

The Scarred HEART

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Wilde Creek Book 5

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CHAPTER ONE

*R*ow Grayson side-stepped to avoid the furious bear's meaty fist, then countered with an uppercut that caught the other male in the jaw, throwing him off-balance and making him stumble backward. The male was bigger than Row by a hundred pounds or so, but he wasn't as well-trained. Sometimes being bigger was enough to win a fight, but not in this case.

As the male went down, Row leaped on him, raising his fists over his head and bringing them down in the center of his opponent's chest. The male's sternum cracked audibly, and the crowd around him bellowed in joy. Breathing hard, Row sat on top of him and waited to see if he'd try to get up. After a long moment, Row was certain the other bear wouldn't rise, at least not without medical help.

Row's king strode into the center of the ring with a smug grin. Row stood, ignoring the sting of his battle wounds, and let King Fayar clasp his hands together and raise them in triumph. The crowd cheered loudly as Fayar shouted, "Row stands victorious!"

Row's vision blurred for a moment; he probably had a concussion. The other bear, whose name he couldn't even recall, had walloped him on the head a few times, hard. While Fayar listed the number of fights Row had won in the last year, Row scanned the crowd for the only two people he cared about—his mom and his sister, Dani.

He found them standing with some of the other sleuth females. Although they were both smiling, he could see they

were worried about him. They were the only family he had. His dad died before he was born. His mom had adopted Dani when Row was eight, and the sweet little girl had been his closest friend and champion.

The crowd cheered again, and Fayar slapped Row on the shoulder. “Go have a beer, you did well tonight.”

“Thanks,” Row said.

Once a month, Row and other fighters within his bear sleuth battled against neighboring sleuths. There was no prize apart from accolades for the winners and their kings, but Row had been winning these monthly battles for the last few years. Sometimes he lost, but it was a rare occurrence. He didn’t think he’d been defeated within the last eighteen months, although he had to admit his memories of some battles were a little fuzzy around the edges.

As Row watched his mother and sister move through the crowd, a dark growl erupted behind him. He turned at the familiar sound. Hector, a male he’d beaten in a previous battle, stood glowering at the edge of the makeshift ring.

Fayar stepped between Row and Hector. “You have no standing here, cat.”

Hector was a lion shifter. And an asshole.

“I came to have my pride restored,” Hector said, pounding on his chest like a disgruntled ape.

Row rolled his eyes and let out a short growl of his own. “I should’ve killed you when I had the chance.”

That fight was one that Row would never forget. The two had faced off against each other, but Hector’s king, who’d adopted the crazy lion when he was a cub, had failed to mention that he’d encouraged Hector to shift during their fight and try to kill him. In a dick move, Hector had tried to claw off a certain valuable appendage of Row’s, and Row had pulled out his claws at the root so they’d never grow back. It did give Row a small bit of joy to see Hector’s scarred fingertips before he clenched his hands into fists.

“Your pride is not my concern. Your sleuth was banned from our fights, and you are not welcome here. Either leave on your own, or leave in a body bag,” Fayar said, punctuating his words with a loud growl.

“I want my fair shot,” Hector snarled. Three other males slunk behind him, bears from his sleuth and clearly his friends. “I’m owed retribution for my suffering.”

Row knew he’d never beat Hector if he faced him now. He was injured from the last fight, barely standing under his own power.

Fayar tilted his head slightly. There was a heartbeat of utter silence, and then the king moved so quickly he was a blur. One moment Hector was standing between his three friends; the next he was flying through the air, over the heads of the other sleuths, before slamming to the ground.

“Get. Out,” Fayar bellowed. The three males, mouths open, stood frozen in place until Fayar took a menacing step toward them. Then they dispersed into the crowd, grabbing the unconscious Hector and hauling him away.

“Follow them and make sure they leave town,” Fayar said, gesturing to two of his guards. They nodded and darted off in pursuit.

“Well, that was interesting,” Fayar said, turning to Row.

“I’m sorry,” Row said.

“For what? He’s an ass. His king probably raked him over the coals for losing so badly to you during that fight. Maybe being a lion without claws is like being a neutered house cat.”

Row snorted. “Thank you.”

“No one fucks with my people, Row. Don’t you know that by now?”

Row did know. Fayar was a good king, and he took care of the sleuth. Every member was important to him, from the smallest cub to the oldest males and females. Fayar called for the party to start and then told Row, “I’ll set up a patrol for a while, just to make sure that Hector and his cronies don’t

come back, and I'll speak to his king about my dislike for this behavior."

Row thanked him again and watched him disappear into the crowd. Dani and his mother walked swiftly to him as everyone else dispersed for the celebration that would follow. There had been four sleuths at the battle tonight; Row had fought three times and won each fight. He preferred the nights where he only had to fight once. It wasn't that he didn't like winning or honing his skills, but the constant battles were draining. Injuring a male until he couldn't get up from the ground had long since lost its thrill. In his early years, when he'd first come into his shift, he'd enjoyed the battles—at least once he'd learned how to fight and win. Losing sucked, as the male he'd defeated tonight would attest. Once he'd woken up.

"You did so well," his mother said in a low voice. She and Dani walked on either side of him, leading him away from the crowd. His vision still hadn't cleared. It was a good thing he was a shifter and had accelerated healing; otherwise he might worry that the blurry vision was going to stick around.

"Do you want to shift? We can take you into the woods," Dani said, linking her arm with his. Anyone seeing the trio would assume his family was congratulating him on battles well fought, but Row knew they were also bracketing him in case he passed out. That had happened on more than one occasion after he'd won a battle by the skin of his teeth.

"No." Hector's sudden appearance made Row reluctant to leave his mom and sister alone in the house. Although he didn't necessarily believe that Hector would come back after being humiliated and injured a second time, he wanted to keep an eye on his family.

"You're so stubborn," Dani said, chuckling.

"Well, it's worked for me so far," Row pointed out.

They left the battleground and took a familiar route through the woods surrounding it, toward Row's mother's house. The sleuth's territory was centered around the battleground, proof that the king believed the fights were the most important activity his males could engage in. Beyond the

thick trees, the sleuth's homes formed a larger ring, packed tightly together, side by side and encircled by another forested area patrolled by guards assigned by the king.

His sister and mother led him inside the house, and he collapsed on the couch with a groan. "Stop bleeding on Mom's couch, Row," Dani chided as she pulled him to a sitting position.

"You could've taken me to my place," he said.

"Not on your life. You have to let us take care of you."

While his mother tended the wounds, reminding him he'd heal faster if he shifted, Dani told him about the book she'd just finished reading, based on a science-fiction TV show. Row smiled as she talked excitedly about the differences between the show and the book. She was trying to distract him from the aches throbbing in his muscles, and he loved her for it.

His mother snapped the lid closed on the medical kit and patted his knee. "I'm going to fry up a thick steak for you and bring you an ice pack."

"Better make it two," Row said.

"Steaks or ice packs?" His mother smiled down at him.

"Both."

He spent the night passed out on the couch as his body healed. Bears, unlike other shifters such as wolves and big cats, healed slowly, so he'd be feeling the ache of the wounds from his battles for a few days.

The following morning, Row ate breakfast with his mom and sister. Dani still lived with their mom, but Row had moved out of the house several years earlier into a home of his own. He'd never wanted to bring a random female home to his mom's house, and fucking in the woods, while alluring in

some ways, had lost its luster over the years and he'd wanted to have a place he could call his own.

After their meal was over and the kitchen was clean, Row's mom said, "I've got some news."

"I hope it's good news," Dani said.

She smiled. "It is for you, sweetheart. I think it's time for Row to take you to your people."

Row blinked in surprise. "I thought you'd never been able to find any reindeer."

Their mom shook her head and went to retrieve her iPad from the small desk in the corner. "I wasn't able to until recently. The detectives I hired when we first found Dani could never locate any reindeer, or any evidence that there were others aside from Dani. I never gave up hope that someday she might be reunited with her own people, if she wanted to be. Last week, one of the detectives contacted me to say that he'd finally found a herd of reindeer. They're a secretive group, which is why he'd never been able to pin them down before. The journey will take a few days."

Dani and Row looked at the iPad in their mother's hands. The screen showed a map, with a pushpin in the middle of what appeared to be a forest.

"After you meet your people, you can come back here. Or maybe you'll love being with them so much you won't want to."

"I'll always be a bear in my heart, even if I'm not one when I shift."

His mom showed them the information she'd been given, and Row poked around on the map program for a while, checking routes. Dani sat quietly next to him. She was younger than him by three years. When his mother adopted her she was just a child, and Row had been proud to take on the mantle of older brother. Over the years they'd become best friends. Although he was happy that his mom had finally found a herd of reindeer shifters, he was conflicted about her leaving their family, possibly for good.

“Why do you want me to leave now?” Dani asked.

Their mom sat next to her and hugged her tightly. “Are any of the males in the sleuth your mate?”

“No.”

“Then there’s nothing wrong with you taking a trip and meeting some reindeer. Maybe your mate is somewhere in that herd, or perhaps you’ll meet him along the way. All I know for certain is that you’re a beautiful young woman and you deserve to find your mate and start a family.”

Row cleared his throat. “What about me?”

She laughed and put her arm around him. “You deserve that, too. I just think it’s time for Dani to connect to her roots, and I know you’ll watch over her along the way.”

Dani chewed her lip for a moment. “What if they don’t like me?”

“What’s not to like?” Row asked.

She smiled. “You’re biased.”

He shrugged. “You’re a great sister and friend. Just know that when you do meet your mate, he better treat you right or he’ll have to answer to me.”

“True mates treasure each other,” their mom said. “When you each meet the one meant only for you, you’ll know.”

Later that afternoon, Row met with Fayar to explain his upcoming absence.

“I always hoped you’d find your mate through one of the visiting sleuths,” Fayar said, leaning against a post on his porch. He was a fair king, and although Row could do without the monthly battles, he did know that he was a better fighter because of them. Eventually, when he did find his mate, he’d be able to protect her the way a male of worth should.

“I’m thirty. I think if she was going to be at one of the battles, she’d have shown up by now.”

Fayar chuckled. “I suppose. You’re growing tired of them.” It was a statement, not a question.

“A little.”

“When you return from taking Dani to meet her people, we can discuss you joining the trainers for the young males.”

Row’s brow rose. The trainers were a small group who were charged with ensuring that the young males in the sleuth were taught how to defend themselves and their families. It was an important job.

“I’d be honored.”

Fayar said, “They’ll be lucky young males. And perhaps you’ll meet your mate along your journey and soon be teaching your own sons how to hunt and fight.”

