delivery.

“So ready,” I say, squeezing Kane’s hand.

He smiles down at me and squeezes my hand back.

“Ready, my love?” He asks me, and I nod.

“Let’s do this.”

Want more Emma and Kane? Check out this bonus scene set ten years in the future! [Read it here!](#)

THE ALPHA'S PRIZE

*

He's won her, but not her heart.

Isla:

When the Alpha shows up at my doorstep one night and tells me that he's won me in a poker game, I wonder if this is some kind of bad dream.

It's not.

My dad actually bet me and lost me.

Now I'm living with the Alpha of the North Pack of Aspen Ridge, and I'm not sure where to go from here.

When I turn eighteen and learn that I'm fated to be Bishop's mate, I'm even more confused.

Now I need to figure out what I want.

Bishop:

Playing poker was supposed to be a way to bond as a pack and have some fun.

Then one of my members bets his daughter as collateral... and I win her.

When I collect my prize, I'm not sure what to do with her.

Not until the mating moon.

Now I might have messed everything up between us before we even started.

I need to figure out a way to make things right between us.

I just hope that it's not too late.

These Alpha shifters are about to fall HARD!

Come to the small town of Aspen Ridge, Alaska, and get ready to watch these swoon-worthy wolf and bear shifters fall in love with their fated mates!

ONE



Bishop

I SHOULD HAVE LEFT two hours ago.

Hell, I should have made up some excuse and skipped tonight altogether. I'm kicking myself now that I've been at this poker night for three hours. Most of the other members have already called it a night and gone home. The ones who are left are all sloshed, and my bear growls at the thought of making sure they each get home safe.

At least it's only four of us left.

I glance around the table at the remaining players. They're all members of my pack. This poker night was meant to be a way to bring the pack together, a bit of comradery. It's turning into a drunken mess, and I don't see it continuing past this month.

As the Alpha of the North section of the Aspen Ridge Pack, it's my job to check in with the members of my pack and make sure that everyone is happy and taken care of. We took in a few members of a nearby pack last month after a fire destroyed most of their town and pack land. I was trying to welcome them to the pack and let everyone get to know each other better and bond, so I came up with a few activities that we could do.

The picnic last month went well, and the pack runs are always a hit, but not all of my members are shifters, and I

wanted to be able to include everyone. I thought that the poker night would be some good fun. That hasn't been the case.

The night has dragged on for far too long. There were a few members who forgot that this was just for fun, and I had to break up a few fights earlier in the night.

My polar bear rolls his eyes as he remembers some of the younger members of the pack almost starting a brawl earlier in the night. They didn't last long.

I look over to the clock, noting the time as the next round is dealt out. It's me, Julia Canner, Mitchell Abbot, and Greg Renner left. I have the biggest pile of chips next to me, probably because I'm the only one here not tipsy or half asleep. Julia looks like she's going to fall asleep at any minute, and I know that she's only stayed this long because she has three new pups at home and wanted a break from them.

Greg, to my left, is the drunkest of all of us, and I'm surprised that he can still sit upright. He lost his wife a few years ago and hasn't been the same since. Not that I blame him. If I had lost my mate, I would be inconsolable too.

"You're call, Alpha," Mitchell says, and I nod.

It's time to end this game and get everyone home. My polar bear nods in agreement. He wanted to go home hours ago too.

I glance at everyone's chips, doing the math.

"I raise."

I toss in enough chips so that Julia and Mitchell both have to go all in. Greg has a small pile left in front of him, and I know that if I don't knock him out with this hand, then I will with the next.

Julia and Mitchell both call. I think that they just want to end this game as much as I do.

"Call," Greg slurs, and my bear sighs inside of me.

We flip over our cards, and Julia and Mitchell groan good-naturedly as they stand and shake my hand.

“Good game. We’ll see you later.”

I tell them goodnight, double-checking that they’re safe to get home. They live next to each other, and neither is swaying or stumbling, so I let them go and turn back to Greg. He’s trying to deal out the cards, and I bite my tongue.

“I’ve got a good feeling about this hand,” he tells me, and I force myself to nod.

“Me too.”

I glance at my cards. You have got to be kidding me. I’m holding a straight flush. I wonder if he even shuffled the cards.

“Call,” I say, and he blinks sluggishly at his cards.

“How about a little wager,” he says, eyeing the stack of chips in front of me.

“Sure.”

That’s literally what we’re doing, my bear growls, and I bite back a sigh.

“I’ll match your chips and bet you this.”

He scribbles something down on a napkin, and I don’t even bother glancing at it. This is all for fun. No one is winning anything, but he must have forgotten about that.

“Sure. All in.”

I push my chips to the center of the table, just happy to be ending this game and getting to head home soon.

“All in. Read ’em and weep!” He cackles.

He tosses his cards on the table, and I frown. He has a pair, but that’s it. I lay my cards down, and his laughter cuts off.

“Oh,” he says weakly, and I force a smile to my lips.

“Good game. Now, let’s get you home.”

I rake in the chips, putting them back in the box quickly. I do the same with the cards; then, all left on the table is the napkin. I grab it, my eyes glancing at the words on it. I freeze when I see what he bet.

“Isla?”

“My daughter,” Greg says as he stumbles to his feet. “She’s a good girl.”

“You bet your daughter? With a pair?” I ask in outrage.

He mumbles something, and I shove the napkin into my pocket as I hurry to catch up with him. He leans on me heavily as I navigate us out of the community center and towards his place. He has a small house on the outskirts of town, and I try to rein in my anger as we make our way there.

How could anyone bet a person? How could any man bet his own daughter? It’s obvious that he’s out of it, probably doesn’t even know that he did it, but still. I can’t leave this girl, this Isla, to stay with him. Who knows what else he’ll do?

We make it to his house, and I see that the porch light is on, along with one more light inside. A small figure moves in front of it, and my polar bear sits up inside of me.

I grit my teeth, trying to keep my cool as I carry him up the front porch steps. The house is looking a little run down, and guilt swamps me. I should have been checking in on them. I should have done a better job of making sure that they were okay after Mary died.

Greg is mumbling to himself, his head hung and swaying slightly as I shuffle him to the side and knock on the front door. I’m carrying more and more of his weight, and I wonder if he’s close to passing out.

I’m going to need to have a talk with him tomorrow about his actions and conduct tonight, but I know that it’s no use until he’s sobered up.

Right now, I need to have a talk with my little prize.

TWO



Isla

WHEN I HEAR the knock on the door, I'm not surprised. I'm actually relieved. My dad has been brought home by someone in town at least once a week since my mom passed away two years ago.

Now that he's home safe, at least I can finally go to bed, I think with a yawn.

I've been in my pajamas and pacing, waiting up for him, for a few hours. Normally, he would have been home by now. I was starting to get a little worried. I've already stress-cleaned the whole house and finished up some work for a new client. I'm almost done with their branding package. A few more hours of work and I'll be able to start on the next client's order.

"Coming!" I call as I hurry over to open the door.

My stomach and mouth drop when I see Bishop, the Alpha, holding my father up.

"Oh no," I whisper.

"It's about to get worse," he tells me in his deep gravelly voice, and I wince.

"What did he do?" I ask him.

"Can I put him down somewhere?" He asks, and I nod, hurrying to get out of their way.

“His bedroom is just right down there. At the end of the hall,” I tell him, hurrying to turn on the hallway light.

Bishop half carries, half drags my father’s unconscious body into the bedroom and lays him down on the bed. I move forward, pulling off his shoes and throwing the comforter over him. He’s out cold, and I swallow down the anger and disgust as I look down at him.

My dad used to be the best. He was such a good dad, and he treated my mom and me like we were the most precious things in the world. Then my mom died, and he went off the deep end.

Anger surges through me, filling my bloodstream. I hate thinking about that period. I was grieving the loss of my mother, and I needed my dad. I needed him more than ever before. We should have been growing closer and leaning on each other. Instead, he abandoned me. He left me to drown in my sorrow and loss while he went out and got drunk every night of the week. He crawled into a bottle, and no amount of pleading, begging, or threats from me has been able to drag him out.

“We need to talk,” Bishop says, and I swallow hard, nodding.

“Sure. This way.”

He follows me back out to the living room, and I cross my arms over my chest as I turn to face him.

“What did he do?” I ask, and even I can hear the resignation and bitterness in my voice.

“He comes home drunk a lot,” Bishop says, and it’s a statement, not a question, so I don’t bother answering.

Bishop sighs, digging in the pocket of his jeans and pulling out a napkin. He passes it to me, and I frown as I take it from him.

“What’s this?” I ask, unfolding the napkin and glancing down at it.

My name is scrawled on the napkin in my father's familiar handwriting, and I look up at Bishop in confusion.

"What is this?" I ask again, and he shifts on his feet.

"Your father and I were the last two to play poker tonight. He bet more than he had, and so he gave me this as part of the bet."

"He what?" I gasp out.

My heart breaks in my chest, and I stagger back a step. *No. No, he wouldn't do that. I know that my dad hasn't been the best in the last few years, that he's been lost just like I have since we lost mom but he would never bet me. He would never do something like that to me. He wouldn't.*

"No," I say, and Bishop sighs.

"Listen, um..."

"Isla," I supply.

"Right, sorry. Listen, Isla, I know that it's hard to believe, but he did it. You need to pack a bag."

"For what?" I ask, backing up a step and hitting the wall.

"You're coming home with me."

"Like hell I am," I spit out.

"You are. Your father bet you, and I won you."

"Fuck you," I spit at him, and he frowns.

"I won you," he starts, and I interrupt him.

"I'm not a prize or an object," I snarl back at him.

"You're my prize. Now, pack a bag. Now," he orders.

He's using his Alpha voice on me. It might be scary or work if I was a shifter, but I'm not.

"I'm not going with you."

"Yes, you are. Now, you can either pack a bag and come with me, or I can throw you over my shoulder and carry you back home."

I glare at him, and he glares right back. I'd never tell him or anyone else this, but I've always kind of had a crush on Bishop. I know that most girls have crushes on at least one of the Alphas of Aspen Ridge Pack, but for me, it's always been him.

It was just a silly little crush, though. He never paid any attention to me, and I never really talked to him either. I don't really know him, and so the crush never blossomed into anything else.

Now that crush is quickly dying.

I spin on my heel and stalk back to my bedroom. I grab my backpack and dump out the old school supplies that are still in there. I graduated a few weeks ago but haven't done much with any of my old school work or supplies yet.

"I should just leave with Maddie," I grumble to myself as I shove some clothes and toiletries into my backpack.

There's still time. Maddie, one of my best friends, is planning on leaving town in a few weeks. Emma was going to go with her, but that's before she realized that Kane, her guardian and the Alpha of the East pack, was her mate. She'd been in love with him for years, and I'm glad she's with him and happy now.

I wish that I could call my friends now. Maddie, Emma, and Willa would be able to cheer me up and help me come up with a plan on what to do now. Unfortunately for me, it's after midnight, and I'm sure they're all fast asleep.

I sigh as I zip up my bag. I'll be back home tomorrow so I don't know why I'm even doing this.

"Ready?" Bishop asks, and I jump.

I didn't even hear him come down the hallway. Someone as big as him shouldn't be able to move so quietly.

"I should stay here," I try, and he shakes his head.

"No. Now, am I carrying you or are you walking?"

"Carrying," I say, widening my stance.

He just rolls his eyes at my tough-girl act. He crosses the room in three steps, and I yelp when he tosses me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing. He grabs my bag and spins on his heel, carrying me out of the room.

“Put me down!” I yell.

“No.”

He carries me out of the house and closes the door behind him. I stare at the ground as he walks. It looks so far away, and I’m reminded just how tall Bishop is.

“This isn’t how I thought you would be carrying me,” I grumble.

“You didn’t think I would do it at all,” he retorts, and I sigh.

He has a point. I’m a big girl; I’ve always been curvy or plus-size. I didn’t think that Bishop would want to carry me all the way back to his house.

“I didn’t think that you would be able to,” I admit, and his pace falters.

“I’m a freaking polar bear shifter, and you’re a tiny little human. Of course, I can carry you. I could carry you for days.”

He sounds so offended, and I bite back a smile.

“You just didn’t seem that strong, I guess,” I tell him, and his grip on me tightens.

“I know what you’re doing,” he grumbles.

“Hmm?” I ask innocently.

He shuffles me a bit higher, and I grunt as I land back on his hard shoulder. I can’t tell where we are or how much further we have to go.

“I can walk.”

“I can carry you! You’re not even heavy,” he says as he stomps through the woods.

“I mean that this isn’t comfortable.”

“Oh.”

Without a word or warning, he swings me into his arms, and I gasp as my arms wrap around his neck, and I cling to him.

“Better?” He asks, and I gape at him.

“In some ways. Worse in others,” I mumble.

“What?” He asks.

“Nothing.”

I look anywhere but at him. Our faces are too close, and this feels too intimate. I’ve never even held hands with a guy before, and now my face is like an inch from his. I’m in his arms, his warm body pressed up against mine, his strong hands cupping the back of my thighs and my back.

“We’re home,” he tells me, and I’m not sure if I’m relieved or disappointed to be out of his arms.

He sets me back on my feet on the front porch, and I turn to take in his house. I knew where he lived, but I’m rarely up this way. He lives in a house in the northernmost part of the pack land.

He has a two-story house that’s half hidden in the forest. It’s close to a mountain, and somehow, I know that this place suits him.

“I’ll show you around in the morning,” he tells me, ushering me inside and up the stairs.

“That’s not necessary.”

He rolls his eyes, and I glare at him as he pushes me up the last few stairs and down the hallway.

“This is the guest room. You can sleep here. My room is right next door.”

“Okay,” I say, drawing the word out. “Is that a threat?”

“Oh my god,” he groans. “I’m too tired for this. I’ll see you in the morning. Good night.”

He sets my bag down on the dresser and then closes the door as he leaves. I stare at the closed door and then look

around the room.

There's a queen-sized bed in the center of the room and a small bathroom off to the left. A closet to the right, but I don't explore any of that. Instead, I wander over to the big bay window and stare out at the view. The mountains seem so close, and I get lost in the scenery. It seems so peaceful here. Maybe I shouldn't be fighting staying here so much. At least it would be a break from taking care of my dad.

I sigh as I turn back to the room. I can't think about my dad right now. I'm too tired. I need to sleep on it, and then I'll deal with this mess tomorrow.

I pull back the comforter and climb into bed, trying to ignore the way that my core clenches at the thought of Bishop half undressed in the room next to mine. His scent envelopes me, and I feel safe. I close my eyes, trying to let all of the drama from today go as I drift off to sleep.

THREE



Bishop

I'M EXHAUSTED, but I stay up, straining to hear every sound coming from next door. I know that she's not exactly thrilled to be here, but what was I supposed to do? I couldn't very well just leave her there with a dad who was willing to bet his only daughter in a dumb poker game.

I need to talk to Greg tomorrow. It's probably a good thing that he was too wasted to have that conversation tonight because I'm pissed off enough to have ripped him to shreds over this stunt.

What if I hadn't been there? What if someone else had won her?

My gut clenches with worry and stress so I push those thoughts away. I don't know what it is about Isla, but it feels like she's getting under my skin. I'm used to people, especially members of my pack, being submissive around me, but she's not. She pushed back against me at her house and again on the walk. She tried to push my buttons, something that no one had ever done before.

That must be it. She's an anomaly. That's why I'm so interested in her. My polar bear stretches inside of me. He's ready for bed, and I take a quick shower. I hate to think about washing her scent off of me, and my bear snarls.

We should only want our mate's scent on us, he reminds me, and I nod.

I know. I'll get it together. I'm just tired and stressed out. I'll be thinking clearly after a good night's sleep, I promise him.

What am I going to do about her dad? He's a human so I don't have any real control over him. I can't force him to do anything like I could order around another shifter. He needs to go to rehab or some kind of program, but how do I get through to him and convince him of that?

What am I going to do with my little prize?

She shouldn't go home, not until I know that she'll be safe there and I've talked to her father and gotten him some help.

She'll have to stay here then. I try to ignore the way that my heart starts to race at the thought. My polar bear growls at me, but I ignore him.

I crawl into bed and try to forget about the curvy little redhead next door. My phone buzzes, and I roll over, glancing at the screen before I hit answer.

"Mack, is everything okay? It's pretty late."

"You tell me," Mack says.

He's the Alpha of the West pack of the Aspen Ridge Pack. He was in the military and came back to take over as Alpha after his father passed away a couple of years ago.

"What do you mean?" I ask him

"I heard that you were carrying some girl back to your house. Did you find your mate or are we kidnapping people now?"

"Kidnapping," I tell him, and he huffs out a sigh.

"What really happened?"

"It's a long story."

"Anything that you need help with?"

"No, I can handle it. Thanks though."

“Of course. Let me know if anything changes.”

“I will.”

“You know, I was hoping that she was your mate and you had finally found her.”

“She’s not,” I promise him, but there’s a niggling feeling in my gut that warns me that I might be wrong about that.

“Alright, I’ll see you later.”

“Alpha meeting in a few days.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then.”

“Night.”

“Night.”

We hang up, and I toss my phone onto the bedside table. I can hear Isla’s slow, even breathing in the room next door, and I know that she must be asleep. I take a deep breath, trying to relax, and my bear stirs inside of me. We can smell the storm brewing in the air, and a second later, the first drops of rain ping off the window pane.

Looks like we’ll be trapped inside tomorrow. I wonder if that will be a good thing. At least I’ll be able to talk to her and find out if her father has done anything else shady or that I need to be worried about.

Her breathing stalls, and I hear the bed creak as she sits up. A bolt of lightning illuminates the bedroom, and I stand up, too, heading out into the hallway and knocking on her door.

“Isla? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she says, but I know that it’s a lie.

“I’m coming in.”

It isn’t until I push open the door that I remember I’m only wearing a pair of boxers. It’s too late now to back out of the room. She looks at me, and I can see the fear in her eyes.

“You don’t like storms,” I guess, and she nods.

“Never have,” she admits. “I know that it’s childish.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s normal,” I try, and she eyes me suspiciously.

“I’ll be fine in a little bit,” she says, and I can tell that it’s a lie.

“Sure. Come on,” I take her hand before she can protest and drag her over to my bedroom.

I turn on the bathroom light and then close the door so that just a sliver of light illuminates the room.

“Come here,” I tell her, and she moves to the side of the bed timidly.

We both climb on at the same time, and I pull her closer to me.

“I’ll keep you safe,” I promise her.

“Okay,” she says softly.

I can tell that she doesn’t really trust me just yet, but she closes her eyes. A clap of thunder sounds just outside, and Isla’s hand shoots out and grabs mine. Her little fingers squeeze around mine, and I squeeze her back.

“I’ve got you,” I whisper, and she takes a deep breath.

Her eyelids flutter closed, and I take a deep breath, keeping watch over her until she’s drifted off to sleep. Only then do I let my own eyes close and let sleep claim me.

FOUR



Isla

I SLEPT WITH BISHOP.

I *slept* with Bishop.

I've been staring up at the ceiling, *his* ceiling, and thinking that over and over again since I woke up fifteen minutes ago.

I slept with the Alpha.

Oh my gosh. He was practically naked. His bare skin was touching mine. We HELD HANDS.

I roll over, burying my face in the pillow and groan. His scent surrounds me, and I try to ignore his smell so I can clear my head and figure out what I want to do now.

My dad bet me. He lost me in a poker game. I don't even know what that means. Bishop can't own me, so what did my dad bet? What did he lose? What do I have to give Bishop?

Tears sting my eyes as I think about my dad betting me so easily. I must mean nothing to him. I wonder if he even remembers what he's done. Will he wake up this morning and wonder where I am? Will he be horrified at what he's done? Or will he just shrug it off?

I can't go home. I don't want to. My father might not have hit rock bottom, but I've reached my limit. I don't want to pick up after him anymore. I don't want to stay up late, worried that he's too drunk to make it home anymore.

Knowing that my dad bet me is heartbreaking, but maybe it's also kind of a blessing. He severed the ties between us, and now I'm free to move on and live my life.

A pan clatters downstairs, and I roll over in bed, sitting up. I had thought that maybe Bishop had left already, off to do Alpha duties. I guess that I should go downstairs and face him. I need to try to figure out what the heck to do with my life now.

I throw my legs over the side of the bed and pad down the stairs. Rain is still pattering on the windows, but the worst of the storm seems to be over. I try to push away memories of Bishop holding my hand last night as I slept.

I head toward the back of the house, where I assume the kitchen is. His place is a lot bigger than I was expecting. It's a lot bigger than my own house too. I kind of like it. My house has been making me feel claustrophobic lately, but there's so much space and open areas here. It feels like I can finally take a deep breath after drowning for so long.

"Morning," I say as I join him in the kitchen.

He spins around, holding the frying pan in one hand.

"Morning."

His eyes roam over me, and I take him in too. His dark brown hair is still mussed from sleep, and it makes him look more approachable. His dark brown eyes track me as I move around the kitchen closer to him.

"It's still raining," he warns me, and I nod.

"I'm okay with it during the day," I tell him.

He breathes a sigh of relief and turns back to the stove. His demeanor changes right in front of my eyes, and he's back to being the stoic, loner Alpha that I'm used to. The sweet, caring guy that I caught a glimpse of is gone, and it's back to business with him.

"I was trying to make us breakfast. I have to go check on the pack and make sure that everyone is okay after the storm last night."

“I’m not that hungry,” I tell him. “I don’t usually eat until later in the day. Besides, I can just grab something from town later.”

“You’ll be staying here today,” he informs me, and I snort.

“No.”

“Yes. I need to go out, and you’ll be staying here.”

I grit my teeth. I don’t like him bossing me around, but I get the feeling that if I push back, he’s going to tie me to a bed or something to make sure that I stay put so I bite my tongue instead.

“So, no breakfast then?” He asks, and I shake my head.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Okay. Then I’m going to get dressed and head out. There’s a TV in the living room and movies in there.”

“I brought my laptop. I just need the WIFI password, and I can get some work done,” I say, and he frowns.

“I don’t have internet here.”

“What?” I shout. “How is that possible?”

“I just haven’t needed it.”

“Well, I do,” I inform him.

He shrugs, walking past me, and I bite back a snarl. He’s driving me crazy. He can go from being almost sweet to a jerk in the span of a breath.

He puts his shoes on and grabs a raincoat before he turns back to me.

“I’ll be back in a bit.”

So will I.

“Sounds good.”

He leaves, and as soon as he’s gone, I run upstairs and into the guest room. I pull on a change of clothes and stuff my pajamas into my backpack before I sling that over my shoulder and jog back downstairs.

I text Emma, Willa, and Maddie as I start walking down Bishop's driveway toward the center of town.

ISLA: We need to meet. NOW.

Emma: Diner?

Isla: No, somewhere private.

Emma: Kane is gone. Come here.

Isla: On my way.

Maddie: Be there in ten.

Willa: I'll bring donuts!

I SHOVE my phone into my pocket, flipping up the hood of my sweatshirt as I make my way toward Emma's place. It takes me fifteen minutes to get there, and by the time I do, Willa and Maddie are already there and waiting for me.

"Here," Emma says, giving me a towel to dry off a bit with.

"Thanks."

I do my best to wring out my hair. I hang up my sweatshirt and drop my shoes and backpack next to the heater to dry out a bit.

"What's going on?" Willa asks as she passes me a donut with sprinkles.

"Um," I say, and tears fill my eyes at the thought of having to say out loud what my dad did.

"Isla," Emma says in concern, wrapping me up in a hug.

"It's okay," Willa says, and Maddie nods.

"The poker game last night," I start. "My father went to it. He was one of the last ones there, but he didn't have a lot of chips left, I guess... so he bet me."

"What?" Maddie shouts.

“Come again?” Willa asks, blinking like she’s sure that she must have misheard me.

Emma is staring at me in shock, and I nod.

“He lost.”

“So... who won?” Emma whispers.

“Alpha Bishop.”

The room goes silent as that sinks in, and they all share a look.

“So... I...” Maddie stammers, and I nod.

“Yep. He came home with my dad last night and told me what happened. Then he took me back to his house. He ordered me to stay there today while he’s out, but I just couldn’t.”

“And your dad?” Willa whispers, and I swallow hard.

“I don’t know. He was drunk off his ass and basically unconscious when Bishop carried him inside last night. He hasn’t tried to call me or anything. He’s probably still asleep. Or maybe he doesn’t even remember what happened.”

“What are you going to do now?” Maddie asks me, and I shrug.

“I don’t know. I can’t go home. I just can’t.”

“You don’t have to,” Willa promises me.

“Yeah, you can stay with Bishop. He’ll keep you safe,” Maddie says.

“Plus, it’s not like he’s going to do anything nefarious just because he won you in a bet,” Emma adds. “You’re not his fated mate.”

Emma’s words are meant to be comforting, but for some reason, all I feel is a hint of despair at the thought of Bishop with his fated one.

They have a point about Bishop not doing anything to hurt me, though. Still, it feels wrong to stay with him. Like I’m a burden or a leech.

“Let’s talk about something else!” Willa suggests, offering me another donut. “Something lighter.”

“What do you want to do for your birthday tomorrow?” Emma asks with a wide smile.

“Um...”

Normally, I would be doing something with my dad, but now...

“I’m not sure. Maybe a movie day? What’s the weather supposed to be like? More rain?”

“We could do a movie day here,” Emma suggests. “We’d have the guest house to ourselves and could order some junk food and just relax.”

“That sounds great,” I sigh.

They start to talk about movies we can watch and what food we should get, and I paste a smile on my face and nod along. Talking it out with them helped a bit, but it still leaves me with one big question.

What am I going to do next?

FIVE



Bishop

I KNOW that Isla left yesterday. I got home late last night, and she was smiling at me from the couch. If that mischievous grin that she gave me didn't give her away, the scent of Kane and his mate Emma all over her would have. I was too tired to scold her last night so I let it go.

I figured that we would talk about it today when I woke up. Then I would leave the house again to go over to her dad's place and talk with him. I meant to do it yesterday, but there was more damage than I expected from the storm so I never quite made it out that way.

When I woke up this morning, I could feel it. Something is different. Something has changed.

My polar bear is on edge, antsy inside of me, but I don't know why. I sit up in bed, looking around to try to figure out what this strange feeling is. There are no weird sounds coming from the room next door or anywhere else in the house. I stand and make my way over to the window to look around. I don't see anything out of place there, either.

I take a deep breath, and that's when it happens.

Mate.

My polar bear lunges inside of me, and I spin on my heel and race out of my bedroom and to the guest room next door. I

fling open the door, too excited to get to my mate to worry about knocking.

The bed is empty, and I frown, turning again and heading down the stairs. I search all over the bottom level of my house before I growl.

“Where could she have gone?” I grumble to myself.

Find her! My polar bear yells at me. *Find her and mark her!*

We’re on the same page about that, and I jog back upstairs and into my room to get dressed. She can only be a few places, and I make a mental list of them as I head out my front door and make my way towards town.

I make it to the center of town and breathe deeply. There’s no trace of her scent here, and I curse under my breath as I head towards her father’s house. Her scent is faint on the way there, and I’m assuming that it’s old, but I still go up to the house and knock on the front door.

No one answers, and I pace around for a moment before I knock impatiently again. There’s no sound of movement inside, and I spin and race toward the East territory. She was with her friends yesterday so she must have gone to see them again today.

Faster! My polar bear yells at me, and I grit my teeth, holding in the curse as I sprint through the forest towards Kane’s house. I would shift, but there are too many tourists around who could see me right now.

I cut across Main Street, ignoring the people who try to get me to stop and talk to them. I’m on a mission to get to my mate and make her mine.

Her scent is stronger as I get close to their place, and I take a deep breath. She smells so sweet, like sugar and vanilla. My mouth is watering before I even get to the front door. I knock harshly, tapping my toe as I wait for someone to answer it.

“Um, hi,” Kane’s mate says as she answers the door.

“Emma, right? Is Isla here?”

“Yeah, she’s—”

I push past her before she can finish her sentence and head toward the back of the house. I follow Isla’s scent into the living room and pause when I see her sitting on the couch between two other girls. Her red hair is twisted up into a messy bun on top of her head, and she looks beautiful. Her blue eyes widen when she sees me standing there, and I’m sure I must look like a beast. To be fair, right now, I kind of am.

Mark her! My polar bear snarls at me, and I swallow hard, holding him back as I stare at my mate.

“It’s time to go,” I tell her, and she frowns.

“What?” She asks in confusion.

“We’re going home,” I tell her firmly.

“No, I’m good here.”

“It’s time to go,” I stress to her.

I’m halfway to her before she can protest again, and I swing her up in my arms.

“Put me down!” She shrieks, but I just tighten my grip on her and head back out the front door.

I start running with her in my arms, ignoring her protests. I can feel a sense of calm settle over me as we get closer to our house. Her scent fills my lungs and makes me dizzy with want.

Our house comes into view, and my polar bear roars inside of me. We’ve got her. We’re going to claim our mate, and in two days, on the night of the full moon, we’re going to finally be with our fated mate.

Suddenly, I’m grateful that I went to that poker game the other night.

I kick the front door closed behind us and set her down on her feet, leaning her back against the door as my mouth swoops down to her neck.

“What the hell are you doing?” She yells at me, pushing me away from her.

Her hand comes out of nowhere, and she slaps me across the face. I stumble back a step in shock, my cheek stinging. I glare at her, and she glares right back.

My polar bear roars inside of me in approval. We have a strong mate.

“I’m biting you,” I tell her.

I forgot that she was human. I’ll have to explain shifter and fated mates to her a little more, I guess. No problem. I’ll explain it, and in five minutes, I’ll be sinking my teeth into her perfect skin.

“Like hell you are,” she spits at me.

“We’re fated mates. Did Emma not tell you about this?” I ask her.

“No, I mean, kind of, but that’s not what I mean.”

“What?” I ask in confusion.

“I’m not your mate.”

“You are. I can smell it. You’re meant to be mine.”

She scoffs, and I frown.

“Listen, Bishop, I’m sure that as the Alpha, you’re used to getting what you want, but this isn’t how regular people do it,” she says, motioning between us. “You might have won me in that bet, but I’m not going to be yours.”

With that, she turns and storms upstairs to the guest room. I watch her go in confusion.

What the heck do I do now?

And how did I mess all of this up so badly?

SIX



Isla

OF COURSE, *I'm his fated mate.*

I know I've always had a crush on him, but I don't want him. Not like this. My core clenches, and I frown. Okay, I do kind of want him.

Ugh, I don't know what I want.

I pace back and forth around the guest room and try to sort out my messy thoughts. I've been trying to figure things out for the last half an hour without any luck.

A knock comes at the door, and I grind my teeth together.

"Go away!" I yell to him.

He doesn't listen. Of course. He never listens to me.

"I thought that you might be hungry," he says as he opens the door.

I sigh, rolling my eyes.

"I'm not," I tell him.

"I'm sorry, Isla."

Hearing him apologize catches me off guard, and I glance at him.

"I just got excited. I got carried away when I smelled you this morning. I didn't expect to find my fated mate so easily,

and my polar bear just took over,” he tells me.

“So, you never thought I could be your fated mate then. So, you didn’t want me before this morning, then.”

“What? No... I, um...” he stammers.

“Sure,” I mumble.

Pain slices at me, and I try to swallow down the hurt. I always thought that I would fall in love like in the movies. It would be slow; the guy would sweep me off my feet. He would want me just as much as I wanted him. He would love me as much as I loved him. Instead, it’s like bam! And suddenly Bishop, a guy who didn’t give me a second look before, is head over heels for me.

My head spins, and I take a step back from the bed and him. He sighs, setting the tray of food down on the bed.

Logically, I know that Bishop didn’t do anything wrong here. He’s a shifter, and this is just how things work for them. He wouldn’t have loved or wanted me or anyone else before he found his fated mate. I can’t help the way that I feel now, though, either.

“What do you want me to do?” He asks me, and I swallow.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I just want to go to bed.”

“Okay. I’ll be here when you wake,” he tells me as he backs up towards the door.

My phone rings, and Bishop stops, glancing at the screen. He bares his teeth, and I look down at the screen too. Dad flashes on the screen, and I swallow hard.

“Don’t answer that,” Bishop orders me, and I glare at him.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I snap at him.

“Don’t –” Bishop starts, but I cut him off.

“He’s just calling to wish me a happy birthday.”

“Shit. It’s your birthday. I didn’t even realize... happy birthday, Isla.”

“Great, thanks. Now, go away.”

“Your father doesn’t deserve you,” he tells me quietly, and I look away from him. “He doesn’t. He was willing to bet you.”

“I don’t need the reminder,” I say, blinking back tears.

“He doesn’t deserve your time. He’s a drunk, and he was willing to lose you.”

“And you were willing to let me be a bet too. Stop acting like you’re so much better than him,” I snap, and he blinks.

He looks hurt that I would compare them.

“I would never do that, Isla,” Bishop promises me.

“You were willing to let me be placed as a bet. How can I trust you?”

He swallows hard, looking like I’ve slapped him, but I shake my head before he can say anything else and point to the door.

“Get out.”

He nods, walking out the door, but he pauses.

“I’m going to prove it to you, Isla. I’m worthy of you.”

I look away from him as he closes the door behind him. His footsteps head downstairs, and I look at the tray of food and then at my now-silent phone.

I sigh long, setting the tray of food on the dresser and stretching out on the bed.

Some freaking birthday.

SEVEN



Bishop

AS SOON AS I hear the rain start, I'm up and out of bed. I hurry into the guest room and climb onto the bed next to Isla. The sun is just starting to rise, and she's sitting up, staring out at the droplets hitting the window.

"Morning. Are you okay?" I ask, reaching for her.

"I'm okay," she says, leaning away from me slightly.

My polar bear whines inside of me, but I do my best to school my features. It hurts that she's pulling away from me, rejecting me, but I can see why she is. She's a human, and she needs more than my word to believe that we're meant to be together.

I look at the rain, and even though she doesn't like this kind of weather, I'm still grateful to see it. At least we'll be stuck inside today. That should give me time to plead my case with Isla.

"Do you want to go back to bed?" I ask her quietly, and she shakes her head.

"No, I'm going to take a shower; try to wake up a bit."

"Okay. I'll be downstairs when you're ready."

I climb off the bed and head for the door, pausing before I leave.

"Happy belated birthday, Isla," I say, and she smiles.

“Thanks.”

“I’m sorry that it didn’t go the way that you wanted.”

She nods slightly, and I head out, pulling the guest room door shut behind me. I can hear her moving around in the room and then the sound of water filling in the pipes. I do my best not to picture her naked, her curvy body covered in soap bubbles and water.

“Fuck,” I groan between my teeth, and my polar bear growls inside of me.

I close my eyes, trying to clear the dirty thoughts from my head, but it’s no use. The mating heat is already starting between us, or maybe this is just always how I’ll feel for my fated mate.

I try to distract myself and get some breakfast going for us. The water turns off as I’m taking the first few strips of bacon out of the pan, and my polar bear starts to pace inside of me. Back and forth, back and forth. He’s desperate to be around our mate again.

It isn’t until she’s coming down the stairs that I realize I should have been rehearsing what I wanted to say to Isla. I should have been coming up with some kind of plan to win her over and convince her that we’re meant to be.

“I made us some breakfast,” I say, and she glances at the mostly burned bacon. “Sorry, I’m not the best cook.”

“It’s okay. I like my bacon crispy.”

She smiles at me as she takes a bite, and my heart melts at that smile.

“We should talk about... things,” I start, and her smile drops.

“What kind of things?”

“You being my fated mate.”

“Right,” she says, dropping the rest of the bacon back down onto the plate.

She looks away from me, wandering over to the back door and staring out at the dark skies.

“Look, I know that for you, this is easy,” she says softly, and I turn off the burner and move closer to her. “It’s not that simple for me.”

“I know. I was just so caught off guard and excited when I smelled you yesterday. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

She doesn’t seem relieved by my apology, and worry starts to gnaw at me. *Bite her!* My polar bear urges me, but I shake my head. That’s definitely not going to help this situation.

“Why don’t we spend the day together? Get to know each other more?” I suggest.

“Sure. I doubt that anyone will be out in this today.”

She turns away from the windows, and I go back to the stove, frowning down at the shriveled-up black strips of what used to be bacon.

“Maybe I should cook,” she says as she joins me at the stove.

“Can you cook?”

“I can do better than this,” she says with a laugh, and I smile.

“That’s not saying much,” I joke.

“For real,” she laughs.

She takes the pan and dumps the bacon into the trash can before she grabs the last few strips from the package.

“I’ll make toast,” I say, and she nods as she digs some eggs out of the fridge.

“What did you want to do today? After breakfast?” She asks.

“We could play cards? Or a board game? I’m working on getting you internet. I called yesterday, but they won’t be able to come out until tomorrow to install everything.”

“You’re getting internet? I thought you said that you didn’t need that.”

“I don’t, but my mate needs it,” I say with a shrug.

She doesn’t seem to know how to react to that statement. I wonder what that means. Is that a good sign or bad?

My bear goes back to pacing.

“How many eggs do you want?”

“Three, please.”

“How do you take them?”

“I’m easy. Whatever you want is fine.”

“Over easy it is,” she says, and I get to work on the toast as she starts to crack the eggs into the pan.

We finish making breakfast in comfortable silence. I’m too busy focusing on not burning the toast to make conversation.

“Where’s the plates?” She asks, and I grab two for her, holding them out as she puts the eggs onto them.

“Where did you want to eat? Table or counter?”

“Table.”

I carry the plates over there while she brings the plate of bacon and toast.

“Did you want coffee or something?” I ask her.

“No, I can’t stand that stuff. I like tea if you have it.”

“I don’t, but I’ll get some for tomorrow. What kind?”

“Jasmine green is my favorite.”

“Noted.”

I add it to my list of things to get for my mate. My polar bear starts to calm down inside of me. He likes that we’re taking care of our mate. It relaxes him, and puts him at ease. This is the purpose that we’ve been looking for. We’re meant to make sure that Isla is happy and safe.

Does she feel the same about me, though?

I know that I can be a bit of a grump and standoffish. I've just always been better by myself than around a bunch of people. I never know what to say to people, and I'm left feeling awkward and uneasy.

That's why I live in a house that's miles away from everyone else. It's why I rarely go to town events, and even then, only when it's for my pack.

I wish that I was better with people. I wish that I could tell what she was feeling. I wish that I could figure out how to win her over. I need to be able to put her at ease, charm her, and then she'll fall for me for sure.

How do I do any of that, though?

"What do you want to do today?" I ask her as we sit down to eat.

"I guess just watch movies? I don't really want to go out in the rain."

"I have some board games around here somewhere, too, if you want to play something with me."

She nods, and I try to take that as a positive sign. This way, we'll be able to talk and get to know each other better.

"Are you a sore loser?" She asks me as she stands to carry her dishes over to the sink.

"I don't know."

"Seriously?" She asks, looking at me over her shoulder.

"I've never lost before," I tell her, and she rolls her pretty green eyes at me.

She's smiling, though, and my polar bear roars inside of me. *Keep going! Make her smile at us again,* he urges me.

"I'll get the dishes later. Let's go pick out a game."

I set my dishes on top of hers in the sink and lead her over to the living room. There's a chest in one corner and I open it, starting to rifle through the different board games tucked away inside.

“What looks good?” I ask her as I dig further down.

“Um,” she hedges, and I glance back to see her eyes are on me instead of the games.

Her green eyes seem to have darkened, and my polar bear perks up inside of me at the hungry, appreciative look in her eyes. My body starts to grow hot with need, and I reach down, adjusting my rapidly stiffening cock.

My movements seem to draw Isla back, and she blinks, clearing her throat as her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink that clashes with her bright red hair.

“How about Candy Land? I haven’t played that in ages.”

“Sure.”

I grab that box and then two others and follow her over to the coffee table. She takes a seat on one side, and I sit across from her, pulling out the game and passing her a player piece.

“You’re an only child, right?” I ask her as we set up the board.

“Yeah. You too, right?”

“Yeah. Did you ever wish that you had siblings?”

“Not really,” she admits. “I liked that I got all of my parents’ attention. I probably would have had to share a room if I had a sister, and I liked having my own space too.”

“Same,” I agree, and she smiles as she rolls the dice.

“You grew up here?” She asks as she moves her piece around the board.

“Yeah, my uncle was the Alpha before me.”

“Not your dad?”

“No, he was the Beta. My uncle never found his mate or had kids, so he kind of took me under his wing. He was like another father figure, and when he stepped down, I took over as Alpha.”

“So, you always wanted to be the Alpha?” She asks as I take my turn.

“I wouldn’t say always, but I’m glad that I am. I like to think that I’m good at it.”

“You are,” she tells me, and I smile.

“What about you? What do you want to do?”

“Well, I’ve always liked books. My mom was from Germany, and she taught me to speak German when I was younger. I’ve been freelancing as a German translator for the last two years.”

It’s not lost on me that she seems to have started working after her mom passed and her dad went off the deep end.

“And you like that?”

“Yeah, it’s been really fun. I enjoy reading, and it makes me feel closer to my mom.”

She says the last part softly, and I reach over, resting my hand on top of hers.

“I’m sorry that you lost her. I didn’t really know her, but I’m sure that she was an amazing person.”

“She was,” she says quietly, and I squeeze her hand in mine.

We play the next few rounds in silence, and I let her calm down emotionally before I bring up the next topic.

“What are your plans now that you graduated?” I ask.

“I’m not sure. I’d like to keep doing translations. Maybe I’ll get a part-time job here in town too.”

“I can support us,” I tell her, and she doesn’t say anything back to that. “You like being self-sufficient, though,” I guess, and she nods.

“You never know what’s going to happen,” she says lightly, and I nod.

“Tell me about your friends.”

She smiles, and my polar bear flops onto his back inside of me. She’s always beautiful, but when she smiles like that, she looks like an angel.

She tells me about meeting Emma, Willa, and Maddie at the school here in town and how they became fast friends. I've seen them around town, and I know that they're practically inseparable. She beats me the first game of Candy Land and then the second.

We stop for a late lunch, throwing together some sandwiches before we head back into the living room and start a new game of Guess Who.

"I'm glad that you have people like that here. People you can trust and will always be there for you."

"Me too. They're the best."

She smothers a yawn as we put Guess Who back in the box, and I take her hand, pulling her to her feet.

"How about a movie now?" I suggest.

"Sure. You pick which one."

I bring the games back to the chest and head over to the bookshelf to grab a DVD from the shelf. I put it on and settle onto the couch next to her. She makes it about ten minutes into the movie before she's fast asleep next to me.

I study her, smiling at how sweet and peaceful she looks. My polar bear is resting, happy just to be near her, basking in her sultry scent.

The sun is starting to set, and I swallow hard as I think about what that means. The full moon, the mating moon, is tomorrow. I glance over at Isla as she dozes next to me on the couch, and I wonder if I've done enough to show her that we're fated to be or not.

I start to get nervous. My polar bear picks up on my change of mood and starts to get worried. He starts pacing inside of me in agitation. Today has been amazing. It's the happiest I've ever been, hanging out with my mate. If she rejects me or leaves town, then I don't know what I'll do. I know that she's only been in my life for a few days, but already I can't imagine my life without her.

My polar bear whines and paws at me. I swallow hard, pulling Isla tighter against me as I close my eyes and try not to worry about tomorrow night.

EIGHT



Isla

I WAKE UP FEELING... different.

Parts of my body that I've never thought about before are suddenly tingling and hot. I feel achy, needy for something that I can't quite put my finger on.

As soon as I look up and see that I'm sprawled out on Bishop, I start to realize what I want.

Him.

The full moon is tonight, and I wonder if this is the mating heat. *Would I feel that already? Or is this just me falling in love with him?*

It seems too early for both of those things to be possible.

I remember thinking that it was hard to fight fate last night when I fell asleep, and it only seems clearer this morning.

To be fair, it would be hard not to fall in love with Bishop. He's the total package. As long as you like hot, grumpy, polar bear loners. Which, apparently, I do.

I know that it's more than that. He's been so sweet and attentive. It's been a complete one eighty from when I first came home with him, and it's hard for me to trust that he'll stay this way, but he seems sincere.

Bishop stirs in his sleep, and my body reacts to his skin brushing against mine. I can feel my face heating with a blush,

and I try to get my body under control and school my features as he blinks his dark brown eyes open.

“Morning, mate,” he says, his voice deep and raspy with sleep.

“Morning,” I mumble, pushing to my feet.

“What did you want to do today?” He asks, rising to his feet too.

It’s like he doesn’t want me to be further than a few steps from him. I can’t tell if I like that or not.

“Don’t you have Alpha things to do? The rain is over,” I point out.

“I have a meeting, but that won’t take long. You can come with me if you want to.”

“No thanks. When’s the meeting?”

“Nine,” he tells me, and I glance at my phone.

“It’s eight forty-five now,” I inform him.

“Shit,” he groans. “I’ve got to go. Want to go to town with me?”

“I need a shower and to get ready. You’d be late. I’ll meet you in town in a bit or something,” I tell him, and he nods.

He leans toward me before I can react and brushes a kiss against my cheek.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” he whispers against the shell of my ear, and a shiver skates down my spine at his nearness.

His woody scent fills my lungs, and I feel dizzy from the smell. He heads upstairs, and I try to get myself under control before I head up to the guest room. I’m sorting through my clothes, trying to decide what to wear today, when he pushes open the door.

“I’m headed out now. I’ll find you once I’m done.”

“Sounds good.”

“See you in a bit.”

He heads downstairs, and I turn back to the few pieces of clothes that I have left to wear. I need to go to my dad's place and get the rest of my things.

It hits me then.

I want Bishop. I want to be his.

I'm planning on moving in here. Permanently.

I should be terrified by that thought, but imagining my life with Bishop only fills me with happiness and excitement. For the first time in a really long time, I'm excited and looking forward to the future. I want to make plans with him. I want to do a lot with him.

I grab the only clean clothes that I have left and head into the shower. My mind switches to facing my father. I know he'll be home, but there's a chance he'll be sleeping one off. Maybe I won't even have to face him.

I never called him back on my birthday. I woke up yesterday with three missed calls from him, but I didn't bother calling him back or listening to the voicemail that he had left for me. I can't hide any longer, though.

I step out of the shower and dry off. I debate leaving a note for Bishop, letting him know where I'm going, but I know that he'll find me one way or another.

I head down the path toward my dad's house, nerves filling me more and more with each step. When I reach the front door, I hesitate. *Should I knock?* Somehow it doesn't feel right to just walk in. This isn't my home anymore, after all.

In the end, I don't need to decide. My dad opens the door, coming up short when he sees me standing there.

"Isla," he whispers, his eyes filling with tears, and I sniffle, trying to hold my own tears back.

"Dad."

"I'm so sorry," he says, pulling me into his arms. "So, so, sorry."

I let him hold me, but I can't find it in me to accept his apology.

"You bet me," I croak out, and he cries harder.

I step back from him, and he tries to cling to me, but I move out of his grasp.

"You bet me. Like I was an object. Like I meant nothing to you. You were willing to lose me."

"I was drunk," he tries to argue, and I scoff.

"You're *always* drunk."

He winces at that, looking ashamed, and I hold back the small part of me that feels guilty for hurting him. He hurt me first and for way longer. Maybe this will be the wake-up call that he needs.

"Alpha Bishop came to see me the other day."

"What? He did?" I ask in shock.

"Yeah," he nods. "He, uh, he gave me an ultimatum. Go to rehab or get the hell out of town. He scolded me pretty badly for hurting you. Not that I didn't deserve it!" He rushes to add.

"Oh."

"I chose rehab. I know that I need help. I know that I can't go on like this."

"Good. I'm glad," I tell him honestly.

"I'm so sorry, Isla. I'm going to make it up to you. I'll make it all up to you. I'm going to be the dad that you deserve from now on. I swear it."

I nod. I hope that he's telling the truth, but until I see some progress, I think I'll keep my expectations low.

"Happy belated birthday. I tried to call you."

"I know."

"I have your gift here. Hold on, let me grab it."

I follow him into the house and head into my room to start packing some of my things before I go out to find my dad.

He's in the living room, twirling a small package around in his hands.

"Happy birthday," he says as he passes me the present.

"Thanks."

I rip open the wrapping paper and open the lid of the jewelry box. Tears fill my eyes when I see my mom's necklace.

"She would want you to have it. I had it cleaned and checked to make sure that the stones weren't loose or anything," he tells me.

"Thank you," I whisper.

We're silent for a few minutes until he sees the small duffle bag at my feet.

"You're leaving?"

"I'm staying with Bishop. I'm his fated mate."

"That's good. He's a good man."

"He is."

"I'm glad that he's taking care of you. You deserve that. Someone who will take care of you for a change."

He smiles at me for a minute, and I do my best to smile back.

"I need to go. I'm supposed to be meeting Bishop," I tell him.

"Okay, well, I'll see you after rehab. I'm going to miss you," my dad says, and I nod.

"Good luck, Dad," I tell him quietly, and he nods.

"I'll see you soon."

I grab my bag and head out. I decide to walk home and try to clear my head on the way. I get back, and Bishop is still gone so I dump my duffle bag in the guest room and head back out.

I take the long way towards town. I'm not sure what to think about my dad. I'm glad that Bishop talked to him and is getting him help. I'm surprised that he did that and didn't tell me he went to see him.

I walk towards Emma's place, intending to talk to her about all of this. She's mated to an Alpha, too, and maybe she'll have some advice or insight into what's happening between Bishop and me. Maybe she'll be able to tell me what to expect tonight.

When I get to her place, though, no one is home. She must have gone into town with Kane this morning. I head that way, but by the time I reach the community center, the meeting is over, and everyone is gone.

I walk over to the gazebo in the town square park and take a seat. It's been a crazy, wild couple of days, and it feels like I've barely taken a breath or cleared my head since Bishop showed up at my door on poker night.

It's been a whirlwind, but maybe that's what I needed. Something to shake things up for me.

I sit at the gazebo, trying to think things through, and I don't realize how much time has passed until the sun starts to dip behind the mountains. I need to get home.

I stand up, wondering where Bishop is, when he steps out from the forest nearby.

"Hey," I call.

"There you are. I've been all over town looking for you."

"I've been here. I needed to clear my head," I tell him, and he nods.

"Everything alright? I heard that you saw your dad today," he says carefully.

"I'm alright."

"Are you mad?"

"About what?" I ask him.

“About your dad and rehab,” he says quietly, and I can tell he’s worried that he’s upset me.

“No, I’m not mad. Thank you for doing that.”

“I’d do anything for you, Isla.”

“I know. Right now, I just really need you to take me home,” I tell him.

“As you wish.”

He swoops me up into his arms, and I laugh, burying my face in his neck and letting him carry me home.

NINE



Bishop

“ARE YOU HUNGRY?” I ask her as I carry her inside.

“Yeah. Want me to make us something to eat?” She asks.

“Why don’t I make you something?”

“Can you?” She asks with a laugh, and I smile.

“There are a few things that I can’t mess up. It’s mainly pasta.”

“That works,” she agrees with a wide smile.

I set her down on the kitchen counter before I grab a pot and fill it with water. I keep a lot of pasta in the house, mainly because aside from sandwiches or warming up a can of soup, that’s all that I can make.

“How was your meeting?” She asks as I grab a box of spaghetti and some sauce.

“It was good. We just got caught up on a few things. It was over pretty fast. Then I followed your scent all over town,” I tell her. “I really need your cellphone number.”

“You don’t have a phone,” she points out, and I reach into my pocket, pulling out my brand-new one.

“I got one today. I want you to always be able to reach me,” I tell her.

I pass her the phone, and she starts typing in her phone number.

“I’m surprised. I thought that you hated technology.”

“I do, but I love being able to reach you. Oh, they installed the internet today. They wrote the password down on a piece of paper in the living room.”

“Thanks.”

“We can get some of those channels that you were talking about last night, too,” I offer.

“Okay.”

The water starts to boil, so I add the pasta and pour the sauce into another pot. The sun has set by the time that dinner is ready, and my polar bear is almost feral inside of me as the full moon starts to rise high in the sky.

She smells amazing, and my mouth is watering as we take a seat at the table.

“This looks great. Thanks for cooking.”

“Of course.”

She shifts in her seat, pressing her thighs together, and my polar bear and I are both on high alert.

Can she feel the mating heat starting? Does she want me even a fraction as much as I want her?

“I don’t want to pressure you tonight at all. We don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to. I know you might not be feeling that same thing that I am,” I tell her, and she cuts me off before I can continue.

“I want you, Bishop. I want to be with you.”

Those are the sweetest words I’ve ever heard, and I’m reaching for her before I’m even aware that I’m moving.

“I need you,” I whisper as I pull her into my lap.

“I want to see you. I want to see your bear.”

“Anything that you want,” I promise her.

“We can eat later,” she says urgently, and I nod hurriedly.

“Yeah, much later.”

I tug her down and claim her lips with mine. I know I should carry her upstairs, but I can't move. Not when she's squirming against me. My cock is harder than fucking diamond as she rocks against me, and I groan against her mouth.

“So damn sexy,” I growl, and she moans.

“I need you.”

“I know. You have me. I love you, Isla. I love you so damn much. I'll do anything to get you to love me.”

“I do, just don't ever bet me.”

“I would never. You're the most precious thing in the world. I would never risk losing you. Never,” I promise her. “I'm going to show you what you mean to me every day. Every. Single. Day.”

I punctuate my words with thrusts of my hips up against the juncture of her thighs.

“Take me to bed.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I tangle her red hair around my fist, tugging on the strands until I can get to her mouth again. I lick inside, tasting Isla and the spaghetti. It's not enough. I want to know what she tastes like everywhere.

“Upstairs. Now,” she orders, and I nod.

I stand, lifting her in my arms and heading for the stairs.

TEN



Isla

I CAN FEEL the mating heat bearing down on me with each step Bishop takes upstairs. My panties are soaked and sticking to me, and I can feel my nipples pebbling inside of my bra.

“Bishop,” I moan as he sets me down on my feet by the bed.

He tugs me towards him, and I gasp in shock as I fall against him. His lips fit perfectly to mine, and I moan as his tongue darts out to lick against the seam of my mouth. I’m not sure when my hands moved from my sides, but they’re currently buried in Bishop’s dark brown hair, my hands holding his mouth against mine. He moans as my mouth opens under his, and his arm wraps around my waist, holding me tight against him as his other hand snakes up my body.

His palm cups one of my breasts, and I arch against him. Having him touch me like this is mind-blowing. Nerve endings that I didn’t even know about are sparking to life, and my whole body feels like it’s on fire.

We break apart, both sucking in breath, and I swallow hard.

“I want you to bite me,” I tell him, and I’m not even sure where that urge is coming from.

“I will, mate. Soon.”

He reaches for the hem of my shirt and tugs it over my head. I reach for his, scrambling to get him naked as fast as I can.

He pushes his pants and boxers down, and I shimmy my way out of my yoga pants and panties.

“Did you still want to see my polar bear?” He asks, and I’m so caught off guard by the question that I say yes before I can think it through.

He takes a step back and nods at me. I blink, watching as he starts to change right in front of me. His nails and teeth elongate, and fur starts to replace his skin. Within seconds, he’s landing on all fours in front of me.

“Whoa!” I gasp, taking a step back as his polar bear stares at me.

He’s a lot bigger than I was expecting. His polar bear takes a step toward me and then another. I reach out, running my fingers over his soft fur.

“That’s so cool,” I whisper.

He takes a step back and starts to shift again. He lands on his two feet a moment later, and I stare at him wide-eyed.

“Are you okay?” He asks, and I nod.

“That’s so cool,” I say again, and he smiles, looking relieved.

He approaches me slowly, and my body starts to heat the closer he gets. His eyes are dark and focused solely on me.

“Still want me to bite you?” He whispers, and I can only nod.

He reaches for me, pulling me into his arms, and I moan, wrapping one leg around his hip so I can rub myself against him. Bishop growls deep in his throat as his hands drop to my waist, and he lifts me easily. I cling to him, tension tightening in my stomach as I feel his skin against mine.