Row’s bear perked up. The idea of finding his mate hadn’t really occurred to him, but his bear sure as hell was ready to start the next chapter of their life.

“Thanks.”

“Be safe.” Fayar turned and strode into his house, and Row walked back through the territory to his mother’s, where Dani was just finishing her packing. He set the last of the supplies in the SUV, kissed his mother goodbye, and got behind the wheel. It took a few more tearful minutes, but Dani eventually stopped hugging and crying on their mom, put her last bag in the back, and got in the SUV.

“Ready, kiddo?” he asked as he slowly backed out of the driveway.

“Yes and no.”

They both waved out the window to their mom, and she waved back. Shifting into gear, he honked twice and drove away, leaving the safety of the sleuth’s territory and heading toward Dani’s future.

Row hoped that when they found the reindeer herd, they’d be happy to see Dani. But if they weren’t, he would take her away; they’d return home to the sleuth and go on with their lives. He had a new job to look forward to, and he knew that eventually his sweet sister would find her mate. He hoped like hell he found his, too.

Dani rolled her neck as she got out of the SUV while Row pumped gas. “Man, I’m freaking tired of traveling.”

“It’s only been two days,” Row said.

“It’s just been a lot of driving.”

“I’m the one doing the driving. You’ve been stretched out in the backseat playing games on your tablet and driving me crazy with pop music.”

“You know you love my music.”

He snorted. “You have no proof of that.”

The attendant gave Row change, and Dani asked, “Where are we?”

“Wilde Creek,” the man said.

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

“Not this late. Unless you want junk food, which there’s plenty of in the mini mart.”

“Ugh,” Dani said. “No more chips and snack cakes.”

“Thanks,” Row said to the attendant. As he and Dani got into the SUV, he said, “It’s a wooded town. We could go hunting.”

“You mean you could go hunting and I could graze? What if there are humans hunting? I don’t want to get shot.”

“I’ll keep you safe.”

Using the map program on his phone, he found a heavily wooded area nearby. It took twenty minutes to find the road that skirted along the woods. Row parked and got out, going to the back to get the supplies ready.

Dani got out just as Row heard the distant howling of wolves. “Ah, damn it,” he muttered. “We must be in pack territory. Get back in the car, Dani.”

When she didn't answer him, he stepped around the side of the vehicle and saw her staring into the dark woods. "Dani?"

She turned her head slowly to look at him. "I hear him."

"Him? Him who?"

"Mine. My...*mine*." Her whole body shook and she exploded into her shift, far faster than Row had ever seen her do before. Her clothes hung in tatters around her form. She pawed at the ground with a snort, took one look at Row, and then leaped toward the woods.

"Dani! Wait, it's too dangerous, they'll kill you!"

Panic thundered down on him as his sister bounded into the woods and disappeared. Row stripped, shifting into his grizzly form and lumbering after her as quickly as he could. If they were in pack territory, Dani was in trouble. The wolves might not attack Row, but they would definitely go after a reindeer first and ask questions later.

As Row followed her scent through the woods, he became aware of another presence tracking her as well. He snarled, knowing it was a wolf. Row bellowed a warning, but the wolf never stopped moving, a shadow following Dani as closely as Row was. He could see his sister ahead of him, but he couldn't catch up to her.

Realizing it was futile to get Dani to stop, he decided to intercept the wolf instead. Turning abruptly, he raced toward the wolf, following its scent as he closed in on his target. He barreled into the wolf's side, shifting as he did so. The wolf shifted as well, and Row pressed them to a tree and snarled, "She's not prey, she's my sister."

A feminine voice wheezed out, "She's a reindeer."

His rage surged. "I know that!"

He wanted to tear the female apart to protect his sister, even though he knew he'd never act on that. The wolf was running on instinct, just like Dani was, unfortunately.

Cold fingers pressed to his cheeks, and the female pleaded, "Please don't kill me."

At her touch, Row felt everything inside him quiet. He stared at the wolf, really looking at her for the first time, and he was stunned. By the light of the full moon, and with his enhanced eyesight, he could see her clearly. She was beautiful, with pale skin and lustrous dark hair. She licked her lips, and he growled at the sight. His heart clenched tightly enough to make his knees shake. He pressed his face to her neck and inhaled. She tensed, but she didn't try to get away.

Immediately he knew who she was—his mate.

He wrapped his arms around her and sat down, not caring about the snow, only wanting to protect her from the cold. He stroked his fingers down her throat, taking in her sweet, woody scent. She smelled like flowers, and the forest at night.

“*Adara* mine. I found you. I can't believe I found you.” The words left his mouth before he realized what he was saying.

He'd been trailing his sister, but he'd found his mate. The fates were smiling on him, and he wasn't going to waste a second.

“I'm—” She opened her mouth, but he pressed his lips to hers, stifling the words with a kiss that seared him all the way to his soul. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and the taste of her exploded on his tongue like dark chocolate. Her fingers tangled in his hair as she moaned, kissing him back. His bear roared in triumph.

As his fingers trailed down her back, he realized she was scarred, badly. He rumbled angrily, furious at the injuries she must have suffered. “Who hurt you? I'll slaughter them!”

She struggled to get off his lap, but he wouldn't let her go.

“Who are you? Let me go right now!”

“I'm Row, and you're mine.”

He stood swiftly, tossing her gently over his shoulder. He needed to find Dani and make sure she was safe, and then he'd deal with his mate. Whoever had harmed her badly enough to scar her was going to suffer greatly. Row had his share of scars from his battles, but females weren't supposed to be fighting

for their lives. He'd always heard that wolf packs protected their females and cubs, so why had she been harmed?

“Put me down, you loon!”

He gripped the inside of her thigh to hold her against his shoulder as he began to walk. “Not now, *Adara*.”

“My name is Kammie.”

“Kammie,” he said, rubbing the inside of her leg, aware of the heat of her skin and how close he was to the apex of her thighs. “*Adara*,” he explained. “My mate.”

CHAPTER TWO

*K*ammie decided that the most uncomfortable position she'd ever been in was hanging over the broad shoulder of this were-bear who said his name was Row. One minute she was chasing a reindeer—which was hard enough to believe in the woods of Wilde Creek—and the next minute she'd been in Row's arms. His glorious, muscular arms.

Shut up, Kammie.

She couldn't hear anything but the sound of her blood rushing in her ears. She knew they were still in the pack's woods, but the territory stretched for miles. This sexy beast had decided that she was his mate, and when she'd tried to get out of his arms, he'd put her in a position that she couldn't get free from.

She could probably kick him in the face, but she had a feeling that even if she did connect her heel with his nose, he most likely wouldn't drop her. Plus, he was gorgeous, and she didn't really want to hurt him. Her wolf was in heaven, even though Kammie was anything but happy.

Row had said she was his mate, but he hadn't really seen her body; the body she kept covered with long sleeves and pants no matter the weather. She knew that once he got her somewhere well-lit, he'd see the map of the abuse she'd suffered at the hands of her uncle. He might think she was his mate, but he wouldn't want to tie himself to her forever. She would never be a trophy wife, a woman in a low-cut dress or a skimpy bikini, that a male would want to show off.

He hadn't said anything since he'd called her *adara* and introduced himself.

"How about putting me down?"

His hand, wrapped around her thigh and holding her against his shoulder, tightened slightly. She didn't want to think about how close he was to her pussy, which had been throbbing ever since she'd realized he wasn't going to kill her.

"No."

She groaned. "Where are you taking me?"

"To find my sister."

"The reindeer?"

He grunted.

"So how does a bear end up with a reindeer shifter for a sister anyway? Is your mom a reindeer?"

"I'm the offspring of two bears. Dani is adopted."

"Okay, seriously, I need you to put me down. My head is killing me."

He stopped immediately, pulling her from his shoulder with such care that it made her feel like she was made of glass. He cradled her against his chest and, when the stars had stopped sparking in her vision, she found him watching her with sincere concern.

"How's your head?" he asked gruffly.

"You can put me down, Row." *So I can hop out of here like a freaking bunny.*

"Not until I know you won't run away from me."

Is he psychic?

"I won't run."

He arched a dark brow.

"Okay, fine, I was thinking about it, but you're really making me uncomfortable here. I'm naked and you're naked, and you're touching me."

“Mates touch.”

She looked skyward and closed her eyes with a sigh. “You say that now, but in the light of day you’ll change your mind. Save us both some aggravation and just let me go.”

He blinked slowly and inhaled deeply, his chest expanding against her side. The slide of his hot flesh next to hers seared her, made her never want the moment to end—even as a small part of her, the frightened, beaten child part, was screaming at her to get away before he destroyed her completely.

He didn’t say anything as he began moving again, and he didn’t put her down, either. He paused every few feet and scented the air, changing his path as he walked with long, sure strides. She stared at the side of his face and neck. With her enhanced sight, she could see faint scars. They were old, like hers, and jagged as though his flesh had been torn by claws. Chewing her lip, she wondered what he’d been through. How strange would it be if he had been abused, too? It was one thing to consider eventually finding a male who wasn’t repulsed by her scars, or who would let her stay covered for the rest of her life. It was an entirely different scenario to think that her mate might have scars like hers.

Row stopped moving suddenly and began to growl, so loudly that his whole body vibrated. Kammie could feel the rage in the sound. Under normal circumstances, when she wasn’t naked in the arms of the male making the sound, she might have been terrified. Surprisingly, she was anything *but* terrified. She couldn’t really explain how she knew with absolute certainty that Row wouldn’t hurt her, but she did.

Row set Kammie on her feet gently and tucked her behind his back. “Let my sister go.”

Kammie peeked around his broad shoulder and saw her friend and fellow packmate, Adam, holding a petite blonde in his arms. They were a few yards away, but Kammie could scent the passion in the air and hear their panting breaths.

“Go away, Row,” the blonde said.

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

Adam growled darkly, his grip tightening on Row’s sister. “Mine.”

Kammie felt Row’s body bulk slightly, and his skin prickled under her hands as he began to let his bear loose. She liked Adam and she didn’t want him to be hurt, but she wasn’t sure how to defuse the situation.

Pressing her lips to his back, she gripped his waist gently and said, “Please don’t hurt my friend.”

Row’s growl cut off abruptly and he straightened from his aggressive stance. “You’re my responsibility. I promised our mother that I would take you to your people.”

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

Kammie giggled inwardly at meeting a reindeer named Dancer, and leaned around Row’s side again to smile at her. “I’m Kammie. I’m not sure where we are exactly, but maybe Adam’s house is close?”

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

“You might’ve mentioned your house was so close, instead of letting me molest you in the woods,” Dani said, chuckling.

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

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

“Sorry,” Adam said, not sounding one bit sorry. He swung Dani into his arms and Row immediately did the same to Kammie, falling into step behind the couple as they moved through the woods.