I let out a gasp when I feel his stiff length pushing against me, rubbing me right where I need him most. My head tips

back as pleasure fills my entire being. Bishop groans into my neck, his warm breath fanning over my skin, and anticipation fills me.

“Do it. Bite me,” I beg him, and he groans as he leans forward and sinks his teeth into my neck.

“Bishop!” I scream, and he licks over the bite mark, sealing it.

“Fuck,” he grits out.

He lays me down on the bed and comes down over me. My legs are hanging over the edge of the bed, and he drops to his knees, pushing my thighs wide.

“Bishop,” I start, but he interrupts me.

“I need this. Need to taste you before I fuck you.”

I can only moan as he licks his lips, growling as he stares between my thighs.

“Oh god!” I shout as I feel his hot breath on the inside of my thighs.

“Does my mate need her big bear to clean her up?”

I’m so hot that I’m surprised I haven’t come already, just from his words alone. I nod my head frantically as he reaches up and grips my hips, pinning me to the bed.

“Mmm,” Bishop moans against my drenched core.

My legs tense on either side of his head, and my hands grip his hair, trying to keep him still so I can rub against him. My hips rock once before I feel Bishop pull away.

“No!” I cry, wanting him to go back to what he was doing.

“Who is in charge here, Isla?”

“What?”

“Who is in charge right now?”

“You!” I shout, trying to drag him back to my needy pussy.

“Exactly, and you will take what I give you. Now lay down and wrap your hands around the bedposts. Hang on tight,

mate.”

Moisture floods from my core, and I stare up at him. He uses the pad of two of his fingers to slap against my clit and my back arches, a moan slipping out from between my trembling lips.

“Hands, Isla,” he says with a hard look, and I reach up instantly this time and wrap my hands around the smooth wood posts of his bed.

“Now spread your legs.”

I spread them wide again and pant as I stare up at Bishop.

“Perfect. That’s just right, Isla. Now, stay just like this and let your mate take care of you.”

I moan, nodding my agreement as Bishop settles back between my legs. My fingers tighten above my head, and I try to remain still as he leans in and starts to lick at my drenched folds. His tongue is wide and a little rough, and I moan as he uses it to nudge my clit. My whole body is tense as I try to remain completely still so that he doesn’t stop again. I just need a little more and I’ll come again.

Bishop moans as he eats me, burying his face between my thighs. He lays down fully then, and soon I feel the bed start to rock. He thrusts, rubbing his cock against the bed as he licks my pussy, trying to catch all of my cream with his tongue. With each thrust, I am rocked up the bed and then down harder against his mouth. The motion is exquisite, and I feel myself starting to break apart.

Bishop thrusts faster, rocking me harder against his mouth, and I scream as I come. I feel the bed shift, but I’m at the height of my orgasm and I can’t concentrate on that. Bishop settles between my legs, and I blink my eyes open when my orgasm finally runs its course. He’s kneeling between my thighs, fisting his massive cock as he stares down at me with his eyes filled with lust.

I’m like a limp noodle as he prowls back over me. He wraps an arm around my waist and drags me up to the center

of the bed, and then comes down over me, his big body bracketing me in.

“Ready for me, mate?” He asks, and I nod excitedly.

He smiles slightly at my enthusiasm. Then, his eyes meet mine, and with one mighty thrust, he seats himself fully inside of me.

“FUCK!” I scream, and he grits his teeth.

“Need you so damn bad. Can’t wait,” he says from between clenched teeth.

“Take me. I’m yours,” I pant.

I probably should have been in more pain with him taking my virginity, but I think I was so turned on that I was ready for him. My body is primed and ready for him to use me any way that he wants.

“I love you, Isla,” he says against my lips.

“I love you too.”

Saying those words should be scary, but they feel right. It’s natural to say that to him. It’s destiny.

He slowly pulls out, and we both look in between us, watching his huge dick withdraw from my pussy, covered in my juices as well as my virginity.

“Jesus,” he grunts. “You’re so goddamn perfect.”

I watch as he sinks inside of me again and again, picking up speed. Bishop tips his head back and growls savagely when I hook my ankles together behind his back. I wiggle my hips and press my heels into his ass, taking him deeper and deeper with each thrust.

He swivels his hips and hits some spot deep inside of me, making me tense and squeeze my pussy around him as I cry out his name.

“That’s it, mate,” he groans, hitting that spot over and over, hammering into me until I shatter apart around him.

“Yes! Oh my god, I... Ohmygod, Bishop!” I repeat his name again and again, shouting it up at the ceiling. He wraps his arms around me, holding my sweaty body tightly against his as his hips jerk uncontrollably.

“Jesus, fuck, mate. I’m coming. I’m coming so damn hard,” he growls.

I feel him empty his hot, sticky cum into me, making my cunt snap around his throbbing cock as an unexpected orgasm burns through my body. I bite his shoulder, causing Bishop to roar out my name as one final burst of cum shoots out of him.

We stay wrapped up in each other’s arms, fused together as we float back down to earth. My cheek is pressed against his chest as I listen to his heart slow down to a steady rhythm. Bishop traces his fingers up and down my spine in a calming motion.

“I love you so much, mate,” Bishop whispers before rolling us on our sides and pulling a blanket over us.

“I love you too,” I murmur, placing a sweet kiss over his heart.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt this safe, this cherished in my entire life. Or at least not since my mom passed away and this whole mess started with my dad.

I lift my head up to tell him as much, but Bishop is already asleep. He looks so peaceful and adorable, and I smile as I snuggle deeper into his warmth, tucking my head under his chin and breathing in his leather and pine scent.

For the first time in a long time, I feel like I’m home.

ELEVEN



Bishop

I WAKE up to the most beautiful woman in the world sprawled out across me like a blanket. Her tiny frame only reaches from my shoulder to my knees, but for some reason, I find that adorable. She's so tiny compared to me. So tiny and adorable.

She shifts on top of me, starting to wake, and I lean down and kiss the tip of her tiny nose, smiling when she scrunches it up and slowly blinks awake. Bright green eyes shine up at me from beneath her lashes, and I'm hit once again with the fact that she's my fated mate. She chose me. My polar bear roars in triumph inside of me, and my chest swells with pride as other lower parts of me swell up, too.

"Good morning, beautiful," I whisper, brushing my lips against hers once again.

"Morning," she mumbles, burying her face into my neck.

I grin, rolling us until Isla is lying underneath me. A sleepy blush stains her chest and travels up her neck. Her eyes are still closed, and I smile. I know exactly how I want to wake up my sleepy girl. She's naked and half asleep and just too damn tempting to resist.

I bury my face into the side of her neck, smelling my mate's cherry and vanilla scent before lapping at the mark I left on her last night.

I love seeing it on her. Love knowing that she's all mine. I kiss down her neck, over her collarbone, past her soft, round tits, and lick a path straight down her stomach to her core. Nuzzling into her pussy, I breathe in deep, loving the sugary-sweet smell of her arousal. I smooth my hands up and down her thighs before prying them apart and settling between them fully.

Isla's eyes are still closed, but her breathing has picked up, and she wiggles her hips a bit in invitation. She's wet and needy and ready for the best wake-up call of her life.

I spread her pussy lips apart with my thumbs and growl at the sight of her swollen pink folds covered in honey. My mate may be half asleep, but this pretty little pussy is begging for my attention. I blow warm air over her sensitive skin and nearly come when her tight little hole pulses, releasing a drop of her juices for me.

That's my breaking point.

My polar bear and I both snap at the sight of her need for me, and I dive in. I lap up her sweetness, dragging my tongue through her slit and circling around her throbbing bundle of nerves. Isla tenses and bows her back off the mattress, moaning loudly. Her fingers tangle in the sheets, and she lets out a shaky exhale as her thighs spread wider for me.

I start off slow and gentle, quick flicks of my tongue that leave her whimpering and writhing for more. Then I up my tempo, becoming more aggressive as my polar bear and I both start to lose control.

I work my mouth over her drenched flesh harder and harder, sending her higher and higher, letting her pleasure build until it's almost unbearable. She twists amongst the sheets and bucks her hips, but I press her back down onto the bed, steadying her while I get my fill.

“Bishop! Oh my god, it's... I'm...Please!”

I growl and scrape my teeth against her clit, throwing her right over the edge. My mate falls into her orgasm, flying over the edge. She claws at the mattress, her thighs quivering on

either side of my head as I continue to lick her through her orgasm.

Her fingers twist in my hair, and she tugs on the strands, forcing me to meet her gaze.

“I need you,” she gasps, spreading her legs wider in a desperate plea.

I crawl up her body, licking and sucking at her soft flesh along the way. Isla wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me down, sealing her lips over mine. I know she tastes her orgasm on my tongue, and my dirty little mate moans at the taste of her own flavor mingling between us.

She wraps her legs around my back, urging me to fill her up. I drag my aching cock through her folds, coating myself in her juices and rubbing my hardness against her clit.

“PLEASE, BISHOP, PLEASE...” she whines, wiggling underneath me as she tries to position me at her entrance.

I push the tip inside of her, groaning when her pussy tries to suck me in deeper. She’s still so tight. I took her a dozen times last night, but she’s still fucking virgin tight.

My polar bear roars in my head, wanting me to pound into her, to rut her like an animal.

“Is this what my greedy mate needs?” I rasp, pulling back and barely entering her again.

“Yes!” she exclaims in frustration, digging her heels into my ass and trying to pull me closer to her.

I give in, giving us what we both need and thrusting balls deep inside of her. We both curse as I’m fully seated inside of her, and I hold myself there until her pussy stops gripping me in such a death grip.

Then I start to move.

“Yes, god, yes,” she says, gasping for air.

I’m too far gone to take it slow; luckily, Isla seems to be on the same page. Her hips are rising to meet my thrusts, her

tits bouncing temptingly in front of my face. She sees me watching them jiggle and moans as she brings her hands up, cupping the round globes in her palms.

“Fucking hell, mate,” I growl.

She’s going to make me bust before I’m ready.

I growl again, reaching for her hands; I pin her arms above her head while I fuck her into the mattress, snapping my hips and pounding her pretty little pussy as she starts to tighten around my cock. She’s so close to coming.

Thank fuck.

“So fucking good,” I growl into the side of her neck, biting her mark and then kissing away the sting as I find my own release.

I crash my mouth down on hers, kissing her as furiously as I’m fucking her. Isla’s thighs tremble, and her fingers curl into my hand that’s holding both of hers above her head. She stretches out, tensing every muscle, squeezing me so damn tight as I pound into her once, twice, three times...

And then she shatters, her climax breaking her apart into a million pieces.

I swallow down her cries and hold myself deep inside of her, feeling her orgasm ripple around my cock right before I join her.

I growl out her name as I come deep inside of her.

I collapse, completely spent and gulping down air into my burning lungs. I roll over, dragging a sweaty, limp Isla across my chest. She curls up into my side and kisses my shoulder so sweetly. I cup the back of her neck and massage her gently, relaxing as she melts into my embrace.

“What did you want to do today, mate?” I ask her, and she gives me a wicked smile.

“I thought that maybe we could stay in bed,” she says, her fingers trailing down my chest to my hardening cock.

I grin back, rolling her under me once again.

Fuck, I love my mate.

TWELVE



Isla

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“IT’S SNOWING!” Maya yells excitedly as she runs down the stairs.

My husband is right behind her, and I laugh as they run right outside into the white flurries.

“Snow?” Clay asks as he wanders out of the living room.

My dad is right behind him, and I smile.

“Yeah, do you want to go out and see it?” I ask my son.

He nods enthusiastically, a wide smile splitting his face, and I hurry to pull on my boots and coat and follow them outside. The kids are polar bears like Bishop, so I know they’re okay in the snow. They’re already shifted by the time my dad and I get outside, and I laugh as Clay runs up to me, snow coating his nose and back already.

Bishop comes up, nudging his nose against my hand until I stroke his soft fur.

“Go play. I know how much you’ve all been looking forward to the first snow of the season.”

He runs off after the kids, and I smile, sitting on the porch next to my dad.

“They’re so cute,” my dad comments, and I grin.

“I know,” I agree.

Bishop and I have been mated and married for five years now. We had Maya nine months after the first night he bit and claimed me. Clay came along a little over a year after that. I know that Bishop would love to have more, but carrying such big babies was hard on me. Besides, I’m happy with it being just the four of us.

Well, five, if you count my dad.

My dad has been sober for five years now. He finished up rehab and came back to town. I was worried that he would fall back into bad habits once he was here in town and alone in that house, but he hasn’t. I think he knows that if he slips up again, I’ll cut him off for good.

He’s really stepped up since he came back to town. He’s been checking in with me more, and he dotes on the kids. He’s been the best grandparent to Maya and Clay. He loves babysitting them, and that works for us because I love having alone time with my mate.

Bishop chases Maya and Clay around the front yard, and I smile as I lean back on the porch steps and watch their polar bears roll around in the snow. Both kids take after Bishop with their dark hair and size. They’re both already so tall for their age, and I know that soon they’ll be towering over me. The only thing that the kids got from me are my eyes. They both have the same dark green eyes that I do.

“I should get home before the snow gets worse,” my dad says, pushing to his feet. “I’ll let you all have some family time.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” I promise him as I stand and hug him goodbye.

“Sounds good. See you soon.”

He walks off the porch and heads over to where Maya and Clay are play fighting in the flurries. Bishop heads my way, shifting as he hits the porch. He sits down next to me, and I try to do my best to ignore his hardening cock.

“Are you having fun?” He asks me, and I nod.

“Yeah, it’s nice to see them so happy. Go play,” I urge him.
“I know that you love spending time with them like this.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel left out.”

“I’m fine. Besides, I need to save my energy,” I tell him.

“For what?” He asks me, and I grin at him.

“For when we play tonight.”

His eyes heat at my words, and I lean over, kissing him quickly.

“Go play with the kids,” I order him, and he growls at me under his breath but stands and shifts back to his polar bear form.

I smile softly as I watch my family play together. I never thought that I would have this. I think that I kind of closed myself off from people when my mom died. Then, I was too busy taking care of my dad to think about dating.

I like to think that we would have found our way to each other regardless, but I’m grateful that my dad bet me and that Bishop won me. It means that I got my happily ever after that much faster.

I burrow deeper into my jacket and relax as I watch my family run around together. I’m cold, but I’ve never been happier. This is the life that I never dared dream to have, and I still can’t believe that it’s mine. I get to wake up next to the man that I love more than anything in the world. Bishop is the best partner and father that I could ever ask for.

And I’m lucky that he claimed me as his prize.

THE ALPHA'S CAPTIVE

*

He doesn't trust her, so how can she be with him?

Willa:

Being a captive isn't exactly how I thought I would celebrate my eighteenth birthday.

None of what's happened in the last few days went according to plan.

When Mack showed up at my door a few days ago, accusing me of stealing from my work, I thought that it was some kind of terrible joke.

He meant it though, and now I'm stuck here until he realizes that I've been framed.

When he tells me we're fated to be together, I think it's just another sick prank.

Turns out he's serious about that too though.

Now I'm not sure what to do.

Mack:

There's something about Willa that has me intrigued.

She's not who I have pictured when I went looking for a thief.

She's not what I had pictured when I thought of my fated mate, either.

Now I have messed things up before they've even begun.

Romance and love aren't my strong suits, but I'm willing to try for Willa.

I just hope that it's not too little too late.

These Alpha shifters are about to fall HARD!

Come to the small town of Aspen Ridge, Alaska and get ready to watch these swoon-worthy wolf and bear shifters fall in love with their fated mates!

ONE



Mack

“BUILDING HAS STARTED downtown in the Silver Spring Pack. They’re going to be working their way out to some of the other members’ houses soon too,” Kane tells us, and I nod.

“That’s good. I’ve heard that some of their members may be staying here though,” I add, and he nods.

“Yeah, I think I’ve got about fifteen families that want to stay here since they’re already settled.”

“Good. Does the pack need any more assistance from us?” Jonas asks.

“Just our construction workers and they’ve already all been hired. I imagine that they wouldn’t mind some food or other things delivered every now and then,” Kane says, and Bishop and I nod.

I make a note to ask for donations from my pack in my notebook. The meeting is almost over and I’m ready to go home and take a shower. I was up half of last night and I’m ready to crash soon.

Jonas’s radio crackles to life next to him, and I frown as Jonathon, the manager of the Aspen Ridge Ski Lodge and Resort, asks for our assistance.

“I can take it,” I offer.

I can see that Kane and Bishop are both eager to get home to their mates, and it's not fair to stick Jonas with dealing with whatever is going on.

"Thanks," Bishop and Kane say at the same time.

"I'll come with you," Jonas says as he grabs the walkie-talkie and stands.

"See you guys later," I say as I head out of the community hall.

Jonas falls into step beside me, his eyes scanning the streets. I'm sure that he's looking for his crush, Maddie. I glance at the Half Moon Diner, looking for her through the windows, but I don't see her.

"Did you want to grab something to eat first?" I ask him, and his eyes snap to mine.

"No, let's go."

He takes off at a fast pace up the street to where the Aspen Ridge Ski Lodge and Resort sits. It's at the edge of downtown so technically, we all split responsibilities of looking after it and making sure that things are running smoothly.

It's the off-season now, so I'm surprised that there's an issue. It's starting to get too cold for most human tourists so the parking lot is empty except for a handful of cars.

I follow Jonas inside and up to the front desk, where a prissy-looking man in a suit is standing, his mouth puckered with a look of distaste that I feel is probably usual for him.

"Jonathon," Jonas says, sounding tired already.

I wonder what he knows about this guy.

"There's been a robbery," Jonathon says.

His nametag says manager, and I'm guessing that he was the one who called over the radio.

"A robbery?" I ask, and he nods.

"From the register here and the safe in the back," he tells us, already turning to lead us behind the counter.

He pushes the girl who is working at the reception desk out of the way slightly and leads us back into his office. There's money stacked on the desk, and it's obvious that he must have been getting ready to make a run to the bank in town to deposit some.

"I was checking the balances and noticed they didn't add up. We're off... by a lot," he finishes, and I frown.

Our pack relies quite a bit on the money that this place brings in. We need it now more than ever since we're taking in other shifters from the Silver Springs Pack.

"Have you checked the cameras?" I ask, and he shakes his head.

"No, we're having the system updated. They haven't been working for the last week."

"So there's no footage or evidence then?"

"No," he confirms.

"Any idea who could have done this?" Jonas asks.

"Who has access to the safe and could get to the money?" I ask the manager.

"Well, me, of course. Also, anyone who works the night shift and the day manager, Ron."

I nod. I know Ron. He's a shifter and has been working at this place since it opened. He swears that he'll never retire, and I believe him. This place is his home. That also means he wouldn't steal from this place so we can rule him out as a suspect.

"We need a list," I tell Jonathon, and he nods, but then hesitates.

"I know most of the people who work nights, and Ron, of course. I don't think that any of them would do this... but there is a new girl that started a few weeks ago. She's been working nights," he tells us.

"And you think that it's her," I fill in, and he nods.

"What's her name?" I ask.

“Willa Matthews.”

Jonas shifts on his feet, and I glance at him. He looks confused and like he doesn't believe the manager.

“Okay. I'll go talk to her. How much was missing?” I ask as I pull out my notebook to write it down.

I scribble Willa Matthews at the top of a new page.

“A little over a hundred thousand, maybe more. I'm still digging, and now I need to go back and look at the books for the last few weeks.”

I have a moment of doubt.

He said that she's only been working here for a few weeks. Could she really have stolen all of that in such a short amount of time?

I guess she makes more sense than one of the seasoned workers doing it.

I write down the amount and close my notebook.

“I'll go talk to her, but let me know when you come up with a final amount. Or if you have any new information.”

“I will,” he promises.

Jonas and I head out of the office and back down the hill towards town.

“I don't think that it was Willa,” he says, and I frown.

“How do you know? Who is she?”

“She's one of Maddie's friends,” he admits in a mumble, and I roll my eyes.

I don't say it, but all I can think is that Jonas's crush is getting in the way of the facts.

“Where does she live?” I ask him.

“In your territory. 124 Willow Lane.”

“Stalker.”

He glares at me, and I shake my head.

“I’ll go talk to her. See if there’s any validity in the manager’s theory,” I tell him.

“Want me to come with you?” He asks, and I shake my head.

“No, I’ve got it. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

We split up and I make my way toward her place. My bear rumbles inside of me, awake from his nap at last.

Good morning, I tell him sarcastically.

It’s not like I missed anything. Some boring Alpha meeting. Snooze.

I roll my eyes at him and he stretches inside of me.

Where are we going now?

To deal with a girl.

Our mate? He asks in hope.

My gut clenches and I grit my teeth.

No, I tell him.

I still haven’t found my mate. To be fair, I haven’t really been looking for her. I left Aspen Ridge Pack right after graduation and joined the Marines. I only came back a year ago after I was shot. My father, the previous Alpha of the West Pack, was ready to retire, and I took over for him then. He moved further south with my mom, and I haven’t spoken to them much since.

They were never proud of me. I was never tough enough, fast enough, smart enough. I was just never enough. It’s why I left as soon as I could and why I only came back when I had to. It’s why I haven’t looked for my mate. If I wasn’t good enough for my parents, then why would I think I would be good enough for my mate?

Still, it hurts to see Bishop and Kane so happy and in love with their own mates. Some part of me, deep, deep down, really wants that.

My bear rolls over inside me and I force thoughts of my parents and childhood out of my head as I turn to face the front door of Willa Matthews' house.

Alright. Let's get this over with and then head home, I tell my bear, and he yawns lazily in agreement.

I let out a breath as I raise my hand and knock.

TWO



Willa

I GRAB my winter coat and slip it on as I pat my pockets and make sure I've got my phone and keys on me. I'm supposed to be meeting my friends at Emma's house in a few minutes, and if I don't hurry, then I'm going to be late.

A knock sounds at the front door, and I smile. It must be Maddie wanting to walk to Emma's together. My parents are out to dinner with some of their friends, so I zip up my jacket and answer the front door with a smile.

That smile fades when I see that it's not Maddie standing there but Mack. He's the leader of my part of town. I don't think I've ever spoken to him, though. When I was younger, I had a massive crush on him.

As I stare at him in the dimming light, I realize that the crush might still be there. He towers over me, at least a foot taller than my 5'4" frame. His dark brown hair is cut close to his scalp, and I wonder if it's a habit of being in the military or just how he likes it cut.

"Willa Matthews?" He asks me, and I nod.

"Yeah, to what do I owe this honor?" I ask him as I step out and close the door behind me.

I lock it, trying to control my hormones before I turn to face him again. Something about having those piercing blue eyes on me that makes me feel... tingly.

“You work at the Ski Lodge and Resort?” He asks me, and I nod.

“Yeah, I started there about three weeks ago. Why?” I ask him as I turn to face him.

“There’s been a robbery there.”

An image of Jonathon, the sleazy nighttime manager, pops into my head, but I bite my lip.

“I don’t know anything about it. I wasn’t even working today, so…” I trail off.

“We’re not sure that it happened today.”

“Okay,” I say, starting to walk past him. “I still don’t have any information for you. Check the cameras or the shift schedule.”

“We can’t.”

He reaches out, his hand wrapping around my elbow as he pulls me to a stop.

“You need to come with me.”

I huff out a laugh, thinking that he must be joking. I mean, surely he can’t think that I would have anything to do with this.

“What?” I ask once I realize that he’s serious.

“Or you can just hand over what you took, and maybe we can pretend like this didn’t happen. Though I doubt that you’ll still have a job.”

“I didn’t take anything,” I snarl, jerking my arm out of his hold.

I have no idea what he’s talking about, and I can’t believe this is happening.

“You’re the newest hire. You work night shifts when the money goes into the safe,” he says, like those things automatically make me guilty.

“I’m not the only one who works nights. I’m not the only one with access to the safe. Hell, I’m not even the best option

for who could have robbed the place. I'm a low-level employee! You think that they just give out the codes to everything to me?"

"If not you, then who?"

"Jonathon," I blurt out, and he frowns.

"The manager."

"Yeah, he's a slimy prick."

His lips almost pull up into a smile at that.

"He's the one who called in the theft. I doubt that he would do that if he was the thief."

"I'd bet everything that I have that he did. Which is about two thousand dollars, by the way."

Jonathon didn't hire me, Ron did. Ron is nice, the sweetest old man that I've ever met. Unfortunately for me, I work the afternoon and night shifts, which means that I usually work with Jonathon.

Jonathon is a slimy toad. He's hit on me and everyone else who works at the place at least a dozen times. No one will go near him though.

I'm not even sure what he's doing in Aspen Ridge. Most people who live here were born and raised here, but Jonathon moved to town about eighteen months ago. I don't think that many people know much about him.

"Maybe you should look into his background," I suggest, and Mack frowns.

"Why? What will I find?" He asks.

"I don't know. It's just a hunch."

"Uh huh."

Mack doesn't look convinced. I shouldn't be surprised that he doesn't believe me. He's a very black and white kind of guy. He's reserved and repressed. He doesn't take leaps of faith. He doesn't believe in the best of people.

“You need to come with me,” he says again, grabbing my arm in his tight hold.

He starts to drag me down the front path of my house, and I dig my heels in.

“Yeah, no can do, big guy. I’ve got plans for tonight.”

“With Maddie, Emma, and Isla?” He guesses, and I stare at him in shock.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I know that Maddie is planning on leaving town, and until we get this whole thing cleared up, I can’t let you out of my sight. So, you’re coming with me.”

With that, he turns and throws me over his shoulder, then starts striding down the road. I’m in too much shock to react at first, and then I realize that I should bide my time. I can’t overpower him and doubt that I could outrun him even if I did manage to get out of his hold.

Mack doesn’t know this, but I’m smart, clever, and stubborn.

So I’ll wait.

But I will be getting away.

THREE



Mack

I'M NOT sure who I believe.

What Willa says makes some sense, but what if that's a lie? All I can think is that I could trust her and she could end up skipping town. Then I would be known as the Alpha who let a thief get away. I can already imagine what my parents would say when they found out.

No, I can't let her go. Not until I figure out who took the money.

Willa digs her hands into my butt, and my bear perks up inside of me at the contact. She pushes herself up, grunting slightly as she twists to stare at the side of my side.

"Where are we going? This isn't the way to jail," she points out.

"I want to keep the robbery quiet. We're going to my house. You'll stay there until I figure things out."

"Bummer," she sighs, and I choke on a laugh.

"You'd rather be in jail?"

"Yeah, I've always wondered if I could break out of one. This was my chance to try it."

"You won't be breaking out of anywhere. This line of talking is only making you look guiltier."

I tighten my grip on her, and she sighs loudly before she drops back down onto my shoulder.

My bear is trying to figure her out as we continue to walk towards our house. I live in a secluded cottage a few miles from Main Street. I could have moved into the Alpha's house, my childhood home, but it didn't feel right. I wanted some privacy, something that was just my own and didn't have old memories attached to it.

I weave my way along the path through the trees, and I feel Willa's hands on my ass again as she turns to look at my house.

"Nice place. Not what I had pictured," she comments.

"What did you picture?"

"I don't know. Something darker. Colder."

I study the white two-story cottage, trying to see it through her eyes. I suppose it is a strange place to call home for a grumpy bear like me.

I carry her inside and up to the second floor.

"I don't have a basement or anything so this will have to do," I tell her as I carry her into the guest room next to my bedroom.

I set her down on her feet, and she sways slightly as all the blood rushes back to her head.

"What's the plan now?" She asks me, taking a step back and looking around.

"You'll stay here."

"As what? Your prisoner? Your captive?" She asks, and I can see her getting pissed off all over again.

"It will only be for a few days," I assure her.

"You can't just go around holding people captive against their will!" She shouts, and my bear stands up inside of me.

I lean down closer to her, my breath fanning across her lips as I snarl at her.

“I damn well can, and I am.”

She blinks, her eyes widening in surprise, but she quickly gets over the shock and glares at me.

“We’ll see about that,” she says quietly, and I growl as I spin on my heel and stalk out of the room.

“I’m supposed to be meeting my friends right now. They’ll be worried if I don’t show up,” she calls after me.