Row looked down at Kammie. “You didn’t run.”

Damn it. “I guess I didn’t.”

“Then you accept that we’re mates?”

Not remotely. “We’ll talk later. When I have clothes on and so do you.”

“Why are you so worried about clothing?”

“Because I am.”

Less than ten minutes later, Adam had opened the front door to his house and let Row and Kammie inside. Adam left them in the living room as he immediately carried Dani back to a bedroom.

Row’s hands tightened on Kammie slightly, and she stared up at him. “You can put me down now.”

“Are you going to run?”

“No.”

He sighed and put her down. His hand rested on her shoulder, just heavy enough to let her know that he’d be able to stop her if she took off. Which she wasn’t thinking about.

Not really.

A light clicked on, and Kammie reeled back out of instinct, trying to move into the shadows and cover herself.

Row didn’t let her get far. He drew her back to him so she was under the harsh light of the fixture over the foyer. “Don’t hide yourself from me.”

Tears pricked her eyes. “Row, please.”

The light clicked off, and he exhaled sharply just a heartbeat before he drew her close and wrapped his arms around her. He buried his face in her neck with a soft growl. “We’ll deal with this later. For now, I’ll let it slide.”

This time her eyes stung for an entirely different reason. He was being sweet—in a completely bossy, asshole sort of way. She let herself relax into his warmth and shoved her worry about what might come later out of her mind. She could live in the moment and enjoy this for what it was. Afterward, she’d have this memory for the lonely nights to come.

Adam and Dani came back into the living room several minutes later, both more or less dressed. Adam was wearing jeans, and Dani had on one of his t-shirts, which was just long enough to cover her to mid-thigh. Her skin was flushed and they both looked happy, especially Adam. Kammie hadn't seen him really smile in a long time.

Dani handed them a pair of sweats and a t-shirt. Row was taller than Adam, and more muscular, but the sweats were baggy enough to fit him. Row grimaced as Kammie tugged the long-sleeved shirt over her head.

“What?” she asked.

“You smell like another male in that shirt.”

Kammie rolled her eyes as Dani giggled.

Row snarled, and Adam tucked Dani behind him quickly. “Don't snarl at my mate in my house. I don't give a damn who you are to her.”

Kammie said, “You're really mates, Adam?”

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

Row snarled so loudly that the pictures on the walls rattled. For a moment, just the briefest blip of time, Kammie considered telling Adam that yes, she did need help, but instead she shook her head. “It's fine, Adam.”

It wasn't remotely *fine*, but she'd deal with it later.

“Dani said you were taking her to see her people, but that's clearly not your concern any longer,” Adam said.

Row's face tightened in anger. “She's my sister.”

“I'm her mate.” Adam growled. “I'll take her to her people.”

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

Kammie thought it was the sweetest thing she'd ever heard. Adam didn't seem to mind that his mate was seeing the scars from the burns he'd suffered as a teenager. Half of his body had burn scars, and Kammie knew he'd been struggling with his future in the pack and his inability to find a mate.

A part of her wanted to give in to the optimism that was trying hard to bloom within her, but she squashed it. It was too tempting to hope that Row actually wouldn't mind her scars. She'd spent the years since her uncle's abuse being ridiculed and ostracized. She wasn't ready to believe that Row didn't care about her scars, although the tiniest part of her wanted to.

Adam looked at Dani for a long, quiet moment, and then said, "You can borrow my truck to drive to Kammie's."

"You don't want to drive us?" Kammie asked.

Adam glanced at Kammie for only a second. "I don't really want to leave the house. You can bring the truck back tomorrow."

"Late tomorrow," Dani said.

Row made a disgusted sound, and Kammie just shook her head with a smile. After they said goodnight to Adam and Dani, Row followed Kammie out of the house to where Adam's truck was parked on the street. Before her bare feet could hit the snow-covered sidewalk, Row had picked her up again and carried her to the truck.

He was clearly agitated, which made Kammie nervous. Her past told her that people who were angry tended to strike out at others. Although she didn't believe that Row would hurt her, she couldn't stop the instinctive anxiety that spiked through her. Trying to force the feelings away, she unlocked the door with the remote and Row set her on the passenger seat. He climbed in behind the wheel and started the engine.

"My place isn't too far," she said, suddenly feeling awkward.

Row put his foot on the brake and shifted into gear. "I'm sorry that I have a responsibility to my sister."

"What? Why would you be sorry about that?"

“Because I should be focused on you, but I’m worried about Dani.”

“Adam’s a good guy.”

“She’s still my sister.”

“I’m an only child, so I don’t know what it’s like to feel responsible for another person, but I’m not worried about Dani and Adam, and you shouldn’t be either.”

He said nothing as she gave him directions to her place. Her nerves kicked up as he parked in front of her small home. Kammie had lived there for seven years, ever since she turned eighteen and was ready to move out on her own.

She felt as if she’d been on her own for far longer than just a few years, though. Her mom died when she was twelve. She’d hardly had time to grieve the loss when her dad took her to his brother’s home and never came back. She’d had a good life up until that point—loving parents, happy childhood—and then the rug had been yanked out from under her. Her uncle looked at her as nothing more than a burden. He was an omega, and unhappy with his place in the pack. He couldn’t be a ranked male because he was nearsighted, even in his shift. He harbored a lot of bitterness over his position, and when she was forced on him by the alpha, his resentment deepened.

She could remember with crystal clarity the first time he struck her. She’d only been with him a few days, and she’d gone to school without food again, because he wouldn’t let her pack a lunch for herself. The school had called him and ordered him to either provide food for her or money for the school’s hot lunch, or else they would notify the authorities. The minute she walked in the door, he grabbed her by the front of her jacket and smashed her into the wall. She had been overwhelmed by the pain as he slammed her again and then let her fall to the floor. He kicked her in the stomach and snarled, “If you ever tell on me again, I’ll kill you. You’re nothing to me. I don’t want you here, but the alpha says I have to take you. My worthless brother didn’t want me in his life, but I get stuck with you because my brother decided he wants to start a new life somewhere else.”

Tears had blinded her. She wanted to run away, but she didn't know where to go. She was afraid he would kill her if she told another adult; and the murderous glare in his eyes left her no doubt he would follow through on his threat. She learned to hide the bruises and walk tall, even though her body ached from the beatings. When he was feeling particularly vicious, he'd use a belt on her. The scars that had failed to heal over the years were from those wounds, scars that she sometimes felt went bone-deep.

Two years passed before someone finally noticed what was happening to her. She was taken from him and given to a widowed she-wolf to raise, while her uncle was kicked out of town and warned to never return. The female was kind to her, and after a few weeks of nightmares, she took Kammie to see a human shrink for help. That had helped a great deal, but the pack frowned on involving outsiders, so Kammie didn't talk to anyone about her twice-weekly sessions. She didn't have nightmares anymore, but there were times—like now—when she was faced with an agitated male who made her brain spin back in time to her uncle growling, furious over some slight within the pack that he felt was in some way her fault.

She shook herself out of her dark thoughts of the past. She knew that her uncle was gone and would never return to Wilde Creek. She didn't have to be afraid of Row, because despite his size, he looked at her like she was the most important thing in his life. As if he couldn't breathe unless they were touching. She'd never felt entirely safe with a male before, but she did feel safe with Row. Not that she'd admit it out loud to the gruff, stubborn bear.

She got out of the truck and walked up the short sidewalk to the front door. Standing on her tiptoes, she reached up, running her fingertips along the top of the door where she hid a key for emergencies. Her regular keys were, unfortunately, in the pocket of her jeans, which were in the woods where she'd left them when she shifted.

She unlocked her door, stepped inside, and held it open for Row. She shut and locked it behind them, and then gasped as

he pushed her against it. His hands flattened against the door as he eased toward her, his gaze zeroing in on her mouth.

Her breath halted in her chest, and her heart began to pound. “Take off the shirt,” he said roughly.

She swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry. “I, um, what?”

“You smell of another male, and it’s making my bear angry. Unless you’d like me to go back to his home and kill him...take off the shirt.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line as her heart pounded. She couldn’t smell Adam; all she could smell was Row’s bear. He had a deep, woody scent that made her think about dark caves in the winter.

Her wolf wanted her to strip and wriggle against Row until every inch of her skin was saturated with his scent. It was an effort not to do what he demanded.

She decided to try being blunt. “I know you may feel like we’re mates, but I’m not looking for a mate.”

“You might not have been, but you’ve got one.” The muscles in his arms flexed, and a deeper scent filled the air between them. Her body flooded with heat, and it took all of her willpower not to free herself from the shirt.

“I’ll go take a shower. Then I won’t smell like anyone but me.”

His eyes were a deep brown that bordered on black. He stared at her as if he could divine all of her innermost thoughts if he looked at her long enough, and maybe he could. She didn’t really want to find out.

“Shower sounds fun,” he drawled.

While her wolf went *woo-hoo*, she put her hands firmly on his chest and pushed. He moved away, but she knew he did it because he chose to, not because she was that strong. If he’d wanted to stay, she would’ve had more luck pushing a brick wall. “Here’s what’s going to happen, Row. I’m going to take

a shower and go to bed. You're going to camp out on the couch. We'll talk tomorrow."

"About being mates?" His brow arched.

"You're stubborn."

"I'm not the one who won't take a shower with her mate."

"You're a stranger. A complete and utter stranger."

He snarled and placed one of his hands on her chest, over her heart. The heat of his hand scorched her. "I'm not a stranger, Kammie. Not here. Your wolf knows what I am; why aren't you listening?"

She could've done a hundred different things. Leaned into him. Hugged him. Dropped to her knees to investigate the rigid length that tented his sweatpants. Instead, she pushed his hand away. "You. Couch."

He sighed, but eased away from her. She rushed away like her ass was on fire and disappeared into her bedroom. It took only a moment to grab a spare blanket and pillow and carry them out to the living room. Row stood at the front window, staring out. She took a moment to drool over how sexy he was. He was possibly the most gorgeous guy she'd ever met. That he was in her house, wanting to do naughty things with her, was quite an ego boost, but she'd never allow herself to get so caught up in her wild emotions that she forgot what she looked like under her clothes.

"There's...food, in the fridge. Can I make you something to eat?"

He turned slowly until he faced her. His whole body was drawn tight, his muscles flexed as if it took a great effort for him to stand still. "No thank you, *Adara*."

"What does that mean?"

"It's my people's term for mate. Females are '*adara*,' males are '*adaro*'."

She'd never had a nickname before—not a nice one, anyway. She'd spent a lot of time being called names that weren't nice at all when she was growing up. Even now there

were females who called her *freak* under their breath when she was around. Row's nickname for her made her stomach flip.