“Text them and tell them that you can’t make it.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll text Kane. Problem solved.”

I close the guestroom door, shoving a door stop in the door next to the hinges so that she can’t get out, and then I stomp my way downstairs and into the kitchen.

I’m worked up and on edge. I haven’t had anyone challenge me, not since I took over as Alpha from my dad, and I wonder if her pushing back is what has me so twisted up inside or if it’s something else.

My bear starts to pace, and I know that I should go out. I should shift and let him run around our territory, do a perimeter check, make sure that everyone is safe.

I grip the granite countertop, staring down at my shadow on the shiny surface.

What is happening to me? I like order, for things to be in their place and to run smoothly. So why am I so drawn to that curvy little troublemaker upstairs?

I push away from the counter, not getting any answers.

Run, my bear growls, and I tug off my shirt as I head outside.

FOUR



Willa

AS SOON AS he closes the bedroom door, I'm looking for a way out. There's no way that I'm staying here until he realizes that I'm innocent. Who knows how long that could be?

There's not much in the room. A small closet, a bed, and a dresser. I head for the window and try to ease it open as quietly as I can. I stick my head out and let out a whistle when I see how far down it is.

Snow banks drift up against the side of the house and I'm suddenly grateful for all of the snow that we've been getting lately. I try to debate the best way down. There's a tree branch that's close to the window. If I could stand on the ledge, I might be able to grab it.

I take a deep breath, zipping my coat up all the way to my neck before I boost myself up onto the window ledge.

I stick my head out and then my shoulders, gripping onto the cold wood as I pull the rest of my body out of the window and balance on the ledge.

"Great, now it looks like it's even higher," I grit out as I cling to the windowsill.

A gust of wind blows by me and I almost lose my grip.

At least if I fall, it will be into the nice soft snow, right?

I take a deep breath and reach out for the thick tree branch. My fingers wrap around the ice and snow covered branch and push off from the windowsill.

I meant to push off and wrap my legs around the branch too, but as soon as my feet leave the ledge, my grip on the branch slips and I gasp as I go falling.

“Oomph!” I grunt as I land in the snow bank.

It wasn't as soft as I would have liked, but I don't think that anything is broken. I'll probably just have a few bruises at worst.

I push up onto my feet and as soon as my head pops above the snow, I groan.

“What are you doing?” Mack shouts as he charges my way through the snow.

“What are *you* doing? And why aren't you wearing a shirt?” I yell back at him as I struggle to pull myself out of the snow.

He reaches me before I can and pulls me out easily, throwing me back over his shoulder as he stomps around the side of the house and back inside. I let out a sigh of relief as the heat hits me and starts to warm my frozen hands.

Every line in Mack's body is tight, tense, and frozen with anger.

He tosses me down onto the bed in the guestroom, and it would be hot how he manhandles me if I wasn't also pissed at him.

“You have to stay here. Is that understood?” He growls down at me, and I glare up at him.

“For how long? When will I be able to leave?” I ask him.

“I'm going to investigate things tomorrow. I'll know more then.”

“It's my birthday tomorrow, and I have plans. I'm spending it with my parents and friends. Celebrating, you know?” I ask him sarcastically.

“We’ll see what I find out,” he says.

He heads over to the window, closing and locking it. He gives me a hard warning look that I roll my eyes at as he heads back to the bedroom door.

“Stay here,” he says before he leaves and locks me in the room once again.

I wait until his footsteps have gone downstairs before I roll over in the bed, grab a pillow, and scream into it.

His scent hits me in the face, and I’m transported back to when I was a silly little girl. A girl who had a massive crush on Mack. He was a few years ahead of me in school but was impossible to ignore. Tall, brooding, handsome, he was my dream guy. Other girls my age were obsessed with the latest Hollywood heartthrob, but for me, it was always Mack.

Even when he got back from the military, the crush was still there. Maybe more so than because I had come up with a bunch of war hero stories about him in my head. He was even more handsome, skilled, smart, and capable then. My eyes were drawn to him every time he walked into the same room as me.

That crush feels like it died tonight.

Well, kind of.

It’s more of a hate thing going on now, but the physical attraction is still there.

Unfortunately for me.

FIVE



Mack

I RUB my shoulder as I trudge through the freshly fallen snow back toward my house. I barely slept last night. I was worked up and on edge, and I'm not sure if it was because of the things that Willa makes me feel or if having someone else in the house just threw my bear and me off.

My shoulder has been flaring up all night too. I know it's because I carried her around quite a bit yesterday. My shoulder healed after I was shot, but it's still not back to one hundred percent. It probably never will be.

I sigh as I try to rub out the stiffness there. My bear is pacing inside of me. I'm surprised that he's still all riled up. I let him out to run for the last hour. I figured that he would be calmed down and tired by now.

The house is quiet as I walk up the front porch steps. I tug on the clothes that I left there and head inside.

As soon as I step inside, it hits me.

Mate! My bear roars, but I'm already moving.

Excitement propels me up the stairs, and I smile. I can't believe that I've finally found my mate. My bear is roaring inside of me, his elation bubbling inside of me.

We've finally found her! He shouts, and I grin.

I'm halfway up the stairs when I freeze. The smile drops from my face, and I blink.

What am I doing? I'm the Alpha of my pack. I can't be doing this. My mate can't be the girl I'm holding captive in my house because I think she might have stolen from my pack.

My bear snarls at me, urging me to go upstairs and claim our mate, but I shake my head. I back down one step and then two. He roars inside of me, almost deafening me. He claws at me as I head back down the stairs and outside.

I close the door, needing the fresh air to clear my head. I need to be thinking clearly right now.

What the heck am I going to do?

Go claim our mate! My bear yells at me, and I try to ignore him.

I can't. Not yet. I need to put this robbery business to bed first before I decide what to do with my mate.

My bear isn't happy with me at all as I walk back into the house and upstairs. I'm going to wake up Willa and then head up to the Ski Lodge to talk to Ron. I'm hoping that he'll have more insight into all of this.

I knock on her bedroom door as I remove the door stopper. She doesn't answer, and I knock again before I push open the door.

"Son of a bitch," I growl when I see the open bedroom window, the curtains flapping in the wind.

There's a small puddle of water of melted snow underneath the open window so I know that she's been gone for a while. She must have snuck out the window while I went out to let my bear out to run.

I close the window and jog downstairs. As I step outside, I'm about to shift when I realize that I can't. I can't trust my bear around her right now.

I walk around to the back of the house and follow her footsteps through the snow towards town. Once we get closer to Main Street, I start to lose track of which steps are hers.

Luckily for me, my bear and I pick up her scent and follow it to the Half Moon Diner.

I spot Willa inside instantly. She's seated with two people who can only be her parents. They're laughing and they all look so happy and normal.

I'm debating whether I should go inside or wait for her out here when they stand and start to head for the door.

I study her parents for a moment, trying to figure out who they are. I have a lot of humans in my part of town, and I don't know them as well as the shifters. Willa and her parents are humans, which is why I didn't know who she was, not really. It also means that it's going to make explaining that she's my mate and that we're meant to be even harder.

"Morning," I greet them as they walk down the front steps of the diner.

Willa gives me a cheeky smile, and I know she's gloating that she pulled one over on me and managed to escape this morning.

"Morning, Mack," she says sweetly.

Her parents smile, and I take in their nice clothes. They look like a normal, middle-class family.

I should look into their financials. Maybe Willa stole the money for them.

"Happy birthday," I tell Willa, and she blinks.

She seems surprised that I remembered, and I frown.

Does she think that I'm that much of an ass?

Well, I did kind of kidnap her and lock her in my house...

My bear harumphs at me and sits down. He's a lot calmer now that we're near Willa.

"Thanks."

"Are you headed to Emma's place now?" I ask her, remembering how she mentioned wanting to hang out with her friends today.

“Um, yeah.”

“We’ll let you go. Have fun, honey,” her mom says.

“And happy birthday,” her dad asks.

They both hug and kiss her goodbye, and then I’m left alone with Willa.

My mate.

“I need to talk to you.”

“I’d rather not,” she says, turning to head towards Kane and Emma’s house.

I grab her arm, dragging her into an empty alley and throwing her over my shoulder. I can feel my shoulder protest, but I ignore the twinge of pain and start to stride down the path towards home.

“We need to talk,” I say, and she sighs.

I can picture her rolling her eyes at me, and my bear breathes in deeply.

She’s right there. Just bite her. Claim her, he urges me.

“What has Emma told you about Kane? Or Isla about Bishop?” I ask her as we head inside.

I kick the door closed behind us and set her down on the couch in the living room.

“Not much. They love them. They’re good guys. Why?” She asks, frowning at me in confusion.

This wasn’t what she thought I was going to ask her about. I was hoping that maybe her friends would have told her more about shifters and fated mates. Either they have and she’s keeping their secret, or they haven’t. I’m not sure which, so that means that I’m going to have to explain it all.

“They’re shifters,” I tell her, and she blinks at me.

“What?”

“They’re shifters. A wolf and a polar bear. I’m a black bear,” I say, and she stares at me. “Isla and Emma are their fated mates, and you... you’re mine.”

Then... nothing.

We both just stare at each other. It doesn't even look like she's breathing. She's just frozen in place, absorbing what I just told her.

"What?" She asks again, and I groan in frustration.

"I'm not explaining this right. I never thought that I would have to," I say as I start to pace in front of her.

"Listen, are you, like, okay? Are you having some kind of mental breakdown or something? Should I call someone?"

I growl, ripping off my shirt and then clawing at my pants.

I'll shift for her, and then she'll see I'm telling the truth. Then she'll believe me.

"Whoa!" She shouts, throwing up her hands as I push my pants and underwear down.

I kick them and my shoes off and then glance back at her.

"Look at me," I order.

"I'd rather not, dude."

"Do it. I'm going to prove this all to you."

She peeks at me from between her fingers, and that's when I let my bear push forward. My nails and teeth grow, and fur starts to cover my skin. My hands and feet turn into paws, and I shiver as my bones readjust. Within moments, I'm landing on all fours in front of her.

Her eyes widen behind her hands and she gapes at me.

"Fuck me," she whispers as she stares at me in shock.

Yes, please, my bear agrees right away.

I step forward, and she tenses like she thinks I might attack her. I stop and sit down by her feet. Even sitting, I'm still taller than her.

It takes her a few minutes before she reaches out and makes contact with me. Her touch is light on my fur, and I lean into it more.

“Hmm,” she says, and I want to growl in frustration.

She’s so hard for me to read. I wish that she would just tell me what she’s thinking.

I nudge her hand with my nose, and she smiles slightly.

That has to be a good sign, right?

I step back from her and shift back into my human form. She averts her eyes, chewing on her lip as I pull my clothes back on.

“So, now you believe me?”

“That you’re a bear? A, uh, shifter? Sure.”

“And we’re meant to be together.”

She laughs slightly at that, and I frown.

“It’s true. That’s how things work with shifters. We’re fated to our one true mate. We won’t love anyone before or after them. And you’re mine.”

“No,” she says.

“Yes. I could smell it as soon as I walked in here this morning. You’re my mate. You’re meant to be mine.”

She opens her mouth, and I interrupt her before she can say it.

“Don’t say no.”

“Fine, I won’t say no.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

Now we’re getting somewhere.

“I’ll say pass.”

Now it’s my turn to stare at her in shock.

SIX



Willa

MACK STARES at me like he's not sure what to do with me or how to respond. I know the feeling well. I mean, the man just turned into a bear right in front of me.

Now he's talking about us being meant to be together like that means something to me. Especially after he just held me captive and accused me of being a thief.

"I'm telling the truth," he says again. "Don't worry; I won't claim you until I've figured out if you're a criminal or not though."

"Don't worry," I seethe, and he nods.

"I'm the Alpha of my pack. I can't be tied to a thief," he explains.

"So, we're meant to be together because fate says so, not because you want me, and if it turns out that I'm a thief, which I'm *NOT*," I stress, "then you're wrong, and we won't be together."

"No, we would still be meant to be together; I would just reject you."

"Well, I'm saving you a step then because I reject you!" I scream at him.

He blinks, seeming taken aback by my rage, and I push past him and up the stairs. I head for the guestroom where he's

kept me and slam the door after myself.

I can hear his heavy footsteps on the stairs, and I brace myself, waiting to see if he'll try to come in.

"I'm going to go investigate," he tells me through the door.

I don't bother to respond.

"Happy birthday, Willa. I'll be back soon. Then we can talk."

I snort, and he sighs and heads back downstairs.

I wait until he leaves, and then I head for the bedroom door. He didn't lock me in this time. I close the door after me and jog down the stairs. My plan is to head to Emma's and spend the rest of the day with my friends. Maybe they'll have more advice on what to do with everything that Mack said to me this morning.

It's freezing on my walk to Emma's house. I hurry when the wind picks up and burst into her house, scaring the crap out of all three of my friends.

"No! You ruined the surprise," Emma complains as she climbs down from the step ladder.

I smile at the slightly crooked happy birthday sign and throw my arms around Isla and Maddie as they rush to hug me.

"Happy birthday!" They say in unison.

"Thanks," I say with a grin.

"Happy birthday!" Emma adds as she joins our group hug.

"Thanks guys."

"You're here early. I thought we had another half an hour," Isla says as we head over to the couch.

"Crap! I need to go grab something. I'll be right back!" Maddie calls as she grabs her coat and rushes out the door.

"Yeah, my plans kind of...changed," I start.

"How so?"

I look around at my friends, trying to decide how much to say. I know that Isla and Emma are both with shifters so I guess it's fine to just dive in.

"Mack is a shifter. A bear," I blurt out.

"Yeah," Isla says, and I realize they both already knew.

"And he says that I'm his fated mate."

That seems to shut them up. They share a look, and I push to my feet and start to pace.

"He also thinks that I'm a thief."

"What?" They squawk in outrage.

"Someone stole from the Ski Lodge and Jonathon accused me. Mack believes him."

"That freaking Jonathon," Emma seethes, and I nod.

"I know."

"I can't believe that anyone believes Jonathon," Isla groans, and I sigh.

"I know, but I mean, the guy is crazy."

"Crazy hot," Isla mutters, and I glare at her.

"Sorry, but he is. And you don't need to worry about the robbery charge. No one who knows you is going to believe it, and I'm sure that your name is going to be cleared any day now," Isla assures me.

"She's right. No one is going to believe that you stole from work," Emma adds.

"That's not my biggest problem right now. It's that Mack keeps dragging me back to his house. He's determined to hold me captive until this is all cleared up, but now he's throwing this fated mate stuff on top."

"Well, if he says you're his mate, then you are," Isla adds.

"Yeah, they only have the one," Emma says.

"What does that *mean* though?" I ask them.

"To be his mate?" Emma asks, and I nod.

“That you’re meant to be,” Isla says. “Shifters will only love their mate. You’re like the center of their whole world.”

“It’s kind of amazing,” Emma sighs dreamily.

“Yeah, it can be addicting. They would do anything for you,” Isla adds.

“So, it’s a good thing?” I ask them.

“Oh, yeah,” they say with a laugh.

“Huh.”

I’m not quite sold on everything. Their mates didn’t hold them captive and accuse them of stealing.

Mack seems so relaxed about being my mate too. He said that he would reject me like it was nothing, like it would be the easiest thing in the world to do, so obviously, I’m not that important to him.

“What are you going to do now?” Emma asks.

“Clear my name,” I say right away.

“And with Mack?” Isla asks.

“Nothing. I don’t want to be with someone who doesn’t trust me, who wouldn’t give me the benefit of the doubt.”

They frown but nod, and I plop back down next to them.

“Screw Mack then. Let’s forget about him and just celebrate your birthday,” Emma says.

“Deal,” I say as Maddie comes back in carrying a bakery box.

“Perfect timing!” Isla tells her, and I grin and try to forget all about Mack as I eat cake and hang out with my best friends.

SEVEN



Mack

“SON OF A BITCH,” I snarl as I stomp my way around the jail.

The two deputies working scurry out of my way. I don’t even look at them as I toss the paperwork onto the front desk.

It was the freaking manager. Jonathon. He was trying to frame my mate. What’s worse is that it’s not even the first time he’s done something like this. Jonathon isn’t even his real name.

“He’s got warrants out for his arrest in Arizona and Kentucky. I’m going to go get the money he stole, and then you can process him and let those two states fight over him.”

“Yes, sir,” both deputies say at the same time.

I stalk out of the police station and over to my Jeep. Jonathon, or whatever his real name is, told me where the money was stashed. He thought that Ron was onto him, rightfully so, and he was trying to pin the theft on someone else so that he had a few more days to get some more money and time to make his escape. We’re just lucky that he didn’t have enough time to spend any of it or slip away.

I drive past the Ski Lodge and up further into the mountains to the abandoned hunting cabin that Jonathon told me about. I park outside and head over to the door. It’s chain-

locked, and I have to kick it in. Sure enough, there, under the old floorboards, is the suitcase full of money.

My bear is snarling at me, and I grit my teeth.

Who cares about the money? Go get our mate! Make this right with her! We should have claimed her this morning.

We have a responsibility to the pack. We need to take care of them. We'll drop the money off and then go find her, I promise him.

The sun is starting to set as I pull up in front of the police station and carry the money inside.

“Let me know if you run into any problems,” I tell them, and they nod. “I’ve already told Ron that we found the money. After you’re done here, we’ll let him deposit it. He’ll be by in the morning.”

“Yes, sir,” they say, and I turn to leave.

I head home, practicing my speech to Willa on my drive. The house is quiet and dark as I walk in, and I’m not surprised; it’s close to eleven at night already. She’s probably fast asleep.

Maybe I should wait to talk to her in the morning.

No! My bear roars, and I sigh as I head upstairs to the guestroom.

I push open the door and sigh.

“Yep, of course, she’s fucking gone.”

I spin on my heel and stomp my way downstairs and back out to my Jeep. I climb behind the wheel and back out of the drive. I have a feeling that I know where she’s at, and I head towards Kane’s house.

His house is quiet and dark, too, but I don’t let that stop me. I’m about to knock on the door when it swings open, and Kane gives me a tired smile.

“I figured that you would be by at some point.”

“I got Jonathon situated at the station. I brought the money in too.”

“Good. Are you here for Willa?”

“Yeah.”

“She’s asleep. All of the girls are,” he tells me.

“Is she pissed at me?” I blurt out, and he smiles slightly.

“Yep. What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t have a freaking clue,” I admit, scrubbing my hands down my face.

It’s been a long day. This isn’t how I should have spent my mate’s birthday. I should have been with her. I should have been celebrating her. More than that, I should have trusted her from the beginning. I never should have taken her captive or accused her without any proof. Now, I might have just pushed her away for good.

My bear makes a distressed sound inside of me at that thought, and I wince.

“I could bite her,” I say, talking more to myself and my bear than to Kane. “Then she’ll feel the connection between us at the mating moon.”

Kane laughs, shaking his head at me.

“It won’t be that easy. Trust me. You’re going to have to grovel and romance her. It’s what I had to do with Emma when I messed things up with her.”

“Willa is different. We haven’t known each other long, not like you and Emma.”

He just laughs at me again, and I push past him and head inside. Emma is sound asleep on the couch, her friends around her, and I reach down and pick her up into my arms. I carry her past a still chuckling Kane and over to my Jeep.

She must be really tired because she doesn’t so much as stir as I buckle her in and make the drive home.

As I go, I can't help but wonder if Kane might be right about the groveling and romance. He has more experience with women than I do. Maybe I should listen to him. Maybe I should have asked him for more advice.

I guess we'll see who's right tomorrow morning.

EIGHT



Willa

WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, I'm not even all that surprised to be back in Mack's house. What does stun me is that I'm in Mack's bed this time.

As soon as I blink my eyes open and realize where I am, I promptly throw my legs over the edge and jump off the mattress like it's on fire.

I stare in horror when I see that Mack is still in the bed.

"Oh, god! Did we sleep together?" I screech, and he jack knifes up in bed, blinking his bleary eyes open.

I look down at my body, letting out a sigh of relief when I see that I'm still fully dressed.

"What? No," he says, climbing out of bed. "I brought you home from Kane and Emma's."

"Why?" I ask him, and he blinks.

"The manager, Jonathon, he confessed last night. We got the money back."

"Okay... and? That doesn't explain why you kidnapped me from my friend's house last night and forced me to sleep in your bed."

"I didn't kidnap you," he starts, and I give him a look.

He sighs, and I start to inch for the bedroom door.

“Jonathon is in prison now. He has a few warrants out, so he’ll be leaving Alaska soon.”

“Good. Wait, you arrested him. That’s even better. I can go home then.”

Mack frowns at me as I turn and head for the door. I’m excited to finally go back to my real life.

I head downstairs, Mack hot on my heels the entire time.

“No, you can’t leave,” he stops me.

“Why not?”

“Well, you’ll be moving in here instead,” he explains, and I turn to gape at him.

“Um, no. I won’t be doing that.”

“You have to. We’re fated mates.”

“No, we’re not,” I say forcefully.

“We are. I shifted for you. I told you about all of this.”

“Right, but I don’t care. I don’t want to be your mate. I want someone good and kind. I want someone who sees the best in people. I want someone who trusts me and knows me and loves me, and you are not any of those things.”

I turn around and head for the door, and I can hear Mack sputtering, trying to come up with something to say to get me to stay, but I ignore him.

I even slam the door for good measure on my way out.

NINE



Mack

“I NEED HELP,” I announce as soon as Kane, Bishop, and Jonas walk into the community center.

“With Willa?” Kane guesses right away.

“Yeah, things did not go well this morning,” I admit.

“Told you.”

I glare at him, and he smirks as he takes a seat at the table next to me.

“Yeah, you told me. Now, please, help me fix it.”

“I told you, you need to grovel and romance her,” Kane tells me.

“Right, but how exactly do I do that?” I ask them.

“Just tell her how you feel about her,” Bishop suggests.

“Did you tell her that you’re fated mates?” Jonas asks.

“Yeah, it doesn’t mean anything to her,” I tell him.

“Probably because you accused her of stealing from her job and then locked her in your house,” Kane says, and I glare at him again.

“Yes, I understand where I went wrong,” I tell him through my teeth.

“So go tell her that you’re sorry. Beg her to forgive you. Ask what you can do to make it up to her,” Bishop suggests.

Okay, that could work.

Could it? My bear growls at me.

He’s been furious, pacing back and forth like a caged beast all day. I messed things up with our mate. If I had just bitten her on her birthday, my bear is convinced that we wouldn’t be in any of this mess right now.

“Okay, any other ideas or tips?” I ask them.

“Plan a good date, and don’t just treat it like a way to get into her pants,” Kane says.

My bear shakes his head at that, and I roll my eyes at him. With the full moon approaching in a few days, he’s been more determined than ever to spend it with our mate.

“Okay, I can do that.”

“You could take her on a picnic or make her dinner,” Jonas suggests.

“Yeah, do something intimate and special. Something where you can really get to know her and spend time just the two of you,” Kane adds.

“Okay, I can do that.”

I start to make a plan of things that we could do together, but the truth is that I’m going to need to convince her to forgive me and give me a second chance first.

My bear starts to pace nervously inside of me, and I swallow hard. That’s the part that I’m really worried about.

Did I mess things up with Willa so badly that I ruined things before they could even start? I have no experience with women. Do I really think that I’m going to be able to make all of this up to her? Do I even have a chance with her?

I can’t help but think about what my parents would say about all of this. I bet they wouldn’t even be surprised if they found out I messed things up with my fated mate. They probably expected my mate to reject me.

I push those thoughts away and stand from the table.

“Thanks, guys,” I say sincerely.

“Are you going to go talk to her today or wait until tomorrow?” Bishop asks.

“Tonight. If I want to be with her for the mating moon, I’m going to need time to make all of this up to her.”

“Good idea,” Kane says.

We head out of the community center, and my bear takes a deep breath, trying to catch any whiff of our mate. There’s no sign or smell of her so I’m guessing that she’s either at Kane and Emma’s place or her own house.

I head towards her house first and my heart lodges in my throat when I see her out front. She’s smiling as she shovels off the last bite of her driveway, and I stop and stare at her.

She looks beautiful and happy. Her dark hair is tied up in a messy bun on top of her head, her earmuffs making her look sweet. Her cheeks are stained a light pink from the cold and exertion of shoveling.

Maybe I should just leave her alone. I’ve been her mate for two days and all I’ve made her is angry, upset, and miserable. Maybe she’s better off without me in her life.

My bear snarls at me, and I blink, taking another step towards her.

“Hey, do you need a hand with that?” I ask as I walk closer.

She looks over at me, seeming resigned when she sees that it’s me.

“No, I’ve got it. Thanks though.”

She shovels off the last bit of snow and takes a deep breath, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Did you want to go for a little walk with me?” I ask when I see her parents peeking out at us from behind the blinds.

“Is that necessary?” She asks, and I try not to be too disappointed.

“Please,” I beg, and she studies me for a moment before she nods.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

We start to walk down the quiet road, the snow crunching under our feet as we go. I know that I don’t have long with her, so as soon as we’re out of view of her parents’ house, I start my campaign to win her back.

“I’m sorry. I should have trusted you when you said you didn’t take the money. You’re right; you do deserve someone who sees the best in people and who trusts you. That should have been me.”

“Thanks for saying that,” she says.

“I wanted to try to explain my reasoning. I’m hoping you’ll be able to see why I did things the way I did and that maybe you’ll be willing to give me another chance.”

She side eyes me, and the little bit of hope that I have dies quickly. Still, I have to try, so I dig down deep and try to open up to her.

“I’ve always had a lot of... pressure put on me. I was the Alpha’s son, and it was expected that I would take over. I had to be tough and strong and the law. That was drilled into me.”

“Alpha?” She asks, and I blink.

“Oh, it’s the leader of the pack. I’m in charge of the West Pack of Aspen Ridge.”

“Okay. Continue.”

“My parents were strict. They wanted me to be the best at everything, and I just... never seemed to be able to meet their expectations. I was never good enough,” I finish quietly.

“But, you’re the Alpha? And a freaking war hero?” She asks, sounding outraged on my behalf.

“It doesn’t matter to them.”

“It should. You’re a good guy, Mack. They should be able to see it.”

“Thanks,” I whisper.

My bear is sitting up proudly inside of me. He’s happy with our mate, happy that she can see our worth and is on our side.

“Anyways, when I found out that there had been a robbery, I was upset and worried about my pack. I didn’t want the thief to get away and knew that if the thief was my mate and she got away with stealing hundreds of thousands, I would never live it down. I was trying to do right by my pack, but in doing that, I let down my mate. I shouldn’t have done that. I really am sorry, Willa.”

“It’s okay. I can kind of see where you’re coming from.”

“Let me make it up to you. Let me take you to dinner,” I plead with her.

She hesitates, chewing on her plump bottom lip as we make our way back to her house. My heart is beating out of control as I wait for her answer.

“Please, Willa. Fate paired us together and there’s a reason for that. Just give me another chance and I promise you’ll see it too.”

“Alright,” she says reluctantly, and I jump on her agreement before she can take it back.

“Great! I’ll go home and get things ready. I’ll pick you up in an hour and a half,” I say, and she blinks.

“Tonight?”

“Yeah... unless you have plans already?”

“No, but...”

“Then, dinner. Okay?”

She studies me as we stop at the end of her driveway, and my bear paces inside of me.

“Okay,” she says, and I grin.

“Good. I’ll see you soon.”

I want to lean down and kiss her goodbye, but I know how that would go, so instead, I just wave and head off toward my place.

Now, I just need to plan the best date ever so that I can win another chance with my feisty mate.

Piece of cake, right?

TEN



Willa

MACK SHOWS up exactly an hour and a half later to pick me up for dinner. I'm not sure how I feel about going out with him. I'm trying to forgive him for how he treated me these last couple of days, but it's hard.

Hearing how he sees himself and his parents viewed him was heartbreaking and softened me towards him a bit. It seems crazy to me that he could see himself that way when everyone in town loves and looks up to him.

I never really met his parents, but his father seemed a lot like him. He carried himself with authority. He seemed cold and matter-of-fact about everything. I assumed that Mack had learned his demeanor from his dad, but now I'm wondering if it's all a façade.

"Let me get your door for you," Mack says as he leads me over to his Jeep.

"Thanks."

I shiver as the wind picks up. Now that the sun is setting, it's starting to get crazy cold out. I'm glad that he drove to pick me up. I'm not sure I would have survived the walk there or back home otherwise.

"Do you get cold?" I ask him as he climbs behind the wheel.

“Sure. Moreso when I’m in my human form, but when it’s well below zero, then I can get chilly, even when I’m my bear.”

“Do you shift to your bear form often?” I ask as we pull away from my house and head towards his.

“Every day. He gets antsy when he can’t run or stretch out every day or so.”

“Does the military know about you? Does everyone in town know about shifters?”

“No, and no. There were a few other members of my unit who were shifters, but we never shifted on base or anywhere near it. It’s too dangerous to do that. We don’t want humans knowing that we exist,” he explains.

“I know that you exist.”

“You’re my fated mate. I trust you,” he says, and the words seem to hit me hard.

“With some things,” I say quietly, and he stiffens in his seat.

“I’m sorry about that, Willa. Truly.”

“I know. I’m almost over it,” I tell him, and he sighs as he pulls into his driveway.

We both hop out, and he hurries over to my side as we head for the door. We’re silent as we hurry inside and start to peel off our layers.

The house is the same as it was this morning when I left, but it feels different to be back here. Maybe because this time I’m here as a guest.

“I made us dinner. I hope that you’re hungry... and that you like spaghetti.”

“I do,” I assure him with a laugh.

“Good,” he says, relaxing right before my eyes. “Let me take your coat.”

I pass him my winter gear and follow him into the kitchen. There's a sauce simmering on the stove, and he turns the heat up, warming it up as he starts a pot for the spaghetti.

"I'm surprised that you can cook," I comment, and he gives me a half, kind of sad, smile.

"I learned when I was a kid. My mom was always busy helping my dad out with his Alpha duties, so I had to learn to fend for myself."

My heart sinks as I think about a young Mack all alone in his house cooking a meal for one. I always thought he was one of the popular guys with so many friends. When we were younger, he was always surrounded by people, but I'm starting to realize now that they weren't really friends.

"It's cool that you know how to cook. I'm kind of a disaster in the kitchen. All I can manage is cereal," I say with a self-deprecating laugh.

"I can teach you a few recipes. Maybe you've just never had the right teacher," he rumbles as he adds the pasta to the boiling water.

"Maybe," I hedge.

I've forgiven him, but I'm still not sure that I want to be Mack's mate. I feel kind of bad though for yelling at him about not knowing me. It seems that I judged him too, and not correctly.

All of those bubbly, warm feelings from when I had a crush on him as a girl are still there, lurking just under the surface.

He moves around the kitchen, focusing on our meal, and I watch him, studying him. He's solid, built like a, well, like a bear. I let my eyes roam over the strong muscles of his back and arms. His biceps bunch as he drains the pasta and pulls the garlic bread out of the oven.

"Did you want to eat at the counter or the table?" He asks me as he grabs some plates.

"Wherever you want."

He hesitates for a moment and then carries things over to the table. I slide off of my stool and join him at the kitchen table.

“It looks and smells delicious,” I compliment as we both take our seats.

“Thanks. Hopefully it tastes good too.”

“Tell me more about yourself,” I say as we both pile our plates with food and dig in.

“There’s not much to tell. I was born and raised here. I left when I was eighteen and joined the Marines. I wanted to make something of myself, and I guess I was trying to prove to my parents and myself that I was strong and capable.”

“You are,” I assure him.

He doesn’t look convinced, but he nods and goes on.

“I was shot on my last deployment, and I heard that my dad’s health was starting to decline so I figured now was a good time to come back and take over things from him.”

“Do you like it here?” I ask softly, and he nods.

“I love it here. This place is home.”

“Good,” I smile.

“Do you like it here?” He asks nervously, and I nod.

“Yeah, it’s home.”

We eat in silence for a minute, and I smile.

“I remember you in school. You were the big man on campus. I used to have such a crush on you,” I admit.

“Used to?” He asks, looking worried.

I shrug, smiling slightly, and he looks like he wants to ask me more, but I change the subject.

“I’m starting college soon. In a couple of weeks.”

“You’re leaving?” He asks in a panic.

“No, I’m going to work and take online courses. Well, I was going to work. I’m not sure that I can go back to working

at the Ski Lodge and Resort.”

“You can. They know that you didn’t steal the money.”

“Still, it feels weird now. I’ll try to figure something else out.”

“You don’t have to work. I can take care of us,” he offers, and I give him a warning look.

“We’ll see,” I say.

I’m actually having fun tonight, and don’t want to ruin it by arguing about us being fated mates or whatever.

“What was your favorite subject in school? What’s your major going to be? Where are you going to college?” He asks, rattling off questions at me faster than I can answer.

“I loved math and science. I’m still not sure about my major, but I’m leaning towards criminal justice or maybe law.”

“Really?” He asks in surprise, and I nod.

“I think it would be cool to be sheriff of this place someday. Probably pretty slow since there’s barely any crime, but still. It would be cool to help out the community that way and keep people safe.”

“You’d probably be good at it. You knew it was Jonathon right away. You’re good at reading people.”

“Thanks. I hope so.”

I eat the last of my garlic bread and lean back in my chair.

“I’m stuffed. That was so good. Thanks for cooking for me.”

“Anytime.”

I help him carry the dishes over to the counter, and we stand side by side as he starts to wash the dishes. I dry, stacking them on the counter.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to,” I tell him.

We clean up in a comfortable silence, and I smile.

It took him two days to ruin the crush that I used to have on him. I wonder how many days it will take for him to bring it back, stronger than ever?

ELEVEN



Mack

MY BEAR IS all worked up inside of me as we wait until it's time to go pick up Willa for our second date. I knew that he was going to be like this, which is why I took him for a long run this morning and again this afternoon. It didn't really help. I know he's going to get worse as it gets closer to the full moon tomorrow night.

I wish that things were different. I wish I hadn't messed things up with Willa before they could even begin.

She came over for dinner yesterday, my bear reminds me, and I sigh.

That's true, and I think it was a good first step, but it doesn't mean that she's really forgiven us yet. Not fully anyway. We might have to wait until next month's full moon to claim her.

My bear growls at that thought, and I have to agree with him. I don't want to wait that long either, but it's probably what we deserve. We hurt her by accusing her of stealing from the Ski Lodge and holding her captive here. We need to find some way to make it up to her. I just don't know how.

What can I say or do to make this all right?

I glance at the clock and see that it's almost time to pick up Willa. It feels like a miracle that I was able to talk her into going out with me again. When I asked last night after I

dropped her off at her house, she hesitated for so long that I was sure that she was going to say no.

Just focus on the fact that she said yes, my bear tells me, and I nod.

He's right. I need to take it one day at a time with her.

I grab my car keys and brush out a few wrinkles in my shirt as I head out the door. It's starting to snow harder, and I hurry over to my Jeep and crank the engine, turning the heat all the way on.

The roads are starting to get icy as I make my way towards Willa's place, and the Alpha in me takes over. I should be out making sure that my pack is safe and everyone is inside where it's safe. Maybe I should call and make sure that the snow plows and salt trucks are ready to go.

Stop! Let the other Alphas take care of those things. They can handle it for one night. Go get our mate! My bear snaps at me.

I make it to Willa's house in one piece and climb out. I'm right on time and I hurry up to the front door. I knock, and she answers a minute later.

"Hey, I was just about to call you. I had to call Emma and ask Kane for your number," she says.

She's already shivering from the cold, and I shift, trying to block out the worst of the snow and wind.

"Oh, am I late? I thought I was right on time," I say, glancing at my watch.

"You are. The weather is getting bad though. I think maybe we should cancel tonight before we get snowed in somewhere," she says with a light laugh.

"Oh, yeah, you're probably right."

I try to hide my disappointment, but I don't think that I'm doing a great job of that.

"Maybe tomorrow we can do something?" I ask, forcing a smile to my lips.

“Maybe,” she hedges, and panic starts to set in.

“I’m free all day,” I say, and even I can hear the desperation in my voice.

My bear starts to pace inside of me and his anxiety is not helping matters at all.

“Okay, I’ll um... I’ll call you or something,” she says, already starting to head back inside.

I know that this is it. I’m seconds away from having the door slammed in my face and losing my mate. I can’t let that happen. Not without a fight.

My bear roars inside of me, and I clear my throat, slapping my hand onto the door before it can shut.

“Wait!” I shout, and she blinks, looking up at me in shock. “Just... wait, please, Willa.”

She opens the door a little bit, and I swallow hard. I should have been planning a speech; I should have prepared for anything that could have happened tonight. Now I have Willa’s undivided attention and I have no idea what the hell to say.

“I’m sorry. I know I keep saying that and it probably doesn’t mean anything to you. I mean, it’s just a word, and I —” I cut myself off.

I have no idea where I was going with that.

Oh my god, what am I going to do?

“I’m bad at this,” I sigh.

“You really are,” she agrees.

“I just have no experience with any of this and I have no idea what I’m doing. I want to ask you what I can do to make everything up to you, but I got into this mess and shouldn’t have to put more stuff on you to get myself out of it. It’s just that I have no idea how to make any of this right. I’m so lost and all I know is that I need you. We’re meant to be, and I know that it means nothing to you, that shifters and fated mates and all of this means nothing to you, but it is everything

to me. I messed it up though,” I say, continuing with my verbal vomit.

“Mack,” Willa starts, but I’m on a roll.

“I grew up hearing about mates; I guess I just took you for granted. It’s rare for mates to reject the other and I never thought about you rejecting me. Still, I shouldn’t have treated you the way that I did. I told you about my parents and all of that, but that was just an excuse. I’m my own man, and should have treated you better, with respect and trust. I’ve been such an asshole for so long, so used to being a grump to keep people away, and it’s weird to try not to be now and to let you in, but I want to. I really, really want to.”

“Mack,” Willa tries again.

Let her talk! My bear screams at me.

“I’m sorry, Willa. I’m so sorry and if you can just forgive me, I swear I will spend the rest of my life making things right. I’ll figure it out. I swear. Can we just start over?” I ask as a big gust of wind sends flurries all around us.

I hold my breath as I wait for her response, and she shifts on her feet.

“Mack... I just, I need some time,” she says softly, and I try to swallow down my disappointment.

“Oh, okay. I understand.”

I start to back away, and she opens her mouth like she wants to say something, but no words come out.

I give her a small smile and turn, trudging back to my Jeep as more snow starts to fall all around me.

I never thought that it would happen, but I think that my mate just rejected me.

My bear roars mournfully inside of me, and I sigh in agreement.

“I know, buddy. I know.”

I start my Jeep, pull away from the curb in front of her house, and head back home.

TWELVE



Willa

I HAVE no idea what to do and I hate it.

I'm so used to being sure about my decisions, but with Mack, I'm all over the place. When I left his house after he told me that Jonathon was the real thief, I was determined to ignore him, but he kept sucking me back in.

When he told me about his parents and childhood, my heart broke for him. My parents are awesome, and I guess I assumed that the Alpha's parents would be too, but that wasn't the case. I can't imagine being so hard on my kids. I can't imagine growing up and not knowing if I'm loved and wanted, but it sounds like that was Mack's reality.

After our dinner together, I thought that maybe we could be friends. I'd forgive him for how he treated me, but I didn't think I wanted to be his mate or anything.

To be honest, I thought that he would let me go. He made it sound like rejecting me would be a piece of cake, but yesterday when I tried to blow him off, he fought for me. In fact, it was the first time I truly saw that mask he keeps so firmly in place slip. He was scared to lose me, terrified of the possibility. His impassioned speech moved something in me, but I still have questions.

That's why I'm headed to his place right now. The snow finally stopped, so I got bundled up to make the trek over.

“Hey! Where are you headed?” Maddie asks me as I almost run right into her.

“Hey, um, I’m headed over to Mack’s place.”

She gives me a knowing look, and I laugh.

“To *talk*,” I stress, and she laughs then.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“Oh my gosh, you’re the worst. I’m seriously just going to talk to him,” I promise her.

She knows all about him accusing me of stealing and apologizing. She also knows I had a crush on him when I was younger. The girls have been asking for updates on what’s happening between the two of us for the last couple of days, and I’ve been honest, telling them that I have no clue.

Movement catches my eye, and I see Jonas stop dead in his tracks when he spots Maddie and me. His eyes are locked on her, and a thought hits me.

I wonder if Jonas is a shifter, too, and Maddie is his mate. That would explain the longing looks that he’s always giving her. I’ll have to ask Mack.

“Are you headed to work?” I ask, and she nods.

“Yeah, I picked up an extra shift. I’m trying to work as much as I can to save up.”

“Have you found an apartment yet?” I ask her, and she shakes her head.

“No, everything is crazy expensive, and I would need to find a roommate, which I don’t really want to do. Not unless it was going to be you or one of the girls.”

“Well, I can’t say that I’m disappointed. I don’t want you to leave.”

“I know, but I have to do something. I can’t take living with my mom for too much longer,” she grumbles, and I give her a sympathetic smile.

“You can crash with me anytime. I’ll even share my bed with you,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“Thanks. I might take you up on that. If Mack isn’t already sharing it with you instead.”

“Stop! Go to work,” I say with a giggle, and she smirks.

“I’ll text you on my break,” she promises, and I wave as she takes off.

Jonas starts to follow her, and I give him a knowing smile.

“Roads are icy. Just want to make sure that she gets there safe,” he tells me as he passes.

“Uh huh.”

His cheeks heat with a faint blush and he hurries to catch up to her as she rounds a corner.

I continue onto Mack’s house and take a deep breath as I climb up onto the front porch and ring the doorbell. The door is ripped open a second later, and I gasp, jumping back and almost slipping right off the porch.

Luckily, Mack catches me and drags me inside.

“It’s freezing out. You should have called me. I would have come to get you or just come to you,” he says, practically carrying me over to the chair next to the fireplace.

“I’m fine. I’m all bundled up,” I tell him as I peel off my gloves and warm my hands by the fire.

He makes some grumbly sound, and my core clenches at the sound.

“I wanted to talk to you,” I tell him, trying to distract myself from thoughts of Mack naked and making that sound again.

“Okay, about what?”

He seems nervous now, and I straighten in my chair.

“Is Jonas a shifter?”

He blinks at me, caught off guard by this line of questioning.

“What?”

“Jonas, is he a shifter? A bear like you?”

“No, he’s a wolf. Why?” He asks, and I can see the jealousy starting to overtake him.

“I just ran into him and was wondering.”

“He’s not your mate.”

“Yeah, I know. Is he Maddie’s?” I ask.

“Probably. The guy has been in love with her for years, since he was fifteen or so, but he’ll need to wait until she’s eighteen to find out for sure.”

“Must be nice,” I sigh, and he frowns.

“Is that what you want? Someone who pines for you and follows you around like a puppy dog?” He asks, and I snuggle deeper into my chair.

“Yes. It’s what everyone wants.”

“Oh.”

He looks thoughtful for a moment, and I study him. He looks tired today like he didn’t get any sleep. I wonder if he was too upset about our conversation yesterday and couldn’t sleep.

“I can do that,” he announces, and I blink.

“Do what?”

“Be your shadow.”

“It’s not the same,” I tell him, and he looks frustrated by that answer.

“I know you probably won’t believe me, but there’s always been something between us. I didn’t notice you before, true, but that’s not because of you. When I was younger, I was just so wrapped up in making my parents proud. I mean, I never noticed girls. Even in the military, I was concentrating on serving my country and staying alive. There’s never been anyone before you, and there won’t be anyone after you. I felt it though. That first day, when I...”

“Accused me of grand larceny,” I fill in, and he winces.

“Yeah, that. I felt it then. You made me smile. You drove me crazy. You’re still driving me crazy. I was attracted to you, and that shouldn’t have been possible since I didn’t know you were my mate yet.”

He’s right. I can’t deny that there’s something between us.

Still...

“What happens if I become your mate?” I ask quietly, and his eyes bore into mine.

“Then I’ll love you until my dying breath. I’ll only ever love you. I’ll only ever want you. You will become the center of my world, and I’ll do anything to make you happy and to keep you safe.”

“And what happens if you treat me bad again? What happens if someone else accuses me of a crime?”

“I’ll rip their fucking throat out,” he growls, and I can see his bear more in that moment.

“You didn’t before,” I point out. “Wait... did you?”

I haven’t seen Jonathon around...

“No, I didn’t. He’s in Arizona now, being booked for his crimes there.”

“Good.”

“I messed up before. Badly. I know that, and I’m really sorry, Willa. I can’t prove it to you unless you give me a chance, but if you do, I swear that nothing like this will ever happen again. I might mess up, but I will always have your back. I promise.”

“It’s hard to trust you,” I admit, and he seems to slump in his chair.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he murmurs.

He looks so broken right now, and it breaks my heart. I hate to see him like this.

You're the only one who ever will. He only lets down his guard with you, my subconscious whispers.

Maybe he does trust me.

“Could I break it?” I ask him. “If I became your mate and you did treat me poorly again, could I walk away?”

He makes a pained sound, looking devastated at just the thought of me leaving him.

“You could. It would kill me, but you could.”

We stare at each other, and I can see the anxiety and stress etched into his features. This guy leads a whole pack. He was in the military and sent to fight in wars, and I know, I just know, that this is the first time he's ever been truly scared.

That hits me hard and I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

“Okay,” I say, and he blinks, looking scared to hope at this point.

“Okay?” He asks, and I nod.

“I'll be your mate.”

THIRTEEN



Mack

WILLA SAID she was getting hungry so I'm currently digging through my cupboards, trying to figure out what I can make for us to eat. I'm not much of a cook. Normally, I just throw together a sandwich or make some spaghetti or something.

"I don't have much here. I could make grilled cheese and a... can of tomato soup," I say when I spot the can in the cupboard.

"That sounds good. Need any help?" She offers.

"No, I've got it. You just relax."

I grab a pot and pan and get started on our dinner. We talked for a bit more after she agreed to be mine. I can barely remember what was said. All I could think was, she's mine! She's my mate! It didn't help that my bear was rolling around inside of me in excitement and distracting me too.

I add the first grilled cheese to that pan, and my mouth waters at the scent of butter and melting cheese. My bear snaps at me. He's hungry for something more than food. The mating heat is pressing down on us already.

I wonder if Willa can feel the mating heat too.

I sneak a peek at her and see that her eyes are locked on my ass. I smirk to myself even as my face warms with a blush.

So, she wants me too.

I should probably tell her a bit more about the mating moon tonight and the mating heat that comes along with it.

I check out Willa, wondering how to go about that, but I keep getting distracted. She looks so beautiful. She's wearing a tight pair of yoga pants and a loose-fitting sweater that hangs off one shoulder, exposing the spot where my bite mark will hopefully be later tonight. My bear licks his lips inside of me, and I swallow hard.

I flip the sandwich over and turn the heat up on the soup. I grab some plates and bowls as I practice what I should say.

"Are you okay? You seem a little... tense," Willa says, and I realize it's been dead silent in the kitchen for a few minutes.

"Let's eat. I'll tell you about it over dinner."

"Alright," she says, and I hurry to pull out her chair at the table.

I grab our food and set hers in front of her.

"This looks great. Thanks for cooking."

"Of course. Sorry that I can't offer you something better."

"Are you kidding? I love soup and grilled cheese. It reminds me of my childhood. My mom used to make this at least once a week."

"Then I'm happy to make it for you."

I take a seat next to her and we both dig in.

"Are you sure that you're okay?" She asks, eyeing me carefully.

"I'm sure," I say, clearing my throat.

Tell her! My bear snarls at me, and I clear my throat again.

"Um, it's the full moon tonight," I start. "And that means that every mated shifter is going to feel the mating heat."

"What's that?"

"It's... it's like pure desire hitting you for one night a month."

Her spoon clatters into her bowl, and she sputters on her bite of soup for a moment.

“I’ll always want you, but tonight, it’s going to feel like I’ll die if I don’t have you. I think that it will feel the same for you too.”

She still doesn’t say anything to that, just stares at me with wide eyes, and I rush to clarify.

“I’m not trying to pressure you! We’ll only do what you’re comfortable with. We’ll go at your pace.”

“Right,” she says, and she looks like she’s in a bit of a daze.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, but I notice that Willa is really just pushing her food around her plate.

“I didn’t mean to freak you out,” I apologize, and she shakes her head.

“I think I do feel it,” she whispers, and my heart leaps in my chest. My bear jumps to his feet, too, and I try not to get too excited.

Claim her! My bear screams in my head, and I grit my teeth.

Be good or she’ll run out of here and we’ll never see her again. We’re only doing what she wants to do, I remind him.

“Now what happens?” She asks, and I swallow.

“That’s up to you. I know that shifters and fated mates are all new to you.”

She stares at me, and I take a deep breath, trying to calm my bear down. He’s pacing back and forth inside me. We’re so close to finally fully claiming her that we can taste it and it tastes so sweet.

I take a deep breath and when I can smell her desire, I know I might actually have a chance with her tonight.

“What’s next?” She asks.

“Well, I... I need to bite you and then I would claim you,” I explain.

“Bite me?” She squeaks, and I nod.

“It’s a shifter thing. We mark our mates so that others know that you’re taken.”

“Okay.”

She seems nervous, and I rush to reassure her.

“It won’t hurt! In fact, I hear that it can make you... come,” I finish, and she blinks.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

We’re silent for a beat, and she chews on her bottom lip.

“And then you... claim me? What’s that?”

“Sex,” I blurt out, and her eyes widen.

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” I say hoarsely.

Fuck, I want her so bad.

She nods, her eyes locking with mine. I’m not sure who moves first, but in the blink of an eye, we’re wrapped around each other.

The spoons clatter in the bowls as we bump against the table. Her hands are in my hair and mine are gripping her waist. I can feel the mating heat pulsing like a second heartbeat all around me and I can sense that it’s the same for her too.

“Willa, God,” I groan once she breaks our kiss to gulp down air. “I never want you to think I’m using you. If this is too fast for you, then you need to tell me now.”

“I need you. I want you,” she half moans, and I look down at her, trying to gauge her mood.

She nods, and I can see the desperate edge in her pretty eyes. She’s trying to play it cool, but she wants me just as

much as I want her.

Willa bites her bottom lip, drawing my eyes to that spot. My dick lengthens even more, pressing against my jeans, against her pussy through her yoga pants. I hold my breath, waiting for her response. She grinds against me and my control snaps.

I'm on her in the next breath, lifting her in my arms and practically sprinting with her through the house and upstairs to our room. Her scent is still lingering here and it's been driving me crazy these last few nights.

I rest her down on the bed, coming down over her and pinning her arms above her head. She gasps as I nudge her legs wider.

“Are you aching for me too, mate?” I all but growl.

I need to hear that she wants me as much as I need her.

She nods eagerly, her pupils dilating and cheeks flushing. So damn sexy.

I grunt and slam my mouth down over hers, swallowing her moans of pleasure as I thrust my tongue in and out past her sweet lips. Willa wriggles and whines underneath me, and I release her arms, freeing up both of my hands to roam over her curvy body.

WE BREAK APART, both of us gasping for air as I help her sit up and peel off her loose shirt.

She looks so vulnerable all of a sudden, a nervous glint in her eyes as her hands move to cover the swells and dips of her body.

“You're gorgeous. The prettiest thing I've ever seen,” I tell her reverently.

She smiles at me and my heart threatens to burst out of my chest.

My bear whines. He wants to bite her, to lick all of her, and I push him down and get back to worshipping my mate.

My hands run up and down the smooth skin of her stomach, ribs, and then cup her perfect breasts, still covered in a lace bra. I rub my thumbs over her already hard nipples, making her moan and arch her back. She doesn't even seem to notice as I deftly unhook her bra and slide it down her arms.

"Oh fuck me," she whispers, tipping her head back and tangling her fingers in my hair as I bend down and suck one perky tit into my mouth.

"I aim to, mate," I tell her against her skin.

I smile with a mouthful of her breast and bite down gently on her nipple. Willa's whole body jerks, making me completely ravenous for her. I want to hear her moan and scream my name. I want to watch her break apart underneath me.

Back and forth I suck, lick, nibble, and knead her tender flesh, and she loves every second of my attention. I think I could make her come just like this, but I have other plans for her. Big, big plans.

I pop off her tit, making her whimper and pout. Grinning, I scoot down between her legs and hook my thumbs into her yoga pants and panties.

"Still okay?" I grunt, needing her to check in on her and get her permission, even though I might die if I don't have her taste on my tongue in the next three seconds.

"Yes! God, yes!" She gasps out, and I grin.

It sounds like she might die if I don't make her come in the next three seconds too.

I groan in approval and start tugging her pants and panties down, slowly revealing the curve of her hips and the soft curve of her thighs.

She takes a breath like she's going to say something, but then I pull her pants all the way down, baring her ripe, juicy cunt to me for the first time. I rid her of the last scraps of clothing and then take my time looking her up and down from my position on my knees in front of her.

I need to catch up.

I pull my shirt over my head, wanting to be skin-to-skin with her as I eat her out.

I don't have it in me to draw this out any longer. Scooting down her body, I throw her legs over my shoulders and dive into that pretty pussy. I flatten my tongue and lick from her entrance up to her clit and as soon as I tap her tight bundle of nerves, Willa goes off.

“FUCK!” She screams, her thick thighs clamping down on my head, her back bowed off the mattress, her fingers clawing the sheets as her orgasm rips through her.

I don't stop. Not for a second.

Using my tongue, my lips, and my teeth, I keep rubbing her throbbing clit, pushing her past her orgasm, higher, higher, higher, till she's shaking, gasping for air, pleading for me to give her mercy. Only then do I ease off her over-sensitive bundle of nerves and turn my attention to lapping up her release.

Willa shudders as I gently bring her down with long, steady strokes of my tongue, licking her clean.

“That was so fast. I've never come that fast,” she pants, and I chuckle.

I place her legs back on the bed and stand, stripping out of my jeans and boxers before I crawl on top of her, holding myself up with a forearm on either side of her head. I stare down at my mate as she opens her eyes and looks at me with such awe. I can't explain what that does to me. I've never felt anything like it, having her admiration, seeing her like this, knowing I put that look there.

“Claim me,” she whispers while rocking her hips and gliding her pussy up and down the underside of my aching cock.

My curvy mate is gorgeous. Too damn beautiful and good for me, that's for sure. But she's mine anyway and I'm not letting her go. I can't now that I've finally found her.

Willa chews on her lip nervously, and I realize I've just been drooling over her. I know without her saying that she's a virgin. That thought makes me growl, and my bear goes crazy, needing to be the only one inside of her. We'll only ever belong to each other.

"You're perfect," I whisper, though all I want to do is roar and devour every inch of her. She deserves better, though.

My cock nudges against her snug opening, and I grit my teeth as I move against her. I fist her hair and tug, giving me access to her tempting little mouth. My lips crash down on hers, and we lose ourselves in each other's passion.

"Mack!" she cries, her tone indicating she's been saying my name for a little while now. I can't help it; I'm just so lost in her.

"Hm?"

"I need you," she pleads, and I nod eagerly.

"Willa..."

She cuts me off by leaning up and capturing my lips in a scorching kiss. I growl into her mouth and take over her movements, sliding my dick up and down her wet pussy, but never entering her. She gives in so beautifully to me, trusting me with her body, her pleasure. Back and forth, I rub my swollen fucking cock over her sensitive bundle of nerves until she's panting again.

"Mack, please," she begs, and I can't take it any longer.

I love teasing her, but I'm close to coming all over her, and I need to be inside of her when we come for the first time together. I rub back and forth, my dick pinned between my stomach and her pussy, grinding hard, gritting my teeth against the urge to come.

"I'm going to make this so good for you," I promise her, and she nods.

"I trust you."

My mouth starts to water and my teeth elongate. I bury my face in her neck, breathing in her sweet scent. I start to push

into her, and she tenses slightly as I reach her virginity. My bear is howling in my head, his lust and excitement heightening my own.

“It will only hurt this first time,” I say, kissing her neck and then biting down as I thrust fully into her, making her mine.