Slipping from the room as quickly as possible, Kammie gathered clothes to sleep in and locked herself in the bathroom. She dropped Adam's shirt in the clothes hamper and turned on the shower, rolling her neck and exhaling. She was tempted to go out to Row, but caught sight of herself in the mirror and shoved those thoughts promptly away. Row was far too sexy to want to be shackled to her side forever. He might be noble in the darkness, but the light of day would change things.

Turning back to the shower, she stepped under the spray and forced herself to think about anything except the sexy bear in her living room.

It wasn't easy.

CHAPTER THREE

*R*ow's whole body ached, and his bear was slamming around in his skull, anxious to get to the she-wolf who was, for some strange reason, denying him the pleasure of her naked company. He'd never been one for self-denial, and leaving Kammie alone was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

He wanted to be an honorable male for Kammie, and if she wanted to keep him at arms' length...well, he'd let her, for now. He wasn't sure why she pushed him away, but he suspected it had something to do with her scars. Perhaps she thought he'd find them repulsive. He'd have to find a way to show her that he didn't care about them. Well, he cared because she'd been hurt, and he wanted to violently destroy whoever had caused them. The scars he'd felt on her back had been old, but that didn't mean he was any less angry about them. But for her to believe that he actually cared about her scars—that he might be disgusted by them—cut him deeply.

His dick had gone hard the moment he'd realized who she was in the woods; he was having a hard time lying on the couch instead of breaking the bathroom door down and finding out what she looked like wet and covered in suds. Ten minutes later, the shower turned off and the door opened. He was aware that she stood in the hallway for a long while, but she never said anything or came into the living room. He wished she would. He wished she'd let go of her insecurities and trust him, but he knew that wasn't going to happen overnight.

She left the hallway and he heard the click of a lock, presumably to her bedroom door. As if a flimsy lock could hold him or his bear back. Didn't she realize that it was only because he didn't want to scare her that he was keeping his butt firmly on the couch?

Exhaling loudly, he ordered his bear to shut up, and closed his eyes. It was going to be a long, *long* night.

Racing through the woods, Row bellowed for Kammie, desperate to find her in the darkness. He couldn't see past his nose, but he could smell her and feel her fear as if it were part of him. He bellowed again, warning whoever had her that he would not rest until she was safely in his arms.

Something warm touched his shoulder, and a soft voice breached the fevered madness that surrounded him. He gasped as his eyes opened. He felt Kammie near him and grabbed her, covering her body with his to protect her.

"Row!" She tugged on his ear sharply and he blinked, the woods fading as he stared down at her, underneath him on the couch.

He panted for breath, his gaze darting around as the realization that he *wasn't* trying to find Kammie in the woods filled him. She was looking up at him in shock and confusion.

"I dreamed someone had taken you."

Her mouth fell open. She stopped gripping his ear firmly and rubbed the lobe with her thumb and forefinger. "You did?"

Cracking his neck, he dropped his head to her neck and inhaled her sweet scent. He nodded and kissed her throat, feeling her pulse pounding beneath his lips. "I'm sorry if I scared you."

Her hands rested on his shoulders tentatively. "It's okay. I heard you growling, and when I came out here you were thrashing around. I thought you were having a nightmare."

“I was. The thought of you being taken from me is the very definition of a nightmare.”

She sighed deeply. “Oh, Row. You can’t keep saying things like that.”

He lifted from her throat and stared down at her, tracing the line of her jaw with his fingertip. Her skin was smooth and soft. He followed her jaw to her ear, and then smoothed his finger over her cheek before lightly rubbing the swell of her lower lip. It was dark in the room, but his enhanced eyesight allowed him to see her in spite of the lack of light. She was so beautiful.

“Let me see you, Kammie,” he whispered.

“No.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I never show anyone.”

“Then I’ll be the first and the last.”

He kissed her gently, and after a brief moment she melted against him. Her hands tightened on his shoulders as he pushed his tongue into her mouth and her sweet taste filled him. He slid his arms under her and pulled her close, sliding his tongue against hers as she finally began to kiss him back. Passion flared through him, and he groaned as she pressed her hips against his.

He lifted from her mouth and kissed across her cheek, tugging on her earlobe lightly with his teeth. She shivered and dug her fingernails into his shoulders. He kissed down her neck, licking and nibbling her skin. Tugging the collar of her top aside, he pressed his lips to her shoulder, rubbing his teeth against her flesh.

He slid one hand from behind her back to her waist and tugged upward on her top. She stiffened immediately, her welcoming arms turning rigid as she pushed frantically at him. “No, Row, please don’t.”

He snarled and pushed off the couch, his bear clamoring inside him to rip her clothes off and stop her from putting any

barriers between them. He stormed to the wall and slapped the light switch, turning the overhead light on. "Look at me," he demanded.

Kammie sat up, blinking rapidly and shielding her eyes from the bright light. She was wearing a long-sleeved top and lounge pants, completely covered from her neck down. "What?"

He turned slowly and showed her his back. She gasped softly. Part of him wanted to turn around and comfort her, but he knew she needed to see his scars. He never looked at his own back, but he knew the scars intimately, because of the pain that they'd brought; the thick scar that cut across his back from shoulder to hip, the claw marks where a male had tried to pull his ribs out, and would've succeeded if Row hadn't broken those claws off. There were other, smaller scars, born of less life-endangering fights, but they were there. A map of his successes in battles and his defeats. Times when he'd nearly died, and times he'd been victorious.

"I said your scars don't matter, and they don't." He turned his head to look behind him. "Unless mine bother you. Would you have me wear a shirt for the rest of our lives together?"

"Row." She whispered his name like it was the most significant word in the world. "What happened to you?"

He turned slowly. Her gaze roamed his chest and he touched his most recent scar there. "We call them battles. The kings of neighboring sleuths organize them and pit their best warriors against each other."

"Sleuth' is what you call your bear group?"

He nodded. "Bears' claws cause a lot of damage, and our natural ability to heal is very slow. It's why I scar instead of healing completely."

She swallowed audibly. "I didn't know that it was different for bears than wolves."

"Wolves seem to have gotten the luck of the genetic draw when it comes to healing."

Her hands clenched, gripping the fabric of her pink pants. He realized what he'd said and shook his head, mentally kicking himself. "I'm sorry, that was a fucking stupid thing to say."

"No, it's okay." She seemed to force herself to relax. He wanted to ask her about her scars. He'd been thinking about getting her naked since she'd put on that male's shirt, but now he was focused on seeing her scars and then killing whoever had hurt her.

He walked to her slowly, gauging her reaction to ensure he didn't scare her. She was tense, but she didn't smell of fear. He dropped to his knees in front of her and laid his hands over hers. They were smaller than his, and her skin was so much softer. The sweet, natural scent of her wrapped around him, and he stifled a groan at how amazing it was.

He looked down and picked out a scar on her forearm. It was narrow but long, stretching across her elbow. He bent and ran his lips across the old wound, wishing he could take the pain from her. He knew the scar had long since stopped hurting, but the emotional hurt still lingered for his mate. She didn't like getting naked because of her scars, so he'd have to prove that he didn't care about them.

She inhaled shakily, and her heart rate spiked. He glanced up at her as he kissed the point of the scar. She was fragile right now, he could see that. If he pushed her, she might start shoving those walls between them.

"Would you lay with me, Kammie? I think I had a nightmare because you weren't with me. I promise nothing will happen between us, but I need you."

Her eyes glistened suddenly. "You do?"

He cupped her cheek. "Yes."

She stood slowly and squeezed his hands. He straightened, towering over her by almost a foot. Time stood still while he waited for her to make the first move. She stared up at him for what felt like an eternity. He opened his mouth to tell her that they could stay on the couch if she'd be more comfortable, but

she turned and walked toward her room, keeping their hands joined. He followed—hell, he'd follow her anywhere—and when he crossed the threshold into her bedroom, his bear did cartwheels in his head.

She climbed onto the bed, and he joined her, stretching out on his back and keeping himself very still. He wanted to grab her and hold her tight; it was an act of sheer will to keep from doing so.

She knelt next to him and shivered. “You’re my first.” His brows rose and she snorted out a laugh. “I don’t mean my first-first, I mean the first male to ever be in my bedroom.” She wrung her hands. “I just wanted you to know that. I’m not...comfortable sleeping with males.”

“I won’t touch you unless you want me to.”

“That’s the problem.”

“What is?”

“I *do* want you to touch me, but I’m scared.”

He stroked the top of her hand with his index finger and she seemed to relax slightly. “Just lay next to me, sweetheart. Let’s leave the rest for the morning.”

Stiffly, she followed his request, laying on her side and staring at him. Her lower lip was swollen from where she kept biting it. Her eyes were wide, and her body was stiff. He could hear her heart beating quickly. He doubted she’d ever fall asleep in her current state.

“Would it help if I turned over?” he offered.

She smiled. “You’re very accommodating, considering that about two hours ago you had me pinned to a tree.”

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Worry flashed through him. He’d been running on instinct, but that was no excuse. “I’m sorry I was rough.”

She put her hand on his shoulder, right near an old scar, her thumb barely grazing the ridge of it. Her gaze strayed to the mark and she shook her head slightly. “I’m fine, really.” Inhaling deeply, Kammie closed her eyes and lay her head on

the pillow. She didn't move her hand from his shoulder. "Good night, Row."

He was humbled to the very center of his being. For a female who'd been mistreated to the extent she had been to allow a male she didn't know to share her bed—she was far more courageous than she believed herself to be.

He knew he wouldn't really sleep. His bear was too consumed with the need to keep her safe. Closing his eyes, he inhaled her sweet scent and let himself drift off into a light sleep, his bear ready to do anything to protect their mate.

Row woke feeling refreshed despite having slept lightly. Kammie's house was quiet, but his bear had taken every tiny noise to mean something dangerous—from the heater kicking on periodically to the rumble of cars on the street—and as a result he kept startling awake. Not that he minded; he'd take a million sleepless nights if it meant sleeping next to Kammie. Her warm hand on his shoulder had meant more to him than all the meaningless sex he'd had over the years.

He wanted to make breakfast for Kammie, but he had zero ability in the kitchen. He stared at the carton of eggs in her fridge and knew if he attempted to cook them, he'd make a total mess of it. Pulling open one of the drawers, Rowe found a plastic bag of leftover pizza slices and decided they were his best option.

He arranged the slices on a plate, put them in the microwave to heat, and then popped a pod in the coffee maker. The pizza was hot by the time he brewed a second cup for himself, and he opened several of the cabinets before finding a tray that would hold everything.

He walked into the bedroom as Kammie rolled over with a yawn. "Morning, *Adara*," he said.

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Good morning."

He set the tray down on the bed and sat next to it. He looked over the contents, embarrassed that he didn't have more skill in the kitchen. A male of worth should be able to provide a better meal for his mate.

He looked at her and saw her eyes were shining with tears. "You made me breakfast?"

"It's not much, I know," he said, grimacing.

"Oh no, it's amazing. It's the...sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me."

A tear slid down her cheek and he brushed it away. "Really?"

She sniffled. "Yeah. I'm the one who works for everyone else; I'm an omega. A really low omega."

"I don't know what that means. What's an omega?"

She fixed her coffee with one spoon of sugar and enough milk to turn it a pale beige. "Omegas are the lowest pack members. We're not ranked, but some omegas are given more responsibility than others or are treated better. All females are omegas, except for the alpha female."

"Female bears aren't ranked. They're either mated or unmated, and the unmated females usually live with their families. I guess the females are like the omegas in your pack, but everyone just pitches in for whatever needs done. The king is the boss and the sleuth does what he says. There's no fighting for rank. Do your males fight?"

She nodded and took a sip of her coffee. "On the full moons, when the alpha allows it. I do a lot of work for the alpha and his mate. I cook and clean for them, and there are other females who expect me to work. I should be at work right now, actually." Her voice trailed off and she looked away with a frown.

Row reached over the tray and cupped her chin. She turned her head. "What is it, Kammie?"

"I'm just not very important. Not at all, actually. If I didn't have cooking skills I'd be entirely invisible." She pushed his

hand away. “It’s why you won’t want to stick around.”

He snarled. “I don’t care what wolves think. In case you didn’t catch me in the fur yesterday, I’m not a wolf.”

“I know you’re not a wolf. But you’re still a guy.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that I know what will happen if you ever really see me.”

He stood up, anger flashing through him at her low opinion of herself, and of him. Gesturing to his upper body, he said, “Do you think I’m so shallow that I would expect you to have flawless skin? I. Don’t. Care.”

The coffee mug trembled in her hand and she put it down on the tray. “It’s different for males. A mate with battle scars would be valued for his ferocity. I was beaten by my uncle when I was twelve. My scars make me weak.”

A low growl escaped his parted lips, and he shoved his borrowed sweats to the floor. Kammie gasped as he fisted his dick and slapped his other hand against his thigh. A thick scar traveled from the inside of his thigh to his hip. “A king brought a secret weapon to a battle two months ago. The male was part lion. Even though full shifting is outlawed during the battles, his king decided it would make for a good fight if we were allowed to shift. My king and I weren’t told. The male shifted and tried to claw my dick off. So tell me, Kammie,” he said harshly, “could you wrap those lush lips of yours around me and not feel pity for me? You think I look at you and all I see are scars? Look at me. I’m nothing *but* scars. They brought me here to you and I’m not going anywhere. If you’re an omega, then I’ll be one with you.”

He’d never been more serious in his life. And his dick had never been so hard. It felt like steel in his hand, and in spite of the unpleasant nature of their conversation, he couldn’t stop from stroking himself root to tip while her beautiful brown eyes followed the motion.

She slid off the bed, her knees hitting the carpeting as she reached for him. He knew he should step away, but he couldn’t

bring himself to do it. Her fingers touched the scar, and his dick twitched.

“Did you kill him?” she whispered, her breath brushing over his dick like a caress.

“I wasn’t allowed to. But he never used his claws like that again. I pulled them out after I choked him unconscious, and claws never grow back in half-breeds. He came after me at the last battle, wanted a chance to beat me and get his pride back or some bullshit. My king sent him running from town with his tail between his legs.”

She leaned forward to kiss the edge of the scar by his hip, and everything inside him rioted. “Kammie, you don’t have to touch me,” he said, his bear bellowing for him to shut up.

She nuzzled the scar. “I can’t help it. You smell so good.”

Her fingers were trembling when she touched his thighs, but they tightened suddenly as she licked the length of his scar and then nipped at the hand covering his dick. She cast her eyes upward and met his gaze. He released his dick slowly, not daring to breathe.

She licked him, softly and slowly at first until she reached the tip, then swirling her tongue around the head and sucking lightly. One hand left his thigh and wrapped around his length, and the other stroked his scar. He hadn’t thought that the scar was an erogenous zone, but as Kammie worked her way down his dick and explored the thickened skin, he felt like her fingers were stroking every part of him.

Locking his knees, he threaded his fingers through her soft hair and watched her bob her head up and down. Her eyes never left him, their brown depths simmering with a passion that he wouldn’t have expected given the conversation they’d had moments ago. He wished she was naked, so he could see every inch of her creamy skin. He’d kiss her scars just like she’d kissed his. The way her fingers worked across it on his thigh, he knew he’d never think of it in a bad way again.

She hummed around him, making a sound like a wolfy purr. He groaned, and his fingers tightened in her hair as his

hips flexed. Her mouth was a hot heaven, her tongue doing wicked things to the sensitive underside of his cock.

“Fuck, Kammie,” he groaned.

Her nails scraped lightly around the scar. His whole body jerked as her hand tightened on the base of his dick and she sucked him deep. Heat blazed through him as his balls tightened and his climax tingled at the base of his spine.

“Kammie, baby,” he whispered harshly in warning.

She moaned and sucked him harder. As he stared into her eyes, he saw them shift, a rapid blink from brown to amber, and he knew her wolf was right there with her and approving of their connection. His climax thundered down on him, and he let go, growling loudly as she drank him down.

She released his dick and kissed his scar tenderly. She looked up from where she knelt in front of him, her lips swollen and her cheeks flushed with passion. “You are so beautiful,” he said hoarsely, massaging her scalp. Truthfully, he’d never seen anyone as gorgeous as her.

She closed her eyes with a soft hum, and his dick twitched. He dropped to his knees, scenting her arousal. Leaning toward her, he pressed his lips to hers, caging her against the side of the bed with his hands on either side of her. She opened her mouth, sucking on his tongue with the same fervor as she had his dick. Her hands roamed up his arms, curving around his muscles as if she was trying to memorize them. She hooked her hands over his shoulders and flexed her hips, her knees spreading slightly between his.

He dropped one of his hands slowly from the bed and cupped her pussy through her thin pants. He could feel how hot and wet she was, even though the barrier of clothing. Rubbing her firmly, he nibbled on her lips.

“I want to make you come.” He growled the words, his bear rolling inside him to get closer.

Her hands tightened on his shoulders. “Row,” she moaned as he rubbed circles over her clit.

He moved his hand slowly up the front of her pants, and she tensed, looking at him through half-closed eyelids. He wanted to strip her in the worst way. Taste her. Make her come a hundred times. He knew she wasn't ready for that, but he *had* to get her off. Straightening slightly, he leaned over her, pressing his lips to hers as he pushed his hand inside her pants. His fingers found the edge of her panties and he slid them under the waistband. She relaxed fractionally, as if she had been worried he was going to do more than touch her pussy. She was slick with arousal. He touched her clit for a brief moment, circling the tight bud before sliding his finger down and testing her heat.

She moaned as he pushed inside her with first one, and then two fingers. His free hand fisted the covers as she leaned harder against the bed and pulled him closer. He curved his fingers, stroking her, and she shuddered and pulled free from his mouth, her breath gusting over his skin.

Her hips canted and he growled, nuzzling her throat. "Ride my fingers, baby," he said.

Her hands gripped his shoulders and her head fell back against the bed as she moved, fucking his fingers. Her honey gushed over his hand as he found the spot that made her scent deepen. He latched his thumb onto her clit, circling it, lifting his head and watching her as she spiraled toward pleasure. Her eyes opened, bright amber again. Her fangs slid down from her gums and she growled, her pussy clenching his fingers. He thumbed her clit faster and stroked her deeper.

An instinct flashed through him and he bared his throat to her. Her pussy clenched and she snarled softly, whispering *mine* as her fangs embedded in his skin. She came, moaning against his neck as her fangs dug deeper into his flesh. He gentled her with soft, slow strokes and she pulled her mouth away, her tongue softly licking the wounds.

He slipped his hand from inside her pants and wrapped his arms around her. She clung to him, buried her face in his neck, and started to cry. Carefully he pulled her onto his lap as he switched places with her, leaning against the bed and cradling her close. Something cold touched his back, and he realized

the coffee had spilled. He made a mental note to deal with it later.

Unsure what to say, he simply held her, stroking her back through her thin top and feathering kisses wherever he could reach. Her fingers tangled in his hair and she took in a deep, shuddering breath.

“You didn’t push me.” Her voice was soft and raw, and so filled with awe that it broke his heart.

“You’re mine to cherish and protect. If you want to keep your clothes on for now, it’s your choice to make.” He tipped her chin until she looked at him. “You set the pace, Kammie. Just please don’t shut me out completely.”

She blinked, and tears spilled over her cheeks. He brushed them away with his thumb. “What if I never get over my fears?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Her gaze trailed down to his neck. The wound throbbed, but it was already healing. It wasn’t as if he cared about the pain; he’d take her fangs in his flesh any day.

“Do bears mark?” she asked.

“Not like wolves.”

“Then how did you know what I needed when I wasn’t even sure myself?” She met his gaze.

“Instinct, I guess.”

“What do bears do?”

“The couple go to a sacred den, carved into a hillside. It’s been used for generations. They anoint each other with oil, and they each use one claw to mark the other’s upper arm. It’s a crescent shape, which harkens back to bears’ attachment to the crescent moon.” He stroked the spot on her arm, thinking about how he wouldn’t want to mar her skin further. But he also knew that if he didn’t, she might wonder how serious he was about her. He kissed her gently. “Then they make love on a pile of old furs and keep each other warm all night. In the morning, the sleuth celebrates with a big breakfast.”

A tiny smile curved the corner of her mouth. “That’s cool. I like old traditions.”

“Aside from the biting thing, what do wolves do?”

“When mates come together, at the next full moon the alphas introduce them as a mated pair and recognize their mating, and then everyone hunts.”

He liked the simplicity of it. Kammie’s pack was here, and wolves were social with their own kind. After he made sure that his sister was taken care of, he could take Kammie to meet his mom, mate her in the sacred den, and then come back to Wilde Creek to live. He didn’t care if he had to work by her side for the rest of their lives. It would be a nice change of pace from beating people for sport.

Her stomach growled. “I guess we got distracted from breakfast,” he said.

She blushed, but smiled sweetly. “I can honestly say I’ve never had pizza for breakfast.”

“It’s the breakfast of champions, baby,” he promised as they stood.