My bear growls in my head, and I realize I’m growling out loud too. I lick over my bite mark, sealing it as Willa cries out in pleasure beneath me. I stare down at my mark on her and I swear that I could come from just the sight of it.

My balls are tingling and I feel my cock hardening even more as I start to pound into her. I should go slower, but I can’t seem to make myself slow down. I’ve been on edge for too long, and now that I’m finally with her, I can’t control myself anymore.

“So beautiful. So damn tight. Fucking dream come true,” I grunt out with each thrust, and Willa moans, arching against me and taking me deeper.

Her tits are smashed up against my chest, and I feel the hard little peaks rubbing against me with each movement. I’m close to coming already, and I know I won’t last much longer so I bow my head, running my lips over the bite mark on her shoulder.

“Mack!” She shouts as her pussy contracts around my cock and she starts to come.

Her release triggers my own, and I groan into her neck as I follow her over the edge. I chant her name as my come splashes against her womb, and my bear licks his lips as he thinks about breeding her tonight.

“Mine. My mate,” I breathe out against her lips, and she smiles, still breathing hard as I roll us over so that she’s sprawled on top of me.

I rest my forehead on hers, breathing in her sugary, fruity scent mixed with our lust. It’s intoxicating. It’s all I want to smell for the rest of my life, and as I gather her in my arms, I smile, knowing that I finally have my mate.

And I'm not going to do anything to mess it up.

FOURTEEN



Willa

THE ROOM IS STILL DARK when I slowly open my eyes the next morning. I'm so warm and comfortable that I don't even want to get up. I could stay in this bed forever and be happy. The mattress is so comfy under me, and I burrow further under the blankets and against Mack's side.

My body is sore, and I'm reminded of all of the things he and I did together last night. That feeling, the pulsing connection between us, is still there today, though it's faded a bit. Instead of this wild current like it was yesterday, it's more of a faint throb.

I wonder if the mating heat has finally passed now.

I stretch, trying to ease the tenderness in my muscles as I blink the sleep from my eyes. Something is poking me in the back, and it takes me a second to realize what it is.

"Mate," Mack says, his voice groggy still as he throws a heavy arm around my waist and drags me closer to him.

I grind back against his thick erection, loving the way it makes him tremble with need.

"Do you need me again?" he asks, sounding more awake now.

His hand grips my hip tighter and I love the possessive touch.

“Uh huh,” I moan as I roll over to face him.

His dark eyes seem to glow in the dim light, and my pulse starts to race the longer he stares at me like that.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he murmurs, pushing some hair away from my face.

I tilt my face up towards him more, and he gets the hint, leaning forward and capturing my lips with his. I moan softly as he growls and slides his hands over my naked body.

My skin prickles with awareness everywhere he touches me. The heat I felt last night is back, threatening to burn me alive if I don’t have him inside of me again soon, and I move, throwing my leg over his waist and straddling him so that I can feel him where I need him most.

I can’t help the needy whimper that falls from my lips when my bare pussy rubs up against his cock. I feel him lengthen and harden beneath me, the sensation making me so, *so wet*.

I wrap my arms around his neck and hold him close as I grind down on his lap. Mack groans and breaks our kiss, only for his lips to start to nibble down my neck. I shiver and squeeze my thighs around his hips, needing more, needing all of him.

“Please,” I beg, my voice barely sounding like mine, and he moans.

“I’ll give you anything that you want, mate. You just have to ask, and it’s yours.”

Mack leans back and cups my face, resting his forehead on mine. We’re both breathing heavily, the air thick with what we both crave. He slides his hands down my neck, shoulders, and torso until he cups my ass, squeezing the soft flesh in a possessive hold.

His fingertips trail up my sides in featherlight touches as he looks at me with a mix of awe and reverence. He’s looking at me like I’m the center of his world, and it’s addictive.

Leaning forward, Mack captures one of my nipples in his mouth, gently sucking as his hands slide around to my back, pressing me closer to him. I tip my head back and rock my hips against his, savoring every swipe of his tongue and stroke of his fingers.

Mack hums in approval as I grind against him faster, and he switches breasts, lavishing the other with the same attention. I feel the vibrations deep down in my core, making more of my arousal drip down and coat his hot, throbbing dick. I feel it swell up even more as a soft growl rumbles up from his chest.

I slide my hands down his sculpted chest, pushing him back. He grunts in frustration like I took away his favorite toy, and it makes me giggle knowing he wants me that much.

Mack looks up at me with the softest smile, making me melt for him; even while I'm so turned on, I feel like I might burst into flames at any second.

“Fuck, I love that sound. Love every single time I can get you to laugh or smile at me.”

God, how is this man so freaking perfect? He really is my perfect match.

I don't know how to respond to him with words, so I kiss him once again as my hands trail lower, lower, lower, until my fingers wrap around his cock, stroking him and rubbing his precum up and down his thickness.

“Jesus, Willa,” he grunts, his muscles tensing and flexing as I pick up my pace. Mack grips my hips and lifts me up, positioning me so the head of his cock is right at my entrance. My core clenches up and releases more of my wetness, helping him to slide in easily. “This what you need, mate? Need me to fill you up? You could have just asked.”

“Yes! God, Mack,” I breathe out, moaning as my tight channel stretches to accommodate him.

I feel every vein and ridge of his shaft as he enters me. It feels so damn good to be connected like this, to be filled so completely in a way that only Mack can provide.

Mack groans and sucks on the bite mark on my neck as his hands slide up my back and grip my shoulders. He presses my body down on his as he grinds his thick cock against me, hitting my clit just right with each pass.

I jerk and tremble in his embrace, gasping for air when he pushes me right to the edge. Mack trails his fingers back down my spine, gripping my ass and spreading my cheeks apart as he starts to fuck up into my drenched cunt.

“Love feeling you dripping for me, Willa. Love your sexy fucking body,” he murmurs, nipping at my earlobe and causing me to shudder in his arms.

“Oh God,” is all I can manage to say, too lost in the sensation of his cock scraping along my walls and hitting every pleasure point inside of me.

I feel my orgasm starting to form deep in my core, throbbing outward and seizing up my muscles. My joints lock up, and I suck in a breath, bracing myself for what’s to come. I squeeze my core around him and roll my hips in jerky motions, needing to come so bad it hurts.

Mack senses my urgency, cupping the back of my neck and drawing me down for a passionate kiss. He pulls my bottom lip through his teeth before diving in, tangling his tongue with mine as he bounces me on his length. He tilts his hips and hits that one spot that drives me crazy. Over and over, he hammers into me until the coil snaps, and I cry out my orgasm. Pure pleasure slams into me, overwhelming my senses as I writhe and whimper and get completely swept away by my release.

I’m barely conscious as Mack rolls us over and pulls out of me. He gives me a kiss before he crawls out of bed. I stare at his sexy ass shamelessly.

“Where are you going?” I ask when he tugs on his boxers.

“To get my mate something to eat.”

I grin, and he smiles softly at me, giving me one more kiss before he heads out of the room. I bite my lip and lean back against the pillows.

So much has happened in the last twenty-four hours. It's been a whirlwind, but I strangely only feel good about it. There's no more hesitation or uncertainty and I think that's because of everything that Mack and I shared.

He's so attentive, and it's like I can feel the bond between us now that he's marked and claimed me. I feel more secure in our relationship because of that.

"Breakfast is served," Mack says as he carries two bowls of cereal into the room.

"My hero," I say with a laugh, and he grins.

"I promise that I'll get some more food for here."

"This is perfect," I promise him.

We eat in silence for a moment, and I relax against him.

"What do we do now?" I ask, and he turns to look at me.

"What do you mean? You want to go again?" He asks excitedly, and I laugh.

"Yeah, but that's not what I meant. I mean, what happens between us? What's our future look like?"

"Well, we can do whatever you want. If you want to go back to work, then that's fine. Want to stay home? That's fine too."

"I have college starting soon."

"Okay, I can set up an office in one of the rooms here for you to study and work in," he offers, and I lean over and kiss him.

He seems surprised but pleased by the action, and I swear I fall a little more in love with him at that moment.

"We can figure that out together," I tell him, and he nods.

"Okay," he agrees.

"I love you, Mack," I say softly, and he freezes.

His dark eyes swing to find mine, and I smile. I get the feeling that he hasn't heard those words a lot before, and I intend to fix that.

“You do?” He asks, and the doubt breaks my heart.

“Yeah, I do,” I whisper, and he blinks.

A slow smile stretches across his face, and my heart kicks against my ribs.

“I love you too, Willa. So much.”

He leans forward, resting his forehead against mine, and I smile, letting my eyes fall closed and just breathing him in.

“What did you want to do today?” He asks me a few minutes later.

“Well, later we need to go get some of my things to move in here. Right now, though,” I say as I set our bowls aside and throw my leg over his. “Right now, I wanted to try something.”

He grins up at me, as together, we lower me onto his thick length.

“God, I love you,” he says hoarsely, and I sink all of the way down onto him.

“I love you too.”

He seals his lips over mine, and I get lost in him once again.

FIFTEEN



Mack

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“WHOA! LOOK WHO FINALLY ARRIVED,” Kane calls as I walk into the Alpha meeting.

“I’m right on time,” I growl at him as I take my seat at the table.

“Yeah, but for you, that’s like being half an hour late,” Bishop rumbles.

“Let’s get this over with. I need to get back home to my mate and kids.”

“What’s on the schedule?” Jonas asks, and I try to pay attention as we go around the table discussing problems and giving updates.

It’s hard though. My head is back in bed with my Willa. I wish that I was still curled up around her. I wonder if the kids have climbed into bed with her yet.

We just found out that Willa is pregnant again, and I want to get through this meeting and back to her. We have a doctor’s appointment later today, and I wanted to spend some quality time with my family before we had to go to that.

Willa and I have been mates for five years now and married for just as long. She graduated college just last year, and she's been helping out at the sheriff's department in town. I don't love the thought of my mate being a police officer and being in danger, but Willa loves it and she's damn good at it. I'm not surprised since she's so clever and smart.

We had our first kid, a boy that we named Ashton, three years ago, followed two years ago by our baby girl, Riley. I thought we were done after two, so it was a surprise when we just recently found out that we were expecting again.

These last five years have been incredible. I've kept my promise and treated Willa like a queen, and I could see it after the first month that she trusted that I would never hurt her. When she married me, I knew she would never leave me too.

"Earth to Mack?" Kane says, and I blink.

"What?" I ask them.

"I said, do you have any plans for tonight?" Bishop asks.

"Oh, yeah, Willa's parents are taking the kids so we can have some alone time to celebrate our anniversary."

"Lucky. Have fun," Jonas sighs, and I smile.

"I will."

Willa's parents still live in town, and they've welcomed me into the family with open arms. My parents, not so much. I haven't talked to them in years. They sneered when they found out that I was mated to Willa. They looked down at her because she was a human and therefore looked down on me for being mated to a weak human. They're words, of course.

I cut them off after that. Willa is the best, and I won't let anyone talk badly about her. To be honest, I barely noticed their absence from my life. They haven't really been parents or part of it for a long, long time.

"Get out of here then. Go enjoy time with your mate. Tell her that I said hi," Kane says, and I leap to my feet.

"Okay, thanks. I'll see you guys later," I call as I practically sprint out of the room.

I can hear them laughing as I go, but I ignore them and beeline it back home. We still live in my house tucked away in the woods. I love the privacy, and I know that Willa does too.

My bear rolls around inside of me as I open the front door and take the stairs two at a time up to our room. I smile when I see my family laughing in bed.

“You’re back early,” Willa comments, and I smirk.

“I missed you all too much, so I had to cut the meeting short,” I tell them.

“Daddy!” Ashton cries, throwing himself into my arms, and I grin as I spin him around.

Riley is giggling in Willa’s arms, and I smile as I watch them together. I never thought that I would have this. I definitely don’t deserve it.

I know that I can be a prick sometimes. Willa has definitely mellowed me out. She softens me, and it’s noticeable. People in the pack have treated me differently these last few years with her by my side. I’m more approachable and nicer. I’m more patient, especially since we had the kids.

I’m a better person, and it’s all because of Willa. I owe her everything. I’d be nothing without her.

“Ready to go see our next baby?” She whispers to me as she climbs out of bed, and I grin.

“Let’s go.”

She laughs, leaning up to kiss me as she heads to the closet to get dressed. I watch her go, mesmerized by the gentle sway of her round ass.

My bear rumbles inside of me, and I grin.

I know, buddy, I know. We’ll be biting that ass soon enough.

He grins, and I grin too as I wrangle the kids and head downstairs to get breakfast started.

Today is going to be a good day.

THE ALPHA'S OBSESSION

*

She's always been his. Now he just needs to convince her of that.

Maddie:

I've been working for years to save up enough to get out of this small town and away from my mom. Now that I'm about to turn eighteen, it's finally my chance to make my escape.

Except, when I come home late one night from my shift, I realize that my money is gone.

Now I'm scrambling.

I can't stay here any longer, but my chance to escape was just stolen from me.

So, I do the only thing that I can.

I put myself up for auction.

Jonas:

I've always wanted Maddie.

I know that as a shifter, I'm only meant to love my fated mate and that it's too soon to know if Maddie is mine, but that doesn't stop me from hoping that she's meant to be mine.

When I find out that she's trying to sell her virginity, I panic.

I buy her before anyone else can.

Now, I've got my maybe mate right where I want her, but this isn't how I wanted it to happen.

When I find out that she plans to leave, I'm left scrambling.

I need to convince her that she's meant to be with me.

I just hope that it's not too late.

These Alpha shifters are about to fall HARD!

Come to the small town of Aspen Ridge, Alaska, and get ready to watch these swoon-worthy wolf and bear shifters fall

in love with their fated mates!

ONE



Jonas

MY WOLF IS PACING ANXIOUSLY inside of me as we head down the street toward the Full Moon Diner. Maddie is working this morning, and we're dying for our daily dose of her.

I scan the diner's windows as I head for the front door, my eyes desperate for that first sight of Maddie.

There.

My whole body relaxes and strains toward her all at that same time. It's always been like that. Ever since I first saw Maddie, she's had my full attention.

Her platinum blonde hair is tied up in her signature ponytail, and my heart kicks viciously against my ribcage as she smiles at Mr. and Mrs. Whittaker. She tops off their coffee cups and moves on to the next table.

Her pretty green eyes look tired this morning, and I frown. I hate seeing her looking so rundown. She's been working too much lately. It's like ever since she graduated a few months ago, she's thrown all of her time and attention into work.

There's been rumors swirling that she's looking to leave town. I swallow hard, trying to get rid of the looming sense of panic and doom that thought fills me with. I'm so close to finding out if I'm right about Maddie being meant to be mine. I can't have her leaving before then.

Not that a bit of distance would stop me. I would follow Maddie anywhere.

Unlike the other Alphas, I wasn't born and raised here. I moved here with my parents four years ago, when I was seventeen. I can still remember walking into school that first day and feeling like I was hit by lightning when I first saw Maddie standing by her locker.

There was just something about her that clicked with me. It was like we were two halves of the same coin. Something about her just called to me. That hasn't changed in the last four years. If anything, it's only gotten stronger.

My mom and dad are gone now. I have no idea where. They weren't exactly hands-on or supportive parents. It was like they were waiting until I was eighteen so that they could ditch me. The day after my eighteenth birthday, they left, leaving me alone in our rented home.

I had to grow up fast and learn how to take care of myself and pay the bills. The taking care of myself thing I had been doing for a while, but it took me a few weeks to find a job and a smaller place that I could afford.

Then, the prior Alpha retired, and I decided to put my name in to be the next one. I had to fight three other contenders, but in the end, I was the last one standing, and I became the Alpha of the South Pack of Aspen Ridge.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I know that I became Alpha to try to prove to Maddie that I could take care of her. My parents might not have wanted me, but maybe I could make Maddie want me. Maybe I could be worthy of her.

I head into the diner and take a seat in her section, grabbing one of the menus so that I have something to do with my hands. I have the entire menu memorized by now, but I still pretend to look it over as I secretly watch Maddie move around the diner.

Just five more days until she turns eighteen, and I can escape this limbo.

My wolf paws at me, and I smile. *I know, buddy. I want her too. She'll be over to talk to us soon, and then everything will feel better.*

“Stalking again?” Kane asks me as he slides into the booth across from me.

He scares me out of my thoughts, and I tuck the menu back behind the napkin holder, trying to hide the pink blush I can feel staining my cheeks.

“No,” I lie, and he snorts.

“Liar.”

“Why are you here?” I ask with a sigh.

“Emma wants breakfast,” he says with a bright smile.

My wolf and I both feel jealous as we see how happy he is to be taking care of his mate. All of the other Alphas of Aspen Ridge Pack have found their fated mates. I'm the only one who is still waiting.

For five more days...

Maddie walks by, and I glance over at her. She might look tired, but she seems happy today. I smile, and my wolf lays down inside of me, content to just be near her.

“You're smiling at her like a lovesick pup,” Kane informs me, and I try to school my features.

“Can't I be happy?” I ask him, and he eyes me skeptically.

“Just a few more days,” he says quietly, and I nod.

I know that he's talking about her birthday. I wonder if he knows that I've had the date circled in my calendar for months.

“I know.”

“What are you going to do if she's not?” He asks, lowering his voice even more.

I freeze.

The truth is that I have no idea. I've tried to temper my expectations regarding Maddie being my mate before, but

every time I think about Maddie being with someone else or me having a different mate, it just feels wrong. It's inconceivable. I can't picture it. I can't imagine belonging to anyone but Maddie.

My wolf whines at the thought, and I try to comfort him as Maddie heads our way to take our order.

"Hey there, Jonas, Kane," she greets us.

"Morning, Maddie," I say, smiling at her as my eyes rake over her from head to toe.

"Hey, Maddie," Kane greets her. "Emma says hi."

"Are you here to get her breakfast?" She asks, fiddling with her notepad.

"Yep, she wants pancakes with bacon and a hot chocolate."

"And for you?" Maddie asks Kane.

"I'll have the same, but with a coffee."

"You got it," she says, turning expectant eyes to me.

"I'll have—"

"The usual," she interrupts me with a smirk, and I flush.

"Yes, please."

Kane is staring at me, shaking his head, and I clear my throat, focusing on Maddie.

"How are you feeling?" I ask her. "Didn't you work a double yesterday?"

"Yeah," she says, writing up our order.

"And you're back again today?" I ask, feeling worried. "You're working too hard."

"I picked up Shelley's shift," she says with a shrug.

I nod, and she taps the table with her pen.

"I'll get your order in. Be right back with your coffees."

I watch her walk away, waiting until she's ducked back into the kitchen to place our orders before I look back to Kane.

He's shaking his head at me, and I sigh.

Five more days.

Five more days, and then she'll be mine.

TWO



Maddie

I'M EXHAUSTED as I clock out that night. I've been working too much, but I need it. I'm so close to having enough for my deposit on an apartment I found in Anchorage.

I wince as I walk down the steps, and all I can think about is taking a shower and passing out. I have another shift tomorrow, but at least this one isn't a double.

"Hey," Jonas says, and I'm not even surprised to see him waiting for me.

Every time that I work late, he's there to walk me home. He says that it's just because he wants to make sure that I get home safely, and maybe that's part of it. My friends all say that he has a crush on me. My body warms at the thought of him liking me, and I look away so that he can't see my crush on him all over my face.

"Hey. Aren't you cold?" I ask him as he passes me a thick flannel jacket.

He's wearing a black coat too, but it looks thin. It's not something that you would wear in Alaska in the dead of winter.

"No, I'm fine. I always tend to run hot."

"Lucky. I feel like I'm always freezing."

I slip the coat on over my old peacoat. It's at least five years old and is getting way too tight. The pockets have holes in them and one of the buttons is missing. I should have bought a new one a long time ago, but I've been saving up every penny for my move for years. Ever since my father passed away, leaving me alone with my mother.

My stomach cramps and I'm filled with dread as I think about going home to my mom.

Maybe she won't be there. Maybe she'll be passed out, and I won't have to deal with her shit tonight.

I can only hope.

I feel bad thinking this way about my own mother, but then I remember everything that she's done over the years and the guilt disappears in a flash.

My mom was always a selfish person. My dad never confirmed it, but I'm pretty sure that she baby-trapped him with me. My dad was rich. He owned a chain of hunting and fishing stores all over the United States. He always loved the outdoors, hence why we lived in the middle of nowhere, Alaska.

I never minded growing up in this small town when he was alive. As soon as he passed though, it began to feel more like a prison than my home.

My mom sold off my dad's stores as soon as he was buried. She used the money to buy herself a new wardrobe and started to take lavish trips. The money ran out two years ago, and she's been drunk, haunting the house we share ever since.

I don't know how she's been paying the bills or buying herself alcohol and whatever else she's taking. I'm assuming that it's one of her boyfriends. She has a never-ending string of them, though I have no idea where she's finding them.

"How was work?" Jonas asks as we start to head towards my house on the outskirts of town.

"Long. Tips kind of sucked too," I admit with a tired sigh.

“It will pick up soon. Tourists are starting to come to town now that there’s so much snow.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “I just wish that they had been there today.”

I don’t know what it is about Jonas, but I’ve always felt so comfortable around him. He’s easy to talk to and so calm and kind. He’s my dream man.

I wish that I was staying in town. Maybe we could have seen where this thing goes between us.

It’s not the first time I’ve had that thought, and I pick up my pace, walking faster down the dark streets. That thought is dangerous. It can only lead to heartbreak since I know that I’ll be leaving.

I can’t stay here. I don’t want to live anywhere near my mom, and she’s not leaving.

“What did you do today?” I ask him, wincing as a rock digs into my foot through my thin shoes.

“Here,” Jonas says, and I blink as he crouches in front of me.

“What?” I ask in confusion, and he smiles at me over his shoulder.

“Hop on. I’ll carry you home. You’ve been on your feet for too long.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m way too heavy for that,” I try to argue, my face blushing with embarrassment.

I’m a bigger girl. Always have been. There’s no way that I’m letting Jonas try to carry me anywhere.

“I can handle it,” he promises, and I try to think of a way out of this.

When another rock digs into my heel, I lament and hop on before I can second-guess myself.

“Atta girl,” Jonas says softly, and I bury my face in his shoulder.

I don't know why he's the only one to be able to get this reaction out of me. No one at school and none of the tourists have ever made me feel anything. Only Jonas.

Jonas takes off down the street, and I cling to him. We're silent for a few minutes, and I marvel at the fact that Jonas isn't even out of breath.

"Am I hurting you?" I ask, and he snorts.

"No, Maddie. You're light as a feather."

Pleasure curls through me, and I smile, holding onto him tighter.

"What did you do today?" I ask him again, and he shrugs.

"I checked on the Silver Springs town. They're rebuilding after that fire."

"Yeah? How's it going?"

"Slow but good. The snow and bad weather are starting to really slow them down though. We're sending volunteers and anyone who can help over to help out before the weather can get any worse."

"Good."

That's one of the things that I love about Jonas. He's so generous and sweet to everyone.

My house comes up ahead. All of the lights are off, and I'm not surprised. My mom is either out at some bar or with some guy, or she's home and passed out.

"Thanks for walking me home," I tell him, and he nods as he crouches down, letting me slide off his back. "Thanks for the lift."

I smile up at him, and he grins back.

"Anytime."

I slide out of his coat and try to hand it back to him.

"Keep it. Your jacket isn't warm enough."

"I can't do that. I'll be okay," I promise him.

He takes the coat back reluctantly, and I have a feeling that he's going to be carrying it around and offering it to me every time I see him from now on.

I try not to grin like a loon at that thought.

It's just nice that someone is thinking about me, I try to convince myself.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Jonas says as he turns to head home.

"See you."

I wait until he's walking away before I head inside. Just like I thought, my mom is sprawled out on the couch, a half-empty bottle of vodka lying on the floor beside her.

I can feel the look of disgust on my face as I head past her and into my bedroom. I pull the tips out of my jeans and throw the crumpled bills on my bed as I stoop to grab the old shoe box where I've been keeping my savings.

As soon as I lift it, I know that something is wrong. It's much too light.

"No, no, no," I beg the universe as I pull the box out and flip the lid off. "Fuck!"

Anger floods me, and I stand, stomping my way out to the living room.

"You bitch!" I scream, and my mom's eyes fly open. "You stole all of my money! Where is it?"

She's dazed, drunk, and I start to dig through her pockets, looking for any sign of my money. Her pockets are empty, and I start to rifle through the junk on the coffee table and then the bookshelf in the corner.

Nothing.

I head into the kitchen, pulling open drawers and peeking in cabinets. I'm desperate, panic and stress bubbling through my bloodstream.

"It's gone. I had to pay bills to keep a roof over your ungrateful ass," my mom spits at me.

She's weaving as she walks towards me, unsteady on her feet. I stare at her in disgust. I want to scream at her, I want to hit her, but I can't do either.

Despair crashes into me and I can feel the tears threatening to spill onto my cheeks. I push past her, jogging back to my bedroom and slamming the door shut behind me.

What am I going to do now?

It took me years to get to this point. Now I'm back at square one.

I fall onto my bed and sob for everything that I've lost.

I miss you, Dad. I wish that you were here instead. Now I'm trapped here with her.

I need a new plan. How can I come up with a bunch of money quickly?

I grab my phone, intending to call Emma, Willa, or Isla, but then I see the time and hit the internet icon instead.

I type in quick ways to make money and hit search. The first couple of results are either scams or things that I've already tried, and I know they're not the money-makers they promised to be.

I hit the arrow to go to the next page and then the next.

That's when I see it.

Sell your virginity.

Those three words stare at me and I swallow hard.

Could I?

I click on the website and my jaw drops when I see past auctions and the dollar amounts below them.

My mind flashes to Jonas and I pause. What would he think of me if I went through with this?

My mom starts banging on my door, screaming at me through the wood, and I grit my teeth.

I click on the submit button and start to read over what they need from me.

I might not be happy about it, but this could be my only chance to escape, and I'll do anything to get away from her.

I take a deep breath as I start to enter my information.

THREE



Jonas

MADDIE DOESN'T WORK until this afternoon, so I skip the diner this morning and head towards the grocery store instead. I need to pick up a few things and then make sure my pack is set in case we get the storm that's predicted tonight.

I'm almost to the Aspen Ridge Market when my wolf sits up inside of me, on high alert. That can only mean one thing, and I start to look around for Maddie's familiar blonde hair and bright green eyes.

She's ducked into the alley next to the Market. Emma, Willa, and Isla are with her, and I head closer, trying to hear what they're talking about.

I know I shouldn't eavesdrop, but Maddie looks so shaken up and worried. I just want to know what's going on and see if I can help her with anything.

I pause next to the edge of the building, my ears straining to hear their whispers.

"It's all gone," Maddie tells them, sounding miserable, and I hate it.

My wolf paws at me, and I ignore him, listening as Maddie starts talking again.

"So, I looked up some things and did something a little crazy," she admits.

She sounds hesitant, and sweat starts to pop up on my brow at her tone.

What could she have done? What's all gone?

“What did you do?” Isla asks, sounding as alarmed as I feel.

“I signed up to sell my virginity,” Maddie whispers.

“What?” I shout in shock, and then I duck inside the entryway of the market before I can be caught.

All I can see is red as I think about Maddie being intimate with anyone other than me. My wolf is pacing and growling inside of me, just as upset about this piece of information as I am.

I need to know more so that I can stop it.

I sneak back to my spot at the edge of the building and listen in.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Emma asks, and Maddie sounds worried.

“I don't know, but it's my only option. I can't stay there any longer.”

“You can live with one of us!” Willa says. “I'll talk to Mack tonight, but I'm sure it will be fine.”

“Yeah, Bishop will be okay with you staying with us too,” Isla offers.

“Kane too,” Emma adds.

“Thanks, guys, but I can't. I don't want to intrude on you and your places. You're all in new relationships. You should be enjoying your alone time.”

“We have the guest house!” Emma offers.

“No, I just... I want something that's mine.”

She sounds so sad and alone. I understand the feeling well. My heart breaks for her, and I wonder what's going on. What could I have missed?