“Oh no,” Kammie said. Row turned to see that both cups of coffee had spilled, coating the tray, plate, and bedspread with dark liquid.

She moved to lift the tray and he stopped her, pulling her gently away. “I’ll clean this up.”

“Row,” she protested, but he shook his head.

“I want you to go out to the living room and relax on the couch.”

“Really?” Her brow arched.

He nodded. “Go on, baby.”

She stared at him intently for a long moment and then walked out of the room. He righted the coffee mugs on the tray and lifted it, carrying it into the kitchen. Glancing into the living room, he saw Kammie sitting on the couch like he’d asked and he couldn’t help but grin. Returning to the bedroom,

he carefully stripped the bed. The coffee had soaked through the comforter and a blanket underneath, but the sheets were fine, so he left them.

“Okay,” he said as he walked into the living room, “I do need your help to tell me where the laundry room is.”

“I can do the laundry later.”

“I caused the mess by being too caught up in your addictive scent to move the tray from the bed.”

Her head tilted slightly as she regarded him. “You probably thought I wouldn’t want to keep going if you stopped to move the tray.”

He grinned. “Which is why I’m cleaning up.”

“It’s the door off the kitchen.”

He smiled and turned away, finding the laundry closet. He was definitely not in the habit of doing household chores, but he could do laundry, and he’d learn everything else for Kammie. When the comforter and blanket were churning in soapy water, he closed the closet doors and walked into the kitchen.

He brewed two more cups of coffee and carried the milk and sugar out to the living room. Sitting next to her, he kissed her temple and said, “I don’t want you to cook breakfast for me, but you’re out of pizza.”

She grinned broadly. “I don’t mind.”

“You said you work for others in the pack; you shouldn’t have to do that with me.”

“It’s different.”

“How?”

“You know.” Her nose wrinkled and he kissed it.

“No, I don’t. Tell me.”

“Because...” she bit her lip and her gaze darted over his shoulder.

Cupping her face, he drew her attention back to him. “Tell me, Kammie.”

“Because we’re mates.”

He swore his bear just did a cartwheel in his head. “You didn’t want to admit it last night.”

She nuzzled his palm. “I know. I’m not really sure what will happen, but I can’t deny who you are to me. My wolf won’t let me. Last night was the most peaceful sleep I’ve ever had, and I know it was because of you.”

“And then there was earlier, on the floor,” he said softly.

Her cheeks flamed. “That was nice, too.”

“More than nice.”

“Awesome.”

“It was for me, too.”

“Let me make you breakfast. Not because I have to, but because I want to.”

“Only if I can help.”

She nodded and they stood, moving to the kitchen together. For the next twenty minutes, Kammie gave Row a mini-lesson on breakfast and they were soon eating scrambled eggs, toast, and sausage. It was possibly the best breakfast he’d ever had, and it was simply because Kammie had made it for him.

As the morning passed they talked about everything, but the heat that still simmered between them. She wouldn’t say anything more about the uncle who’d given her the scars, but Row knew that in time she’d trust him enough to share her whole life with him. He held nothing back from her, and she took everything in stride. He’d wondered if she’d be disgusted by the fighting he’d been part of for so long, but she seemed to understand that he really didn’t have a choice in the matter. He might be the only bear in the wolf pack, but as long as he had Kammie, he didn’t much care about that or anything else. Her happiness and safety were paramount to him now. Nothing else mattered but her.

CHAPTER FOUR

After lunch, Kammie and Row drove to get Row's truck. They both got out and met in front of Adam's truck.

"I'll follow you to Adam's house," Row said.

"Right, and then we can get my clothes and you can drive me to my car."

"Do you need to check in with your alphas?"

He folded his arms across his massive chest and her gaze followed the line of his bicep down to his pec. She couldn't really help herself. He had a fantastic chest. And abs.

Row groaned. "Baby, I appreciate that you like my chest—no shit, my bear is preening like a damn peacock—but unless you want to get naked, eyes up here." He pointed to his face and Kammie laughed.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he grabbed her and pulled her close. "Don't ever be sorry."

"What were we talking about?"

"Getting naked."

Rolling her eyes, she said, "The alphas. Yes, I need to check in. You're new to town and Acksel would be pissed if I didn't tell him you were here."

He tilted her face and kissed her. "I'm going to grab some clothes and then we can go."

She sat in Adam's truck and waited for Row to get his duffel and climb into the cab of his own truck. It took him only a few minutes to change, and then he pulled onto the street and waited for her. She drove past him and led him to Adam's. She hoped it was late enough in the day for Adam and Dani to be up and dressed. She didn't think that Row would much care to see his sister and her mate together.

When she parked on the street in front of Adam's house, Row parked behind her. She offered to carry one of Dani's bags, but he wouldn't let her, and she didn't hide how much she liked that. There were males in the pack who didn't give a damn that she was female; they would've told her to handle bringing the bags in and left her alone, but not Row. Maybe because they were mates, or maybe because he was honorable—she didn't know but she sure as hell liked it. In fact, she liked everything about him.

"You're gorgeous when you smile, baby," he said as Kammie knocked on the front door.

She peeked at him, blush heating her cheeks. Her wolf was reveling in his attention, the silly creature fighting Kammie to bare herself to him so they could get to the sexy mating part. Although she was still saying no to the idea of being naked in front of her mate, she wasn't protesting as strongly now. Skin-to-skin contact had always freaked her out, but she could admit that after spending the morning with him she wasn't as worried by the thought as she usually was.

Adam, bleary-eyed and wearing only jeans, opened the door and squinted in the sunlight. Row made a face, which Kammie thought was adorable.

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

Kammie followed Row into Adam's house. Adam shut the door and led Row back to the master bedroom to drop off the luggage. Row came back alone, the bedroom door shutting loudly.

He crowded against Kammie, wrapping his arms around her and dropping his face to her neck. She hugged him,

inhaling his sweet, dark scent. She couldn't remember the last time she'd voluntarily hugged a male, but ever since Row had rocked her world that morning, she'd found it easier to touch him and to let him touch her. She still wasn't sure she could take *all* her clothes off, but when his hands were on her, she forgot about her scars.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

"I don't like being away from you."

She totally thought that was awesome. Before she could answer, Adam and Dani came out of the bedroom. Row straightened, but didn't let go of Kammie.

"Thanks for bringing my clothes, Row," Dani said.

Row tossed the truck keys to Adam, who placed them on the coffee table. "Have a seat. Are you guys hungry or thirsty?"

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

"Oh, okay," Dani said as she plopped on the couch with Adam and snuggled close to him. "Adam talked to Acksel this morning, but told him we wouldn't be leaving the house anytime soon. I guess I'll meet him later."

The heat that filled Adam's eyes was enough to make Kammie blush, and she looked up at her mate and watched him grimace. Row cleared his throat with what sounded suspiciously like a growl. "Kammie and I haven't discussed everything yet, but I'm planning to take her home so we can mate officially."

Kammie looked at Row in shock. She was surprised to hear him say he was planning to take her home, but she tabled her thoughts and concentrated on the situation at hand.

"How weird is it that we both found our mates?" Dani smiled, looking at Adam.

Even Kammie could see the arousal simmering between Dani and Adam, and she suddenly wished she was anywhere

but in Adam's house. "Anyway," Kammie said, "we'll leave you guys alone."

Row nodded. "You need to call Mom."

"I will."

"Are you going to go meet your people?"

Dani's syrupy, lovey-dovey smile made Kammie uncomfortable. Why was it so easy for some people to love others? Adam didn't seem to care about being half-naked in front of his mate. His body was scarred from a fire when he was younger and he'd always been one to cover up as much as Kammie. It unnerved her to see him so at-ease with Dani, and even Row and Kammie, when she was still struggling.

"I don't think so," Dani said. It seemed to take her some effort to look away from her mate. "Adam's my family now. I know that Fayar would probably let us use the sacred cave, but I'd rather follow the pack's traditions for mating since we're going to be staying here."

"Kammie and I will leave in a few days."

"Be sure to call before you come over next time," Adam said.

Row growled in annoyance but said nothing. Dani stood quickly and came to them, hugging Row and then Kammie, enveloping them in the same peppermint smell Kammie had noticed in the woods. She found it odd, and kind of hilarious, that reindeer shifters smelled like peppermint. "Let me know when you're heading home. I want to say goodbye."

Row kissed Dani on the cheek and gathered Kammie close, ushering her out the door and into his truck. Within minutes, they were parked in front of the alphas' home. A male stood on the front porch, and Kammie knew that there were other guards patrolling the home as well.

Row turned off the engine and leaned forward to look past Kammie. "Why are there males around your alphas' home?"

"They're protectors. They're led by Sam, the theto of the pack. They patrol town, like a wolf police force, and also the

alphas' home.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Row said. He was agitated, but she didn’t know why. Once more she found herself tensing when he was upset, but she reminded herself that Row wouldn’t hurt her. He wasn’t like her uncle.

“Can I ask you about us going back to your home?”

He grinned sheepishly. “I guess I should’ve mentioned that before I blurted it out to my sister, huh?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m sorry. My bear wants to claim you, and that’s done in the sacred cave in my sleuth’s territory. We don’t have to go tomorrow, but I would like to take you home so you can meet my mom, too.” He brushed her hair behind her ear and it made her shiver. “I know your home is here, Kammie, and where you are is where I want to be.”

“The claiming is done in the cave, and it’s important to your beast. I understand. It’s okay with me as long as we can wait a few days?”

“Of course. There’s no rush.” He kissed her cheek. Then he got out and opened her door, giving her his hand so she didn’t slip on the icy sidewalk. When they got to the porch steps, Kammie looked up at Zander and said, “Zander, this is Row. We’d like to speak to Acksel and Brynn.”

Zander looked down at them, and Kammie could practically see the wheels turning in his mind as his gaze pinged between her and the huge male next to her. Row growled softly and edged closer to Kammie, wrapping his arms around her.

With a shrug Zander seemed to dismiss them, and turned to knock on the front door. Row seemed confused, but Kammie knew the truth of Zander’s dismissal. She wasn’t important enough in the pack for Zander to care about a strange male who had his hands on her. If she were one of the sought-after females, like Brynn’s best friend, Mia, he’d probably be tripping all over himself making sure that she was okay. Embarrassment flashed through her. It was easy for her

to forget her place in the pack when it was just her and Row, but the truth was that she was very, very low-ranked and that meant that she only mattered in a roundabout way to the higher-ranked males. Unless ordered by the alphas, no one would check on her.

Row looked at her and bared his teeth in fury, his canines elongated as a light dusting of dark fur emerged from his skin. The door swung open just as Row leaped up the steps, grabbed Zander by the collar, and threw him off the porch. He hit the ground with a loud thud, the snow fluffing up around him.