Waiting to see if she's my fated mate is killing me, and now I might lose her to some other guy right before her birthday. I can't let that happen.

I need to be the highest bidder. I need to talk her out of this. How can I convince her not to go through with this though?

I'm lost in thought. Maybe that's why I don't hear the girls heading my way. Their shadows startle me, and I take a few steps away, back towards the market.

They part ways, and Maddie turns towards me, coming up short when she sees me standing there, staring at her.

"Oh, hey, Jonas."

"Hey," I say.

My throat feels like it's on fire. I want to ask her what the heck she's doing. I want to demand that she tell me everything and then beg her to let me fix it for her.

"How's it going?" She asks, and I wonder how she can sound so calm when it feels like a bomb just went off in my world.

"I'll buy you," I blurt out, and she blinks, her green eyes widening in shock when she realizes that I heard her conversation. "Don't sell yourself."

She looks like she doesn't know whether to be embarrassed or pissed off, and I swallow hard.

"I'm sorry for eavesdropping, but please, don't go through with it. I couldn't take that. Please."

I'm begging her now, close to getting on my knees and pleading with her when she clears her throat and looks over to the diner.

"I should get to work," she says, and I frown.

"You don't work until later."

"I picked up an extra shift."

I want to growl and demand that she take a break, but I know that I can't.

"I'll see you tonight. After work. We can talk about everything then."

I say it like a statement, but I wait for her to nod in agreement before I let out the breath that I was holding.

My wolf is still pacing inside of me as we watch her turn and walk over to the diner.

I know, buddy. We need to come up with a plan to stop her from going through with this.

And fast.

FOUR



Maddie

LET ME BUY YOU.

I can't stop thinking about Jonas's offer for my entire shift. On the one hand, I'm kind of outraged and upset that he thinks that he can buy me, but then I remember that I'm literally trying to sell my virginity. I guess I'm just disappointed that Jonas would pay me to have sex with me.

On the other hand, I'm kind of relieved that he made the offer. That part of me wants to take him up on it. I would get money and get to sleep with someone that I'm insanely attracted to. Besides, I know that Jonas would do everything he could to make it good for me. He would make sure that I enjoyed my first time.

I probably would get more money from the online auction though.

Yeah, or you might also get murdered.

I sigh. I'm so sick of going around and around in circles. I need to talk with Jonas so I'll be able to make a decision.

"Have a good night, Maddie!" Chrissy calls as she bundles up in her jacket and gets ready to head home.

"You too!" I call back.

I tuck my meager tips into my pocket and head over to grab my own coat. Chrissy leaves, and I shiver as a blast of

cold air hits me. I turn the collar of my coat up, hoping that it helps keep me warm on my walk home.

I wave goodbye to Clark, the owner, and he waves back. He looks like he's getting ready to lock up and leave too.

I head outside and run right into Jonas.

"There you are. Here," he says, holding out a woman's down jacket.

"Whose is that?" I snap, jealousy clogging my throat.

"Yours. I bought it for you online. It just got delivered today. You can't be walking around in that coat. It's not warm enough for you."

He doesn't seem to see the relief on my face at his words. He's too busy helping me pull off my old peacoat and put on the new one. It's a green color and so soft and warm. I sigh as I burrow deeper into the coat, and Jonas smiles as he tugs the hood up and zips the zipper up to my chin.

"I got you this too," he says, holding up a reflective belt.

He wraps it around my waist before I can take it from it and snaps it in place.

"So many presents," I murmur, and he smiles sheepishly, pulling out a knit hat and gloves.

He tugs the hood down, and I slip the hat into place.

"This is way too much," I protest as he passes me the gloves.

"It's not. I like taking care of you," he admits softly, and I make up my mind right then and there.

It doesn't matter if Jonas can pay me or not. He's the one that I want to be with.

"I also grabbed these," he says, pulling out a takeout bag from Mountain Burgers. "I thought that you might be hungry after working all day."

My mouth waters as he passes me a burger, and I bite in, moaning as the flavor hits my tongue.

“So good,” I groan as I take another bite.

Jonas is staring at me with a mixture of surprise and hunger on his face. I drag the back of my hand across my mouth, wondering if there’s something on my face.

“How was work?” He asks, his voice sounding kind of strangled.

We start to walk, and I sigh.

“It was alright. Tips sucked again today. I had one big party come in and they left a decent tip, but that was it.”

I finish my burger, and Jonas takes the wrapper, tossing it back in the bag. We keep walking, and I realize that we’re not headed towards my house but to his. I open my mouth to say something, then snap it shut. It’s not like I want to go home and see my mother.

I wonder if she’s even home. She’s probably out somewhere getting drunk.

My blood heats, and I clear my throat. Jonas glances at me, and I try to smile. A gust of wind and snow hits me and I stumble back a step. He reaches for me, steadying me with his arm wrapped around my waist, and I lean into him.

It feels good, it feels right, to touch him like this. It’s just nice to finally be able to lean on someone without feeling like a burden.

I know that my friends are all sincere about letting me stay with them, but I can’t take them up on it. They’re all still getting settled with their boyfriends, and I know I would disrupt that.

Plus, when would I be able to move out? There aren’t really any places to rent here, and if I can’t afford rent, then I definitely can’t afford a mortgage.

“We need to talk about... this morning,” he says, and I nod.

“I know.”

I wait for him to start the conversation. I'm too nervous and too unsure about where to start.

"Are you really listed on some website?" He asks, sounding pissed at the thought.

"Well, not yet. I submitted some forms, but nothing official."

He looks away from me, his jaw popping as he grinds his teeth together.

"Don't," he finally says, and I swallow.

"It's kind of my only option. I need the money," I tell him, and he swallows hard.

"For what?"

"I need to get out of my house," I tell him, deciding on a half-truth.

For some reason, I don't want to tell him that I'm leaving town soon.

"I have some money saved," he starts, and I shove my hands deeper into the pockets of my new coat. "It's not much, but it's yours."

We reach his house, and I follow him up the front porch steps and inside. He heads over to the fireplace and starts to stack logs to build a fire. I fiddle with the zipper of my coat and watch him.

He's not that much older than me, but he seems so much more capable than me. He has his own house, can take care of himself just fine, and is a leader in our little community.

Jonas starts the fire, and I unzip my jacket as he heads back my way.

"Stay here tonight? You can have the guest room," he offers.

"Okay."

"About what I said..." he starts, and I swallow.

"Can I sleep on it?" I interrupt him, and he nods.

“Of course. Come on, I’ll show you to your room.”

We walk upstairs in silence, and he leads me down a short hallway and into one of the bedrooms.

“Get some sleep. I’ll, uh, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks.”

He nods, and I watch him turn and head down the hall to his own bedroom. The door closes, and I close my own door, leaning back against the solid wood.

The room is nice and clean. There’s a full-size bed in between two sets of windows, and it looks so comfortable. It’s calling my name.

I shrug out of my coat and set it and the hat and gloves down on the dresser. I’m toeing my shoes off when there’s a knock on the door.

“Hey, I thought you might want something else to sleep in,” he says, passing me one of his t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants.

“Oh, thanks.”

He nods and heads back to his room, and I hold the clothes to my nose, breathing in his woodsy scent. I feel lightheaded and giddy as I strip and pull his clothes on. They’re huge on me, and I marvel over our size difference as I climb onto the bed and slip beneath the covers.

He’s so thoughtful and sweet. He’s the kind of person that I wish I could be with.

If only he didn’t live in this town.

I close my eyes, trying not to think about all the stressors in my life. Jonas’s scent calms me, and I smile as I drift off to sleep.

FIVE



Jonas

I BARELY SLEPT LAST NIGHT. All I could think about was what she would say. I was practically praying all night that she would say yes. I'm not sure what I would do if she said no and went through with the online auction. Probably snap and lose it. I'd kill anyone who touched her.

My wolf growls in agreement inside of me, and I smile. At least we're in agreement on that.

She's still sound asleep when I climb out of bed. I can hear her soft breathing in the room next to mine, and I smile. I'm glad she's comfortable here and seems to trust me.

Her smile from last night when I bundled her up in her new winter gear flashes in my head, and I grin. She looked so happy, and I vow to spoil her from now on. My wolf nods, wanting to take care of our mate too.

I head downstairs and add a few more logs to the fire. I make sure the house is warm enough before I head into the kitchen and start the coffee maker. I'm not sure when she'll be awake, but I decide to start getting things ready for breakfast.

I'm slicing up some strawberries when I hear her feet on the floor above me. She pads downstairs, and I turn and smile at her as she comes into the kitchen.

"Morning," I greet her.

“Morning,” she mumbles. “Coffee?”

I smile and pour her a cup, adding the caramel coffee creamer that she loves.

“You like caramel too?” She asks with a smile as I pass the mug over to her.

How do I tell her that I don’t, not really, but I drink it because it makes me feel closer to her?

“Every now and then,” I lie, and she smiles at me brightly as she takes a drink.

“It’s so good,” she says, taking a bigger drink.

My wolf preens inside of me, happy that our maybe mate is happy.

Three more days.

“Are you hungry? I was about to make breakfast.”

“Um, kind of. I don’t really get hungry until I’ve been awake for a while. I usually just eat a yogurt or some fruit for breakfast.”

“Sure, I have that.”

I pull out her favorite brand of yogurt and pass over the bowl of cut-up fruit toward her.

“I love this yogurt!” She says happily, and I bite my tongue before I can say, ‘I know.’

“It’s good. Dig in.”

She fills a bowl with yogurt and fruit, and I watch as she takes a seat and starts to eat.

“I thought about your offer,” she starts, and I nod.

My heart is beating out of control as I wait to see what she’ll say next.

“Okay, I’m in,” she says, and my heart leaps in my chest.

This is it. This is my chance to get close to Maddie. I’m not really going to sleep with her for money. I would never

pay anyone for sex, and not just because I'm a shifter. I can only love and be with my fated mate.

I'm lost in thoughts about Maddie being fated to be mine. Maybe that's why I don't notice Maddie headed my way until she's reaching for the snap on my jeans.

"Should we do it now?" She asks, and I jerk away from her.

"No!" I shout, backing up more.

My wolf howls inside of me, and I grip the counter behind me. Maddie's face is bright, red and I'm sure that mine is too.

"No, not right now. I mean..." My brain scrambles for a reason to postpone this until I know if she's my mate. "You're not even legal yet."

She blinks like she wasn't expecting that.

"Oh, I will be soon," she says.

"I know."

She blinks, and I clear my throat.

"Your birthday is in a few days, right?" I ask like I don't already know.

"Yeah. How'd you know? Wait, let me guess," she says before I can try to come up with another lie. "Emma, Willa, and Isla are planning a party or something."

"Um, yeah," I say, and she smiles.

"I knew it. Crap! Is that the time? I need to get home to change and then get to work."

"I'll drive you," I offer, and she smiles.

"Thanks, let me just go grab my things."

She downs the last of her coffee and then heads upstairs. I watch her go, willing my body to relax. My wolf licks his lips as he watches her, and I shake my head.

Three more days.

Three more freaking days.

SIX



Maddie

JONAS DRIVES ME HOME, and I'm feeling happier and lighter than I have in a long time.

Then I walk in the front door and see my mom passed out on the couch, and my good mood plummets.

"What is it?" Jonas asks as he hops out of his truck and heads my way.

He pushes past me before I can stop him, his eyes landing on my mom and the puddle of vomit next to the vodka bottle on the floor.

Embarrassment slams into me. I try to hide my home life from everyone. Not even my friends know just how bad it is around here, but Jonas just walked in and saw it.

Shame threatens to overwhelm me, but then I realize how pissed my mom is going to be if she ever finds out that Jonas, someone important in town, saw her like that.

"Where's your bedroom?" He asks, and I point to the hallway.

He takes off, and I hurry after him.

"Wait, what are you doing?" I ask when I see him stuffing my belongings into my old backpack.

"You can't stay here," he says like it should be obvious.

Some of my things are already packed into suitcases. It was meant to make my move out of this town easier, but now I guess it's going to just be easier to move to Jonas's.

"Can you carry that?" He asks, passing me the backpack as he reaches for the suitcases and duffle bag.

"Yeah, but where are we going?" I ask.

"Home. Then I'll drive you to work."

He nudges me, and I turn and head down the hallway and out the front door. My mom is still out cold, and I turn, sparing her one last glance. Her breathing is slow and steady, and I assume that she'll be out for a few more hours at least.

Jonas is loading up my belongings into the back of his truck, and I pass him my backpack. He settles it among the bags and then follows me to the passenger side door and opens it for me.

"Careful, there's some ice here," he warns me, gripping my waist as I climb into the truck.

With each mile that passes between me and that house, I relax. I may not be out of town, but at least I'm away from that house and her.

We drive back to his house in silence. Jonas seems tense and angry, but I'm not sure about what.

"I'll try to find somewhere else to go as soon as I can," I tell him as he pulls into the driveway.

Jonas frowns harder at that statement and turns towards me.

"Maddie, you can stay with me forever, for as long as you want to. I'm happy to have you here."

"I just don't want to burden you or —"

"You could never be a burden," he says forcefully. "Never."

My insides warm, and I smile slightly.

I've been hearing about what a pain in the ass and burden I am from my mother for years. I guess it sunk in. I didn't realize that I needed to hear someone say that I wasn't.

"Thanks."

"Let's get you inside and warm you up."

"I still need to get to work," I remind him.

"Call in sick. You need to take a break," he tells me.

His words sound so tempting. I've been working so hard for so long, and I just want to have some fun for once.

"Alright," I say, pulling out my phone and hitting the number for the diner.

Jonas smiles at me as I tell my boss that I'm not feeling great and won't be able to come in today. They take it surprisingly well, probably because I've never missed a shift before and have picked up more than one shift for other people who called in.

"Feel better soon, Maddie. Let me know if you need anything," Clark says, and I smile.

"I will. Thanks."

I hang up, and Jonas is already out of the truck and opening my door.

"I'll get the bags. You go on ahead."

I head inside, and Jonas is right behind me with all of my things. He sets the bags down at the bottom of the stairs and kicks the door shut behind him.

"Are you hungry?" He asks, and I shake my head.

"Not yet."

My stomach is still in knots with everything that's happened.

"Is she always like that?" Jonas asks softly, and I nod, looking away from him.

"Yeah, she has been ever since my dad died. Even before then, she was never the best mom," I admit.

“My parents sucked too,” he says as he leads me over to the couch.

He builds up the fire, and I curl up on the couch.

“Yeah? They left town, right?” I ask, and he nods.

“Yeah, a few years ago. They couldn’t wait to leave me behind,” he says, and I’m surprised to hear that.

“But you’re so perfect! How could they not love you?”

He seems surprised by my words, and I’m embarrassed of what I said until a soft, almost bashful look crosses his features.

Maybe I’m not the only one who needs to hear that I’m worthy and wanted.

“What was your dad like?” Jonas asks.

“He was the best. He loved the outdoors. That’s why we moved here. He was from some small town nearby originally, but he had gone to the lower forty-eight after he graduated high school.”

“What was his name?” He asks with a small smile.

“George Willard.”

His smile dims, and he looks speculative for a moment.

“It sounds familiar.”

“I’m not sure if you had moved to town before or after he passed.”

“I would have loved to meet him. I’m sorry that you were left with that... woman.”

“Me too.”

“What do you want to do with your day off?” He asks, changing the subject.

“Relax. Just relax.”

“Alright, sounds like a plan. Want to watch a movie? I’ll make us something to eat and we can just hang out.”

“Sounds perfect,” I reply.

And it does. I can't think of a better way to spend my day.
If only it could last for more than one day.

SEVEN



Jonas

ICY RAIN and snow start to hit the windows, and I get up to add another log to the fire.

“Roads are going to be bad tonight,” Maddie comments, and I nod.

“Good thing that we don’t have to go anywhere.”

She smiles, burrowing deeper under the blanket that I grabbed for her before we started the movie. We’re about to start our second one, and Maddie yawns delicately as I grab the remote controller and hit play.

“Are you tired?” I ask, and she nods.

“A little. I’ve been working a lot—”

“Too much,” I interrupt her, and she smiles.

“Maybe. Plus, things haven’t been great at home. I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in a while. Except for last night,” she says.

“You got off late, though, so that only half counts.”

“I think that I needed a lazy day off.”

“You definitely did. You work harder than anyone that I know.”

My phone beeps with a new message and I glance at it, noticing that it’s the Alpha’s group chat.

KANE: Roads are bad already. I've told my pack to stay inside. The tourists have been warned to stay in their hotel rooms as well.

BISHOP: Same. See you tomorrow.

MACK: See ya.

I SEND a quick thumbs up and then text my pack to warn them about the bad weather and the order to shelter in place.

“I need to do something to wake up a bit or I'll never sleep tonight.”

“Sure, want to play a board game or something? Are you hungry? We could start lunch... or dinner,” I say when I see that it's after two already.

“A board game sounds good. What do you have?”

“Um, that's a good question. I think that I might have some buried in the hall closet.”

We climb off the couch, and she follows me over to the coat closet. It kind of became a catch-all for things over the years and I have to dig to the back to find the two board games that I own.

Twister and Sorry.

“Sorry,” she says, grabbing the box from me, and I smile.

I stuff everything back into the closet, and my wolf paws at me. He wants to go out for our daily run to burn off some of this steam and tension.

Two more days, I remind him.

On the full moon, he points out.

My stomach clenches at that thought, and I can't help but hope for the millionth time that Maddie is my mate and we're about to be together forever.

Maddie sets up the game on the kitchen table, and I make us each a cup of tea.

"Is this your favorite game or something?" She asks as we start the game.

"No, I love Clue. I'm not sure where this game came from. Maybe from one of the community game nights that we used to do?"

"Oh, yeah, I remember those. They were fun," she says as she takes her turn.

"We'll have to bring them back then once the weather is better. What's your favorite board game?" I ask her.

"I like Clue and Candy Land. I used to play that one all of the time with my dad when I was younger. Every Sunday night for a few years."

She sounds wistful as she talks about her dad, and I wish I could take that pain away from her. My wolf growls as we remember what her mom looked like this morning.

How did we not know that she was dealing with that at home? I guess that we were just so wrapped up in watching Maddie that I never really noticed her mom or what she was like.

It's a lame excuse and I know it. I should have been protecting her all this time and I failed. I won't do that again though.

She's had the weight of the world on her shoulders for too long and it's time that she let someone help her.

I was surprised that she turned all of her friends down when they offered to take her in. Then I saw it last night. She's worried about being a burden on people, even those who love her most. She needs someone to show her how much she's wanted and loved.

“I win!” Maddie shouts excitedly, and I smile as we reset the board.

“Are you getting hungry yet?” I ask, and she nods.

“Sure, what do you have?”

“How about some soup and grilled cheese?” I offer her.

“Sounds perfect.”

She stands to help me, but I wave her off.

“I’ve got this. Why don’t you go take a bath or relax or something? This is your lazy day, remember?”

“Are you sure?” She asks, and I smile.

“I’m sure. Go relax.”

She looks so pleased as she turns and heads into the living room. My wolf is content, curled up inside of me, and I smile as I make dinner.

Things are going so well. There’s no way that she’s not meant for me.

Right?

EIGHT



Maddie

I WAKE up the next day and feel... off.

Is this what feeling rested and relaxed feels like?

I'm more alert today, but it doesn't feel like that. It feels like, for the first time in my life, I'm plugged into a socket or something. There's an antsy energy running through me. Goosebumps pebble on my arms as I climb out of bed and go in search of Jonas.

He's downstairs, building up the fire, and I smile at him. My whole body aches for his touch, and I frown.

Is this just because we got to know each other more yesterday? Is it because of how he took care of me and spoiled me? Am I in love with him?

That last thought strikes a cord in me and I know that it's true.

I love Jonas.

I'm not really surprised. It would be impossible not to fall in love with someone like Jonas. He's so hot and sexy and sweet. He's attentive, a great cook, and the most generous person I've ever met. He's perfect.

"Happy early birthday," Jonas says as he stands.

He seems weird and off today too. His voice is deeper, like gravel, and I wonder if it's just because it's early. His eyes are

heated, lit up from within, and I could swear that they almost look like they're glowing.

"Thanks."

I clear my throat, my body heating as he makes his way towards me. His eyes are scanning my face, almost like he's looking for something, and I force myself to smile at him.

"Are you off today?" He asks, and I have to search my brain, trying to remember.

"No, my shift starts at eleven."

"It's already close to ten," he points out, and I sigh.

"I should go get ready. How are the roads?"

"They've been cleared already. It stopped snowing early this morning so we should be good. I have a meeting at noon so I'll drive you to work and then head over there."

"Sounds good."

I find myself leaning towards him and I force myself to take a step back.

"Are you hungry?" He asks, and I shake my head.

"Not yet. I'm going to go take a shower and get dressed."

"I'll make us something to eat on the drive."

"Perfect, thanks."

I head upstairs to get ready, and shudder as I strip out of my clothes and turn on the shower. My whole body feels sensitive, and all I can think about is Jonas taking me, popping my cherry, and making me his.

Tomorrow. He said that he was waiting until I was legal. Just one more day.

That thought doesn't help to ease the ache forming between my legs or the way that I feel like I'm burning up at the thought of him touching me in the ways that I want him too.

What has gotten into me, and how can I get my libido under control?

Do I really want to? I've never been boy-crazy like all of my classmates. I've never felt attraction before, not until Jonas. It's only ever been Jonas.

I hurry through my shower, ignoring the way that my body reacts as I run my hands over my curves. I've never felt the urge to touch myself or make myself come before, but it's hitting me now.

"Maddie, are you almost done? We should get going soon," Jonas calls through the door, and I snap out of my fantasies.

"Yeah, coming!" I call back, wincing at my choice of words.

I could swear that I hear him growl, and I hurry to dry off and pull on my uniform.

Jonas is downstairs with two breakfast burritos ready to go. I tug on my shoes and coat, and he ushers me out the door. His truck is on, and I know that he came out to warm it up for me.

"Thanks," I say as he gets my door.

He passes me a burrito, and I groan.

"This smells so good," I compliment him. "Where did you learn to cook?"

"It was kind of a necessity. My parents didn't really cook, just warmed up TV dinners and stuff. If I wanted anything healthy or fresh, then I had to make it myself."

"My mom is the same way," I admit as I take a bite. "I still can barely cook though. Unless you count Ramen noodles or macaroni and cheese."

"Still counts," he says kindly, and I smile.

"Barely. Every time I try to make eggs, I burn them. These are so fluffy and perfect though."

"I'll teach you sometime," he offers, and I smile.

"I'd like that."

He pulls up in front of the diner and shifts into park. I finish off my breakfast burrito and unbuckle.

“I’ll pick you up tonight. What time are you off?” He asks me as I move to open the passenger door.

“Nine.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then. Or maybe I’ll come in for dinner or something.”

“I’ll see you later.”

He smiles, and for a second, I think that maybe he’s going to kiss me or something. His eyes darken, and I hold my breath, waiting to see what he does next. He leans towards me, and I sway towards him in response.

Then his phone starts ringing and the spell is broken.

“I’ll let you get that. See you later.”

I hop out of the truck before he can say anything and hurry inside. I head straight back to the break room and hang up my things.

“Hey there, Maddie. How are you feeling?” Clark asks. “You look a little flushed still. Are you sure that you should be here? Things are a little slow with the weather from yesterday. Why don’t you take today off too?”

“Oh, it’s okay. I’m alright.”

He eyes me, looking like he wants to argue, and I force a smile to my lips before I scurry past him and grab an apron.

“There you are! We’ve barely seen you all week,” Willa says, and I smile when I see them sitting in my section.

“I know. I’ve been busy.”

“We want to know what you decided,” Isla says.

“Yeah, Kane and I set up the guest house in case you need to use it,” Emma says.

“Thanks guys.”

I look around the diner, taking in all the empty seats, and scoot into the booth next to Willa.

“Jonas offered me the money. He’s been letting me stay with him,” I whisper to them.

They share a knowing look, and I wonder what that’s all about.

“So, you’re not going through with the auction then?” Isla asks, sounding relieved.

“No, I’ll just do it with Jonas.”

“How romantic,” Willa says sarcastically, and I roll my eyes.

“No, he’s been a perfect gentleman,” I assure them.

“So, you’re going to sleep with him, and then what?” Emma asks.

I freeze.

I’ve lost all sight of my plans to move away. As soon as I’m around Jonas, all I can think about is being with him. He makes me happy. He makes me forget how much I thought I hated being here.

What am I going to do though? Can I really sleep with him and then never see him again? Do I even want to leave town now or is just being away from my mother enough?

“I don’t know,” I admit quietly.

A group of tourists come in, and I smile at my friends.

“I’ll be back to get your order in a minute,” I tell them.

I hurry to greet the newcomers and take their orders before I head back to get my friends orders. Food comes up quick and I drop it off. I mean to go back to my friends to chat for a bit, but business starts to pick up, and I never seem to find the time.

I’m kind of glad about that because I’m not sure what I would say to them. I don’t have any answers for them.

I need to figure it out before my birthday tomorrow when everything is about to change.

NINE



Jonas

I PICK Maddie up at nine on the dot, and everything inside of me settles when she climbs into my truck. My wolf settles down inside of me, and I wish I could hold her hand on the drive home.

Just a few more hours, I remind myself.

“Did you eat?” I ask her as we pull into the driveway.

“Um, I had some soup around four, but that was it.”

“I’ll make us something to eat. I went grocery shopping earlier, so we’re all stocked up here.”

“Oh, what did you get?” She asks as we both hop out of the truck and head up to the front porch.

“A bunch of stuff,” I tell her.

All of your favorites, I think.

We hang up our coats, and I lead her into the kitchen. I’ve already put everything away, and I grin as she starts to look through the fridge and pantry.

“Oh! I love these!” She says excitedly as she pulls out the bag of walnut chocolate chip cookies.

“I know,” I say before I can think it through.

“What? You know?” She asks with a frown, and I scramble to come up with an answer.

“I love them too. They’re the best.”

“Right?” She says, her smile returning as she continues to look at everything that I bought today.

“How about some gyros for dinner? I bought some marinated chicken and pitas. I think that I have everything else here.”

“That sounds perfect. What can I help with?”

“I’ve got it. Why don’t you go relax?”

“Are you sure?” She asks, and I nod.

“I’ve got this. I’ll let you know when it’s time to eat.”

“Okay, I’m going to take a quick shower then.”

I try not to imagine her naked and wet, just one floor above me. My wolf and I still remember this morning when we could smell her arousal and hear her soft moans while she was in the shower. It nearly killed me to know that she was turned on and just out of reach.

I try to distract myself by making dinner, but all I can think about is Maddie. I’m so close to finding out if she’s my mate.

Deep down, I think I already do know. Maddie is the only woman who has ever interested or tempted me. She’s the only one I want and I know that has to mean something.

I glance at the clock and see that it’s close to ten now.

Two more hours.

I take my time making dinner. I want Maddie to have some time to unwind, but I also want to draw this out. I know that I won’t be able to wait until morning. I don’t want to wake her up, though, so I need to keep us up for the next two hours.

I should tell her about shifters and fated mates and start explaining that whole process so that at midnight, we can just be together.

My mind flashes back to what I learned today at the Alpha meeting, and I wonder if I’ll even need to explain all of that to her.

My wolf nods in agreement, leaping to his feet and starting to pace. I let him run for two hours this afternoon, trying to distract him and tire him out, but it didn't really work. We've been waiting years for this moment and we're so close.

I hear Maddie's bare feet coming down the stairs, and I straighten next to the stove.

"Smells good," she says, and I swallow hard.

"What do you like on your gyros?" I ask her, and she joins me at the kitchen island.

We both start to make our plates, and I breathe in her sweet honeysuckle scent.

"Thanks for making this. It looks amazing."

"Of course, I like taking care of you."

We take seats across from each other at the table, and she asks me how my day was.

"Good. I checked on people here in town and made sure that they were all okay after the storm last night."

"Was everyone alright?" She asks in concern, and I nod.

"Yeah, I had to help shovel out a few houses, but everyone was safe."

She smiles at that, and we both dig in. She tells me about her day, and I eat slowly, just enjoying being around her.