“Don’t ever dismiss my mate,” Row bellowed. His fingers were tipped with thick, dark claws, and he wrapped his hands around the porch railing and leaped over it. Grabbing Kammie, he pulled her behind his back and glared at Acksel and Brynn, who stood shocked in the open doorway.

Zander stumbled to his feet as the other protectors raced around the house, claws extended and growls rumbling in their chests.

“What the ever-loving fuck is going on here?” Acksel demanded, shoving Brynn behind him.

Brynn slapped his shoulder and cradled her large belly with her other hand. “Don’t curse around the baby!”

Row’s chest heaved as he breathed, his rage making Kammie’s wolf anxious. She didn’t want anyone to be hurt, but she didn’t know how to defuse the situation. “Row, please.” She pressed her cheek against his back, feeling the heat of his skin through his shirt and jacket.

“No one acts as if you don’t matter,” he snarled, his body shaking with barely controlled anger. “You’re mine. Mine!”

Kammie peered around him at Acksel. Brynn, unlike her mate, was grinning broadly. “You found your mate? That’s so freaking awesome! Move, dang it,” she said as she pushed at Acksel.

“Woman,” Acksel ground out. “He’s a stranger.”

“Hell-o, he’s Kammie’s mate. And P.S., Zander is an asshole for baiting her mate anyway. I want him suspended

from duty here.”

Zander cursed under his breath, and Kammie winced. She hadn't meant to cause trouble. “Alphas, I'm sorry.”

Row growled, but she ignored him. “This is Row, and we came by to let you know he was here in town.”

Acksel finally let Brynn push him aside. “This is the brother of Adam's mate, correct?” he asked as he grabbed Brynn and stopped her from leaving the house.

Kammie nodded.

Acksel looked around the yard and said, “Go back to your duties. Zander, check in with Sam for reassignment. You can beg forgiveness from the alpha female in a few days. I'd recommend chocolate.”

“Oh, and those toaster pastries with the cream cheese in them. Yummy,” Brynn said.

Kammie watched as Zander turned stiffly and stormed away. She almost felt guilty for what had happened to him, but she decided that if Row was going to stand up for her, she could stand up for herself, too. Squaring her shoulders, she slipped to Row's side and moved his hand over her shoulder, holding it in place.

“I need to get my car and my things from the woods,” Kammie said. “I understand if you're busy; we can come back another time, or you could come visit at my place.”

“We're not busy. Come in, please.” Brynn tugged Acksel back into the house and Acksel groaned in aggravation.

“I thought you were tired.”

“I'm always tired. Little Mia likes to wiggle around when I'm trying to sleep.”

“We're not naming the baby Mia.”

“Says you,” Brynn said, wrinkling her nose at him as Kammie and Row walked into the house.

Acksel shut the front door. “I hope you don't think that I've forgotten you threw one of my males off the porch.”

Row wrapped his arms around Kammie. “He insulted Kammie.”

“How?” Brynn asked.

“He turned his back on her as if she didn’t warrant consideration.”

Acksel hummed and Brynn said, “See? I said he was being an asshole. If one of the protectors acted like I didn’t matter, you’d throw them off the porch, too. I freaking hate this hierarchy nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense, it’s our way of life and you have to get used to it,” Acksel reminded her.

Kammie and Row sat on the couch in the living room. Brynn sat on Acksel’s lap. Row had a strange look on his face, and Kammie made a mental note to ask him about it later.

Row explained to the alphas how he and his sister had wound up in Wilde Creek and how he and Kammie had found each other. While he spoke, Row kept his arm tightly around Kammie, holding her close to his side.

“Will your sister still go see her people?” Brynn asked.

Row shrugged. “She said she didn’t need to. As long as she’s safe and happy, whatever her choices are, my mother and I will be happy for her.”

Acksel cleared his throat. “And what will you and Kammie be doing?”

Row tensed ever so slightly. “When she’s ready, Kammie and I will be going back to my people so we can mate properly. It’s a two-day journey. After that, it’s her choice.”

Kammie’s wolf perked up. Her choice? What was?

Acksel said, “Our pack laws don’t allow non-wolves to join. My mate is unique because I’m alpha and I changed the specific laws regarding the alpha’s mate. However, the laws for the pack are the same as they’ve been for generations—only wolves are pack members.

“As Kammie’s mate, you can join the pack as an honorary member and hunt with her on the full moon, but you wouldn’t be allowed to fight for rank.”

Brynn frowned. “That’s dumb, Acksel. He’s clearly a well-trained fighter. Why wouldn’t you want him to become a protector?”

Acksel sighed in a way that sounded like a growl. “We have laws for a reason. I changed the laws to protect you, but I can’t change every single one.”

Brynn rolled her eyes so hard, Kammie was surprised they were still in her head and not bouncing across the floor.

Row interjected, “I will help Kammie, if this is the life she chooses.”

Acksel’s brows rose and his mouth opened and closed twice, before Kammie said, “Can we table this for another time? I don’t mean to be rude, but we just wanted to make sure you were aware that Row was in town.”

“And that we’re mates,” Row said.

Kammie blushed. “Right.”

“Fine. You’ll need to ensure that your duties are covered while you’re gone,” Acksel said.

Row stiffened once more and Acksel’s nostrils flared. Kammie stood swiftly and Row rose behind her. “I’ll make sure everything’s fine, Acksel. Thank you both. I need to get my things from the woods and get my mate home.”

Brynn stood and hugged Kammie tightly. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, Brynn.”

Kammie was happy, too. Row followed her out of the house and she led the way to the backyard and into the woods.

“Can I ask you something?” Kammie said.

Row’s hand squeezed hers as he walked beside her. “You can ask me anything.”

“You had a strange look on your face when Brynn and Acksel first sat down in the living room. Why?”

He hummed. “I’m not used to seeing someone in power be publicly affectionate. My king has a mate, but he’d hit the roof if she talked to him the way your alpha female talked to the alpha male.”

“That sucks. For wolves, the alpha female *has* to be strong-willed. Male wolves are pretty aggressive and most of them prefer their females to be able to handle that aggression, to be capable on their own. It’s strange to think of affection as being viewed as a weakness.”

“I don’t think it should be. I suppose from a bear’s point of view, if it’s widely believed that a king doesn’t care about his mate, then she couldn’t be used against him.”

In a way, Kammie could understand that. Brynn had been kidnapped before she and Acksel were mated, in an attempt to use her against him. Because of her uncle’s behavior, she knew all about someone with bad intentions using something wonderful against another.

“My uncle,” she said, her mouth suddenly going dry, “would watch me to see what I liked, and then he’d take it away.” It was why she tended to keep everyone at arm’s length. The thought that someone she cared for could be snatched from her had kept her from establishing more than superficial friendships.

Row stopped walking and drew her close. One arm wrapped around her, pulling her against him, and he cupped her face with his other hand. His eyes were dark with anger, and his fangs peeked over his lips. “What did he take from you?”

“Everything.” She blinked rapidly to stop her tears. She hadn’t cried over her uncle’s treatment of her since she was a teenager. “If he thought I liked a certain food, he’d throw it out. All the electronics were kept under lock and key, so I couldn’t listen to the radio or watch television. The worst was when he destroyed my mom’s things. I think that hurt more than his belt or his fists, in a way.”

Row's whole body vibrated as he growled. Fur sprouted on his cheeks and his eyes flashed dangerously. "Where is he?"

"The former alpha punished him and kicked him out of town. If he comes back to Wilde Creek, he'll be killed." Which was a small consolation considering he'd been allowed to beat her within an inch of her life for far too long. It wasn't until the second time he'd nearly killed her that the alpha finally stepped in.

She gripped Row's wrist, holding his hand to her cheek. "Pack members knew what he was doing, but they didn't step in until the second time I almost died. The human authorities threatened to come in and investigate, so the former alpha made my uncle disappear. I was raised by a widowed female named Maggie after that. My mom died when I was twelve and my dad took off."

"I thought alphas cared about the pack members?" His voice was thick and rough, his bear clearly riding close to the surface. "How could they let you be hurt when you were young?"

She knew that was where her low self-esteem stemmed from. She'd realized then how little consequence she'd been to her fellow pack members. Her uncle was a disliked, unpleasant omega, and no one had cared what happened to her until the humans had threatened to expose the pack's tolerance of child abuse to the public.

"If I was alpha, I'd throw out the hierarchy," she said, her voice strong with her conviction. When she was younger, she'd prayed for someone to intervene, but no one had. Not even when her body had been shredded by the belt. "I'd make sure that the weakest ones were the most protected, the most looked after."

"In the sleuth, the king is the leader and there's no hierarchy, but abuse isn't tolerated. Things are harsh in the sleuth at times, like during the monthly battles, but there's also a strong sense of community. The king wouldn't tolerate the kind of abuse you suffered, and neither would any of the males

or females. Preying on the young—or watching it happen and doing nothing—is inexcusable.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but then snapped it shut. She rubbed her thumb on the underside of his wrist. “What is it, Row?”

“I hate this place. I hate how you’re treated and what you suffered. Your alpha only cared that your duties were covered. He didn’t even congratulate us on our mating.”

“Brynn did.”

He shrugged and his lip curled.

“I can’t change what I am here. Females are always omegas, and everyone in the pack sees my scars as a weakness.”

“That’s the biggest bunch of bullshit I’ve heard in my life,” he snarled. The fur on his cheeks darkened. “You’re a survivor. In spite of being left to fend for yourself against a madman, you survived. You should be lauded as a warrior, not shunned.”

She stroked his cheek. The fur was thick and soft, but despite that, it made him seem more dangerous. Not to her, of course. She knew way down in the center of her being that he’d never harm her. Fresh tears surged.

“What is it, *Adara*?” He breathed the words softly, his tone filled with worry.

“You really do want to be with me. You really don’t care about my scars or my past.”

“I don’t, Kammie. They made you who you are. If you weren’t part of a shifter group where physical scars are considered a weakness, you wouldn’t be an omega. I wish I had known you back then. I would’ve done my best to stop him. To save you.”

He stroked the tears from her cheeks gently. She was amazed to see both sides of him at the same time, the tender male who touched her as if she were made of glass coupled

with the violent male who would slaughter anyone who hurt her, past and present.

“I want to go home, Row,” she said, nuzzling his palm.

“Me too, baby.”

They found her clothes and returned quickly to their vehicles. They hadn't spoken any more, but they hadn't needed to. There was a peaceful silence between them, and she needed the time to think. The idea of showing him her scars still worried her, but the bone-deep fear she'd always had of being naked in front of someone wasn't there. She didn't want his pity, but she wasn't sure that he actually *did* pity her.