"I need to tell you something," I blurt out as we carry our dishes over to the sink, and she smiles.

"Okay," she says as she sits down at the kitchen table.

I hurry to put the leftovers away and then join her.

"You said that your dad's name was George Willard?" I ask her, and she seems caught off guard.

Whatever she thought I was going to say, that wasn't it.

"Yeah, why?"

"Did you know that... he was a shifter?" I ask, and she blinks.

“What? A what?”

“A shifter. Wolf, I think. Or that’s what Kane said anyway. I guess that he grew up in a pack around here.”

She stares at me blankly, and I start to feel anxious. It’s obvious that she doesn’t know what I’m talking about. I think I just put my foot in my mouth in the worst way.

“I’m a shifter too. A wolf one,” I add, and she blinks.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I can shift, can change, between wolf and human form.”

Her eyes widen, and I start babbling, trying to explain all of this before she thinks I’m nuts or something.

“A lot of people in town are shifters. We’re divided into four packs. I’m the Alpha of the South Pack, Kane is East, Bishop is North, and Mack is West.”

“They’re shifters too?” She asks with a frown, and I nod.

“Yeah, Mack is a bear, Bishop a polar bear, and Kane is a wolf like me.”

“Right,” she says, looking a little dazed with all this information.

“I just, I thought that you knew. I’m sorry to spring this on you, but I just wanted to tell you because shifters have fated mates, their one true love.”

She stares at me, and I swallow hard before I continue.

“I think that you’re mine. I won’t know until you’re eighteen, but it doesn’t matter to me. It should, but it doesn’t. I’m obsessed with you, Maddie. I have been for a while.”

“And if I was your fated mate?” She asks.

“Then nothing really changes. I’ll be just as obsessed with you. You’re the only one for me. I love you, Maddie. I have since the moment I saw you. It’s only ever been you. I know that I don’t know for sure if we’re fated to be together, but it doesn’t matter. I want you. I will only ever choose you.”

Her eyes are wide and filled with unshed tears.

“Please say something,” I beg when the silence has stretched on so long that it’s become unbearable.

She opens her mouth, and what she says shocks me and makes me the happiest man on Earth.

“I love you too.”

TEN



Maddie

JONAS'S EYES are doing that glowing thing again.

“Your eyes, is that a shifter thing?” I ask him, and he blinks.

“What about them?”

“They look like they’re glowing or something,” I tell him.

“Oh, yeah. That’s when my animal starts to push to the surface more.”

I nod. My head is spinning in circles, and I keep thinking about what he said about my dad. So much of it makes sense. My dad loved the outdoors and went out for a hike or something every day, rain or shine. I remember his eyes doing the glowing thing too, but I always assumed that it was a trick of the light back then.

“How do you know that my dad was a shifter?” I ask him, and he moves closer to me.

“Kane has lived here all his life. I asked them about him at the meeting today, and Kane recognized the name. Mack says that he thinks he was part of the Snowcap Peaks Pack. They live further north. I can take you there if you want to ask about him. I know the Alpha of that pack a little bit.”

“Maybe. I... am I a shifter then too?”

He frowns at that, and I get the impression that he never thought about that.

“You should be. It’s incredibly rare for a shifter to not have a shifter kid, but maybe since your mom is human, it skipped you,” he explains.

“Or maybe my mom cheated on my dad, and I’m not really his,” I mumble.

“Maybe, but your dad would have been able to smell that you weren’t his. It’s rare, but it could be that you’re in the minority and just aren’t a shifter.”

I nod, and he glances over at the clock.

“It’s almost your birthday,” he says softly, and I see that it’s almost midnight.

“This morning, I was feeling... strange,” I tell him.

His eyes flash and he nods.

“Shifters mate during the full moon. We have this thing called the mating heat, and it happens every month on the full moon. You can start to feel it the day before though. It will only get stronger as the moon changes.”

“Can you feel it too?” I ask him, and he nods.

“Kind of. It will be stronger after I’ve bitten you.”

“What!?” I squeak, and he smiles.

“I have to bite you to claim you. It won’t hurt. In fact, I’ve heard that you’ll like it.”

A secret thrill runs through me and I shift in my chair. I know it might just be this mating moon thing, but I’ve never been so turned on. I want to feel Jonas’s hands on my body. I want him to kiss me, to make love to me.

“We should get to bed,” I say, and he nods.

He takes my hand as we walk upstairs, and I can tell the second that it’s midnight. Jonas’s whole body locks up and his hand tightens around mine.

“Jonas?” I ask him, and he swallows.

“You’re mine. You’re my fated mate,” he says, his voice filled with wonder.

“Are you going to bite me now?” I ask him, and he shakes his head.

“No, right now, I just want to hold you.”

His eyes flash, and I wonder if his wolf is okay with that decision. He leads me down the hallway and into his bedroom. I look around, smiling as I take it in.

His room is done in shades of brown and cream. It’s relaxing, a welcoming space. His big bed is front and center, and my eyes snag and stay locked on the king-size bed.

Jonas hands me a shirt from his dresser, and I head into the bathroom to get changed. His bathroom is a soft beige, and I take a deep breath. His room smells so good, just like him.

When I come back into the bedroom, Jonas is shirtless and about to slip into bed. My mouth waters at the sight of all of his muscles. He looks like all he does is work out. I wonder if that’s a shifter thing too.

“Come here,” he says, and I’m moving before my brain can even give my body the order.

He holds the covers back for me, and I slide into his bed, sighing as the thick blankets cover me.

“What are your birthday plans?” He asks as he slips in beside me.

“I’m not sure. I was just going to hang out with Emma, Isla, and Willa.”

“Can I join you?” He asks. “Maybe take you out to breakfast or dinner, depending on what your friends have planned.”

“That sounds perfect,” I say, rolling onto my side to face him.

He grins at me, and I love that I can make him so happy by just agreeing to let him hang out with me.

“Can I... never mind,” say instead.

“No, tell me,” he insists.

“Can I see your wolf?” I ask him, and he grins.

“Of course. He’s dying to meet you too.”

Jonas climbs off the bed, and I sit up, watching him eagerly as he moves to stand in front of the bed. His hands go to his sweatpants, and my eyes widen as he pushes his pants and boxers down.

“Ready?” He asks, and I blink, tearing my gaze away from his hard cock.

“Uh-huh,” I say, trying not to sound as dazed as I feel.

He nods, and then, right before my eyes, he starts to change. His nails grow long and then fur starts to cover his body. I watch, amazed, as his hands and feet turn into paws, and then he shivers, landing on all fours in front of the bed.

“Whoa,” I breathe, crawling on my hands and knees toward the edge of the bed. “It’s so much bigger than I thought it would be.”

Even with me on the bed, we’re eye to eye. His eyes are the same ones that I know and love, and I sit down on the edge of the bed, reaching out to touch his soft fur. Jonas’s wolf pushes against my hand, leaning into my touch, and I smile as I start to pet him.

“That’s so cool,” I whisper, and he steps back, starting to shift.

He stands up in front of me and pulls his boxers and sweatpants back on.

“Does it hurt to shift?” I ask him, and he shakes his head.

“It’s painless.”

“Have you always been able to do it?”

“Since I was born. It took some time to be able to get it under control so that I could do it only when I wanted to,” he says as he slides back into bed next to me.

“I have like a million other questions, but I’m so tired,” I say as my jaw cracks with the force of my yawn.

“We have all of the time in the world. Sleep now, mate,” he whispers as he pulls me into his arms.

I smile as I rest my head on his chest and breathe in his woody scent. A sense of peace falls over me as I drift off to sleep.

ELEVEN



Jonas

WAKING up with Maddie sprawled out next to me is the best thing to ever happen to me. She's tucked into my side like she belongs there.

She does, my wolf snaps at me, and I smile.

She does, I agree. And tonight, we make her ours.

My wolf howls at that thought, and I kiss Maddie as she starts to stir.

"Morning. Happy birthday, mate," I whisper as I start to trail kisses down her neck.

"Thank you," she says with a sleepy smile.

She stretches her arms above her head and then rolls up into a sitting position.

"What time is it?"

"Just after nine."

She checks her phone, smiling as she sees a few messages from her friends.

"Should we grab some breakfast? Want me to bring you something in bed?" I ask her, and she smiles.

"Emma is making a spread for us at her house. Want to come with me?"

“Yes. I’ll be ready to go whenever you are.”

“I’m going to take a shower first. I should be ready in twenty minutes or so.”

“Sounds good.”

She kisses my cheek, and my heart almost leaps out of my throat. My wolf growls, begging me to kiss her and roll her under us, but I keep him in check. Maddie crawls out of bed and heads back to the guestroom.

“We’ll have to get your things and move them in here,” I call, and she hums in agreement.

I hear the shower turn on a minute later and hurry to get up and ready. My cock is rock hard and I do my best to get my hard-on to go away. I’ve never had to deal with this before. Shifters can’t get an erection until they have their fated mate.

I hurry through my shower and pull on a pair of jeans and a wool sweater. I can hear the wind outside, and I know that it’s going to be well below freezing today.

Maddie comes out of the guestroom in her own jeans and sweater. My wolf licks his lips, and I have to agree. She looks delectable.

“You look gorgeous,” I tell her.

“Thanks. You’re looking very handsome yourself.”

My wolf flops onto his back happily, and I smile.

“Ready to go?”

She nods, and we head downstairs and start to bundle up. I run out to my truck as she pulls on her coat and brush off the snow from last night. I’ve got the heat cranked when she steps out onto the porch, and she hurries over to the truck.

“Brr!” She says as I help her into the passenger seat. “Wait, can you even like feel the cold? Or does your wolf keep you warm?”

“I’m pretty warm. It’s not like super hot or anything though, I still need a coat and stuff, but I don’t think I feel the cold the same way you do.”

“That’s lucky.”

She asks me a few more questions about shifters as we make the short drive over to Emma and Kane’s house. I’m happy to answer all of her questions. I’m just happy to have her here with me.

“Happy birthday!” Everyone screams as Maddie and I walk into the house.

Everyone is here, and the bottom floor has been done up with balloons and streamers. A happy birthday sign hangs crookedly above the entrance to the kitchen, and I smile as I watch Maddie take it all in.

I have some of my pack members creating a surprise back at my house for Maddie, and I can’t wait to see her reaction to it when we get home.

“Are you ready to party?” Willa shouts as all of the girls swarm Maddie and hug her.

“I am. I love all of the decorations. Thanks for doing this, guys,” she says sincerely.

“Of course!” Isla says.

“Yeah, we’d do anything for you,” Emma says, giving Maddie another hug.

“Let’s eat!” Kane says, and the rest of the guys cheer.

We head into the kitchen, all of us practically drooling over the spread of food laid out on the counters. There are eggs, pancakes, waffles, bacon, sausage, and fresh fruit.

“This looks amazing. You guys didn’t have to do all of this,” Maddie objects, but they wave her off.

Bishop, Mack, and Kane are staring at me, and I smile. They grin back, and I know they are asking if Maddie is my fated mate or if I’m just here as a friend. My smile screams mate, and I can see they’re happy for us.

“So, Maddie, what did you want to do today?” Isla asks.

“Eat,” she sighs as she piles her plate with food.

“Well, that’s a given. What else?” Emma asks.

“Maybe a movie? Or we could go skiing if it warms up a little bit.”

“Are you taking her out to dinner?” Kane asks me, and I nod.

“If she wants me to. This day is all about Maddie.”

I look over, and my mate is smiling, her face flushed a happy pink. My wolf curls up inside of me, happy to see our mate so happy.

It’s obvious that Maddie needs this. She deserves this, to be the center of attention, to have people show her just how much she means to them.

I’m going to continue that every day for the rest of my life.

My wolf howls in agreement, and I grin as I grab a plate and start to add food.

TWELVE



Maddie

DON'T GET ME WRONG, I love everything my friends have done to make my birthday the best day ever, but as it gets later, all I can think about is going home with Jonas and having him bite me.

This mating heat is no joke. I thought it was bad yesterday, but it's nothing compared to today.

I fake a yawn and stand, stretching. I notice that the guys all seem to look relieved as I stand to make my excuses to leave.

They must be anxious to get home with their mates too before the mating moon, I think with a small smile.

“Thanks for today, guys, but I think I’m ready to head home. Maybe relax by the fireplace or take a bath,” I say.

“Happy birthday,” Emma says, standing and hugging me.

I can see Isla and Willa making their way toward me too and I smile.

“And have fun tonight,” Emma whispers knowingly.

I feel my face flush with a blush, but I just hug her tighter.

“You too,” I say, and she grins.

I hug Willa and then Isla, promising them that I’ll talk to them tomorrow. I wave goodbye to the guys, and then Jonas is

taking my hand and leading me out to the truck.

“Ready to go home? Or did you want to go out to eat?” He asks.

“I’m stuffed. I feel like all I did today was eat,” I say with a laugh. “Let’s go home.”

Saying those words feels so right, and I smile to myself as I get comfortable in the passenger seat. The roads are icy on the drive home, and Jonas drives slowly down the backroads to his place.

“I can draw you a bath when we get home. I’ll build us a fire too. One in the living room and the master bedroom.”

“Just the bedroom is fine,” I say coyly, and see Jonas swallow hard as he turns into his driveway.

“We don’t have to do anything tonight, Maddie. If you want to wait, then we’ll wait.”

“I don’t want to wait,” I whisper into his ear as I unbuckle.

I hop out of the truck, and Jonas hurries to catch up to me. He unlocks the door, and I giggle as we stumble into the house. My smile cuts off when I see the living room.

“Whoa,” I whisper in shock, and Jonas stops beside me.

Roses cover every available surface and there are balloons with their strings hanging down everywhere.

“What is all of this?” I ask as I spot the cake on the coffee table.

“Happy birthday,” Jonas whispers. “I wanted to do something special for you.”

My heart lodges in my throat, and if I wasn’t in love with him before, I would be after all of this.

“Do you want some cake?” He asks me.

“No. I just want you,” I say.

He reaches for me and I dance away. He chases me up the stairs and into his bedroom, and a zing of excitement runs through me.

“Maddie, mate,” he growls as he reaches for me.

I let him pull me into his arms and his lips land on mine. My body feels like it's caught on fire, and I hurry to unzip my jacket and kick off my boots as Jonas cradles my face in his hands, his lips molding to mine.

“I want you,” I whisper against his lips as we both come up for air.

He nods, noticing that my coat is in a puddle by my feet, and hurries to catch up. He shrugs out of his own jacket and kicks off his boots. I take a step back and he follows me as he peels off his sweater, tossing it on the ground next.

I feel like his prey as he stalks after me. I lead him towards the bed and his eyes start to glow as my knees hit the mattress and I drop down onto it.

I reach for my sweater and wrestle it over my head. I'm a little self-conscious to be half-naked in front of Jonas. His body is so toned and hot. Mine is... not.

“Beautiful,” Jonas murmurs. “You're the most beautiful thing that I've ever seen.”

His eyes glow even more, and it gives me the boost of confidence that I need to unhook my bra and then push my jeans and panties down. I scoot back on the bed, my eyes locked with Jonas as I lay back.

“Maddie, fuck,” he chokes out, and I smile, reaching a hand out for him.

“Bite me, Jonas,” I tell him, and he nods, pushing his own jeans down and then crawling naked on top of me.

“I'm going to worship you,” he whispers against my skin.

“I want that,” I whisper back, and he kisses a trail up my neck until his lips land on mine.

His tongue pushes into my mouth, and I moan as my tongue flicks against his in a teasing, erotic dance.

His hand smooths down my side, and I arch against him, desperate for his touch. He cups my breast, and I moan against

his mouth, breaking off the kiss to suck in a deep breath.

“Jonas,” I moan, pleading with him for something that I can’t even name.

“I’ve got you.”

He dips his head and his lips kiss right between my boobs. He scoots down a bit, his hands cupping both of my breasts in his hand, and his rough callouses send shivers down my spine as they rub over my skin.

His mouth wraps around one of my nipples and I gasp as he rolls his tongue over the sensitive bud.

“Jonas!” I cry out when his teeth scrape along my skin.

Already I’m drenched as he switches to my other nipple and gives it the same attention. My hands fist in the sheets beneath me as a powerful tingling starts to build behind my belly button.

“Oh! Oh, oh, oh!” I say as his hips press against mine.

I rub up against him, and that’s when my eyes roll back in my head and a small orgasm rolls through me.

My eyes closed at some point and I leave them closed as I try to catch my breath. Then I feel Jonas’s warm breath on my soaked core and my eyes snap open.

“Jon—Oh!” I cut off as his tongue licks a path up my center.

He groans as he buries his face in my pussy and eats me like a starving man. I can feel the pressure starting to build inside of me again, stronger this time, and I try to brace myself for the next release. My fingers tighten in the sheets and I brace my feet flat on the bed.

“Jonas, I’m, I’m coming!” I shout.

He licks me through my orgasm, and I shudder, my body flushing as he nuzzles against the inside of my thighs.

“Delicious,” he whispers, and my face flames with a blush.

“Is it your turn now?” I ask, reaching for him as he kisses his way up my body.

“It’s time for me to mark you and make you mine,” he whispers, and I want to argue with him, but his cock is already rubbing against my clit.

I’m so wet and turned on that I can barely think straight so I just nod and turn my head to the side, offering him my neck. I don’t even know why I do it. It’s just an instinct, but it seems to be right.

Jonas kisses my neck, his cock lining up with my opening, and I cling to him as his teeth sink into my neck.

“OH!” I gasp, and he thrusts into me at the same time.

Another orgasm rolls through me, and I hear Jonas curse above me.

“So wet and tight. You’re perfect, mate. Absolutely perfect.”

My pussy tightens around his hard length, and he groans into my neck.

“I love you, Maddie. More than anything.”

“I love you too,” I say as he starts to move.

He starts slowly, but it isn’t long before he’s pounding into me. I lift my hips, meeting his thrusts, and our bodies work together in sync.

“I’m close,” I tell him, and he grunts.

“I need to feel you come all over my cock,” he says, and my fingers dig into his biceps.

I love his dirty mouth. I love the sweet side to him too, but when we’re like this, it’s like I’m seeing a piece of him that no one else ever has. I love that.

His pace falters, and I know that he’s close too. I look up, my green eyes meeting his and his eyes flash. There’s so much love and heat in their depths and I’m not sure if that’s what pushes me over the edge or if it’s the way that he angles his hips and hits that perfect spot inside of me.

“Jonas!” I scream, and he chokes on my name as he comes too.

He rolls us before he can collapse on top of me, and I cuddle against him as we both pant, desperately trying to catch our breaths.

“Wow,” I whisper, and he chuckles.

“I know.”

He wraps his arms around me, and I kiss his chest.

“Want to do it again?” I whisper, and he laughs.

“Absolutely.”

I grin as he rolls me under him once again.

THIRTEEN



Jonas

I WAKE up with Maddie's hands all over my body. My wolf is satiated and content inside of me, and I smile as I crack my eyes open and stare down at her.

"Did I not satisfy you enough last night, mate?" I ask her, and she smiles.

"You did. I just didn't get much of a chance to explore you," she says as she kisses my chest.

"Explore away."

I stretch my arms out and she grins as she ducks under the covers. I feel her lips on my skin as she makes her way south. My cock is already hard and I can feel my wolf start to tense as her mouth gets closer and closer to my dick.

I'm already so turned on. She's going to kiss my cock once and I'm going to come.

Her hand wraps around me and I grit my teeth. That familiar tingle is already starting, but I know that Maddie wants to explore me, so I try to focus on something else and ignore the building orgasm inside of me.

Her hand pumps me slowly and I hiss through my teeth.

"Fuck, Mads. I need you," I say, reaching for her.

"You said that I could do this," she pouts, and I twist my fingers into the blankets.

I take a deep breath and it leaves me in a gasp when her tight little mouth wraps around me. Her tongue swirls over the tip of my dick and my hips punch up. She moans around me and my eyes roll back in my head.

“You’re going to kill me, mate,” I pant, and can practically picture the self-satisfied smirk on her face.

“I like this. I like seeing how you react to me,” she admits.

“Come up here. You’ll be able to see better,” I tell her.

She kisses the tip of my cock once before she crawls up my body, her head poking out from under the blankets.

I grab her hips and guide my cock to her snug opening.

“Ride me,” I order her, and she nods.

She sinks down slowly, each inch that she takes having me grind my teeth together a little harder. It’s so slow, so torturous, but so, so good.

“That’s it, mate,” I praise her as she takes all of me.

Her hands brace against my chest as she starts to grind against me. Her green eyes darken as her pussy grows slicker with her desire. She starts to bounce up and down on my cock and my hands grip her hips, helping to guide her movements.

“It’s so deep,” she moans, and hearing her like that has my balls drawing up tight.

Maddie’s tits jiggle in front of my face and I lean forward, capturing one nipple in my mouth. She cries out as I suck the tight bud into my mouth and lavish it with my tongue.

“Jonas!” She cries, and I feel her tighten around me.

She’s close. I just need to give her a little more...

My wolf licks his lips as I reach between us, my fingers finding her clit and rolling it under my thumb.

“Oh my gosh!” She pants, her movements growing sloppy as she starts to lose herself in her pleasure.

“That’s it. Give it to me, mate. Come for me.”

My words push her over the edge and she comes with a shout, pulling me over the edge with her.

“Fuck,” I growl as I come deep inside of her.

She collapses on top of me, sprawling across my chest. We’re both covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and I pull the sheets and blankets higher over both of us. We’re both breathing heavily and I rub her back as we try to calm our breathing.

We’re silent for a few minutes as we just enjoy being together. My wolf is happy and curled up inside of me, and I smile as I start to play with her pale blonde hair.

“I was supposed to leave town today,” she sighs, and I stiffen against her.

“What? You’re leaving?”

“No, I just, I was supposed to. That was the plan anyway. I was going to leave town and move far away.”

“Do you still want to?” I ask her, and she pauses.

“No,” she finally says. “I like it here; it’s home. I just wanted to leave to avoid my mom. I couldn’t live in that house anymore, but I didn’t really have a whole lot of options around here. There are no apartments or rentals.”

“I could make your mom leave. Give her some money or just order her to. You could have the house,” I offer.

“Maybe,” she says, snuggling closer to me. “I think that maybe it will be enough to just be away from her. I’m happy now, and she’s always going to be miserable. I think knowing that might just be enough.”

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know.”

“I will,” she promises, and I kiss the top of her head.

“Now, how about I make us some food?” I ask her.

“Well, I’ve kind of always wondered about something,” she starts.

“What?” I ask, my body already reacting to her tone.

“How do you think shower sex would be?” She asks, and I grin, my heart starting to race as I tug her towards me.

“With you? Mind-blowing.”

“Yeah?” She asks. “Then prove it.”

I grin as I pull her from bed and carry my giggling mate into the shower. Then I do prove it to her.

Twice.

FOURTEEN



Maddie

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“YOU BE good for Aunt Emma, okay?” I ask my kids, and they nod distractedly.

They’re so excited to get to have a sleepover with their friends, and I smile as they run into the house.

“Thanks for watching them,” I tell Emma, and she waves me off.

“Of course. Kane and I owe you for watching our little rugrats last month.”

“Let me know if they need anything.”

“I will. What do you and Jonas have planned for the night?” She asks me.

“Just a quiet night in. We’re going to cuddle and watch a movie.”

“Maybe try for baby number three,” she adds, and I laugh.

“Maybe,” I admit, and she cheers.

“Have fun!”

I wave and head back to my SUV. Jonas bought it for me two years ago. I smile as I climb behind the wheel,

remembering all of the driving lessons that Jonas gave me right after we first got together. He was appalled that I never learned how to drive and insisted on teaching me. He was actually a great teacher.

After driving lessons, he did his best to teach me how to cook, but that seems to be a lost cause. I always end up burning everything that I try to make.

We ended up getting married a week after my birthday. Jonas told me that he wanted me to have his last name and be his in every way, and I couldn't deny him that. I wanted it too.

We went on a honeymoon to Hawaii. It was so cold here, and I wanted to enjoy the beach and warm weather.

We took a little detour before our honeymoon and went up to Snowcap Peak Pack and Jonas introduced me to a few people who knew my father. It stung a little to know that he didn't tell me about all of this myself, but Jonas reassured me by pointing out that he died when I was young, and maybe he was just waiting until I was older to explain everything. I wish that things had been different. I wish that he was still here, but I can feel his presence more now. It's like he's happy that I've found my fated mate. Like he's smiling down on me.

When we came back from our honeymoon, I learned that my mom had left town. Apparently she was in a lot of debt and ended up selling the house. She's probably crashing with one of her boyfriends, but I don't know where, and I don't care to find out.

Jonas is still the Alpha of his pack. He's at an Alpha meeting right now, which is why I'm dropping off our kids and hurrying home to get everything ready. I want to surprise him. He doesn't know that the kids are going to a sleepover tonight, or he didn't before his meeting. I wanted it to be a surprise.

He's been working so hard these last few weeks. Between that and the kids, we haven't had a lot of alone time. I'm hoping to rectify that tonight.

I smile when I see that Jonas's truck is still gone. I park and hurry inside, picking up my college textbooks and

cleaning up the living room. I've been taking online classes, just a few at a time so I have enough time to take care of the kids and everything else.

It took me a while to pick a major, but even when I changed it, Jonas was supportive. He just wants me to be happy, and that hasn't changed in the last five years.

I build up a fire and then hurry upstairs to change into the new lingerie I bought. I'm jogging back downstairs when I hear Jonas's truck pull into the driveway and I hurry over to the couch, draping myself over the soft leather.

"Mads?" Jonas calls as he comes inside.

His back is to me as he hangs up his keys and coat, and I smile as he turns and stops dead in his tracks.

"Holy shit," he murmurs, and I grin.

"Do you like it? It just came in the mail yesterday," I tell him as I stand and smooth my hands over the pale blue silk.

"I love it."

His eyes are heated and filled with so much longing. I smile as I lean back on the couch and spread my legs, showing him that I ditched the matching panties.

"Fuck, Maddie."

He takes a step towards me and then freezes.

"The kids?" He asks, looking up the stairs and listening for any sound of them.

"They're having a sleepover at Emma and Kane's house."

His face lights up, and I smirk as he steps closer.

"So, we have the house to ourselves? All night?"

"Yep," I answer, and he pounces on me.

"You're the best mate ever. I love you so much."

"I know. I love you too."

His lips land on mine, and soon, my new lingerie is torn from my body.

“I’ll buy you more,” he promises, and I laugh as he strips off his clothes and reaches for me again.

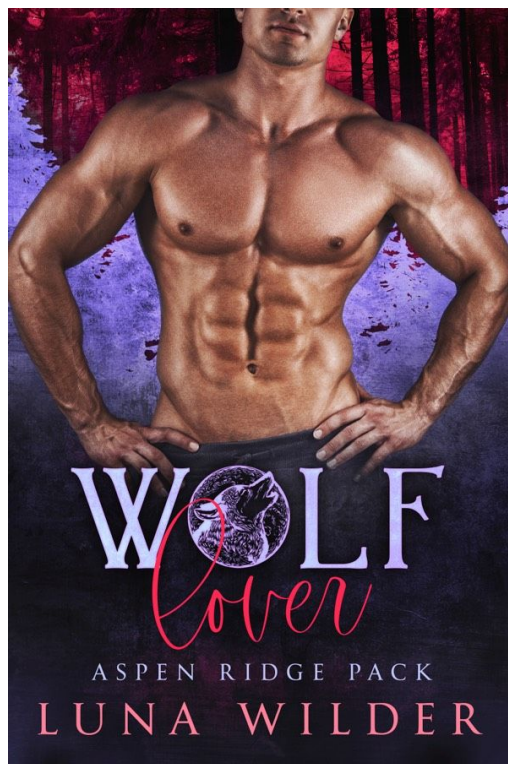
Then he’s thrusting into me and all I can do is moan.

Staying in Aspen Ridge and trying to sell my virginity are both things I never thought I would want, but it turned out to be the best decision I ever made. It gave me this home, two amazing kids, and the most wonderful partner.

Life couldn’t be better, I think, and then Jonas’s cock rubs over my clit and I’m proven wrong.

It can get way, way better.

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