Several weeks ago, she'd had a similar conversation with an omega male named Jeremiah. He'd told her that her scars weren't a weakness, but she hadn't believed him. Jeremiah, a shunned male himself because he couldn't shift, was sensitive to her body issues because he had them, too. But Row wasn't ashamed of his scars, and when she'd touched the scar on his leg, she hadn't pitied him either. She'd been filled with white-hot rage toward the male who hurt him. Toward *all* of them.

As she parked on the street in front of her house and Row pulled in behind her, she decided that she could move forward with her mate physically. She was already half in love with him because of his protective and possessive nature. Her wolf wanted to slaughter anyone who looked at him cross-eyed. The emotional bond between them would strengthen the longer they knew each other, but the physical pull to her mate was like a writhing creature in her belly, full of need and desire.

She was tired of being weak, of feeling unworthy. Row's behavior made her want to be strong for him, but also for herself. She was going to be mated to a strong male, and she didn't want their children to view her as weak, or to be automatically considered weak because of her.

She could do this. She *would*. She would make Row her mate, and he would be the first male to see her completely naked. Fear slithered through her, but she shoved it away. Row was worth it, because the only future she wanted was one with

him by her side. They could iron out the details later. For now, she had some claiming to do.

CHAPTER FIVE

Getting out of his truck, Row shouldered his bag and strode to the driver's side of Kammie's small car. She seemed to be lost in thought, wrestling emotionally with something. Fear would tighten her face and then she'd shake out of it, her jaw clenching with determination. She looked at him through the window for a heartbeat, then turned off the engine and pushed open the door.

Her eyes flashed to the amber of her wolf as she stood, moving close to him so she could shut the car door. The sweet scent of her arousal spiked in the air between them.

She put her hands on his chest and he could feel their warmth through his shirt. His bear growled in approval as she pressed closer. "I have to make a phone call," she said. He blinked in surprise, and she smiled. "The sooner I make the call, the sooner we can talk."

The way she said 'talk' made him hope that she didn't want to just *talk*, but perhaps do the sort of naked talking that mates did. He nodded, and she took his hand and led him up the walk to her door.

She unlocked the door and tugged him inside. He shut it behind them as she walked swiftly to the kitchen and picked up the phone attached to the wall over a small built-in desk. He put his bag down and joined her in the kitchen as she spoke to someone about her duties. He appreciated that she was so dedicated to her position, but he still hated everything that he'd seen so far within the pack. She deserved so much better. Not just because she was his mate, but because she had

suffered and was still being held down, constantly reminded that she was less-than simply because someone else had hurt her. He wouldn't want to be held responsible for someone else's actions, or to have his scars pointed out to him time and again as if they were a liability. He wished again that he'd met her years ago, when she needed a strong hand to protect her.

Now, as he listened to her find wolves to take her duties, he wished that she wasn't part of the wolf pack. If she were part of the sleuth, no one would think anything about her scars. They would see them as a part of her, but not the definition of her. She wouldn't be held down because of them, but lifted up as a survivor.

"I covered my duties for two weeks," she said, coming back into the room. His bear growled in happiness when she slipped right into his arms as if she hated being away from his side.

"Two weeks?" he said, nuzzling the top of her head and inhaling her scent.

She tilted her head to gaze up at him. "I didn't know when we were going to leave for your sleuth or how long we'd stay."

Forever. He wanted her to stay in his sleuth, away from her pack, forever. Not that he'd ask her right now, because things were still so new between them, but it was on his mind. He'd said he would come back and work by her side in the pack and he meant it, but he hoped she'd love the sleuth so much that she'd want to stay.

He wrapped both arms around her tightly and rubbed his cheek against hers. "However long you want, baby," he said.

Her hands flexed on his back and she exhaled sharply. A fine tremble wove through her. He lifted his head to ask what was wrong, and was surprised to see that her eyes were a beautiful mixture of brown and amber.

"Baby?"

"Come with me," she said, her voice husky.

Clasping his hands, she walked backward slowly, never taking her eyes from his. She navigated the short distance to

her bedroom easily, and then stopped in front of the bed.

“I’m going to,” she said, stopping and clearing her throat. “I want to –”

As she struggled with the words, Row could see that she was fighting past her fears. He cupped her face and kissed her gently. “Take your time, sweetheart. I’m not going anywhere.”

He kissed her again, savoring the sweet taste of her, then took her trembling hands in his and helped her lift his own shirt over his head. Her nails scratched his skin lightly as she trailed them down his arms. She rubbed his wrists with the pads of her fingers and stared up at him. Her eyes were clear amber, and he knew that she was letting her wolf out to help with her nerves. She exerted a little pressure on his wrists and drew his hands to the hem of her top.

He lifted it slowly, aware that she was giving him a great gift right now—her trust. With as much care as he could muster, he dragged the shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor. She wore a plain white bra, which was still the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. The swell of her breasts over the satin made his mouth water, and he was dying to tear it off her. She was trembling all over, and he knew why—the scars on her torso were old but vivid. He could almost hear her cries when she was struck, and it made his bear, once more, want to hunt down her uncle and destroy him piece by piece.

“More,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “I want to see all of my beautiful mate.”

Her eyes darkened and a smile ghosted her lips. Her fingertips played over the waistband of her jeans and she undid the button and zipper, never taking her eyes from his. When they were on the floor, he reached for his own, but she took over, some of her trembling easing as she stripped him to his boxers and let his clothing land with hers. Her white panties matched the bra, simple but lovely.

He moved in close and kissed her, nibbling on her lower lip and wrapping his arms around her as she melted against him. He undid her bra and stroked her back with both hands, feeling the ridges of scars under his fingers. She stiffened

immediately, but he sucked on her tongue and growled softly, never stopping the movement of his hands, and she relaxed by slow degrees until she was melting into him again. Her hands traced his back as well, finding the scars of his battles and the pain that he'd endured. It was only a shadow of her pain, though. He'd had the ability to fight; sometimes he'd simply not been the best in a match. The odds had been stacked against her from the beginning.

Her nails grazed his shoulders and they parted long enough for her to let him pull her bra off. Lifting her into his arms, he laid her gently on the bed and stretched out next to her. Her skin pebbled with goosebumps as he laid one hand on her stomach and stroked her hair with the other. He kissed her full lips, delving his tongue into her mouth, and then pressed his lips to her nose and each eyelid before kissing down her jaw to her ear.

“You’re amazing, sweetheart,” he murmured. She gripped his forearm, her nails digging in slightly, but she didn’t push his hand away as he slowly drew it up her stomach and cupped her breast. Her nipple hardened under his thumb as he rubbed circles around it. She wiggled on the bed, and he smiled to himself. He liked that she was losing herself to pleasure, and that he was the first one to touch her, to see her, this way.

He kissed down her throat to her shoulder and across her collarbone. Then he leaned over her, pressing her nipple gently between his finger and thumb and tugging lightly. He watched her face as her eyes opened; the amber had receded some, and he knew that she was getting more comfortable with him. Her wolf was slowly stepping back because Kammie didn’t need her as much.

Lowering his head, he released his hold on her nipple and pecked it briefly before slowly drawing it into his mouth. It was firm against his tongue, tightening further as he sucked on it and rested his hand on her waist, kneading the soft flesh. She inhaled deeply, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders as he left one nipple and moved to the other, licking and sucking it to tight perfection as she wiggled under him.

He lifted slightly to look at her torso, and the scars that told a story of a ravaged child and a pack unwilling to help. She tensed immediately when he began to trace one of them with his fingertip, but he stared into her eyes and let his finger memorize the shape and feel of it. She relaxed slowly as he moved from scar to scar, touching them and then moving on. He absolutely didn't pity her. He was sorry for what she'd endured, but she was the strongest female he'd ever met, and he was proud of her for the woman she'd become.

He moved down her body slowly, kissing and touching his way to the edge of her panties. He looked up and their eyes met, hers so full of raw emotion that he felt as if she were literally offering him her heart and begging him not to hurt her.

His bear paced, wanting to both cuddle her and ravage her. He hooked her panties with his fingers and slowly drew them down her legs, then picked up one foot and pulled her sock off. Her toes were painted dark red. He kissed her toes and her instep, and she laughed. Taking the same care with her other foot, he ringed her ankles with his fingers and pushed gently, spreading her wide before him as her knees bent and her legs parted. Her pussy was beautifully bare and glistening with arousal. He moved his hands slowly up the outside of her legs, trailing patterns over her flesh until he'd touched every inch of her from ankle to thigh. He bent and kissed her knees, alternating between her parted thighs as he kissed toward her center, loving the way she trembled as he drew near. He inhaled, sorting through the scents that surrounded him and finding no trace of fear—just arousal and passion.

He parted her pussy to expose the pearl of her clit and flicked his tongue over it. He sucked on it lightly, flicking the tip with his tongue as her thighs tightened against his head. Lifting from the bud, he moved his finger quickly, rubbing it just right as she gasped and writhed under him. Her nipples pebbled tightly as her body flushed and she came, her back arching and her hands clawing at the blanket.

He slipped his hands under her, cupping her butt and lifting her to his mouth, eager to taste her. Her thighs slid over

his shoulders as he tongued her core, lapping and licking, feasting on her as if she were the best thing he'd ever tasted, which she was.

He slowly lowered her body to the bed, giving her cheeks a squeeze before wrapping one hand around her thigh and pushing it wide. He stared down at her pussy as he slid two fingers into her hot, wet depths. Her pussy hugged his fingers, and he grinned, casting a glance at her to find her eyes bright amber and her fangs peeking from her parted lips as she panted for breath. She was completely aroused, her wolf riding high from her orgasm and her body primed for mating. But he wasn't done yet. He wanted her to know he would always see to her pleasure first.

He curled his fingers inside, stroking her soft walls, watching until her body tensed and she gasped. He knew he'd found the place to make her fall apart. Rubbing his fingers over that spot, he moved his other hand to her clit and began to rub the tight bud in time to his strokes inside, driving her swiftly toward the height of pleasure. Her pussy creamed around his fingers. She grabbed hold of his arm with both hands, her nails the dark color of her wolf's claws as she dug them into his flesh and held on.

Giving her everything he had, he concentrated on driving her to the edge and over. When she came, she screamed his name so loudly that her voice cracked and tears leaked from her closed eyes. He'd never seen anything more beautiful than his mate coming around his fingers.

She grabbed his shoulders and tugged, and he let her pull him up her body. She caged his hips with her legs as he planted his hands on either side of her head and gazed down at her. He lowered his head and kissed the tears from her cheeks first and then her mouth. Their lips parted and their tongues met, sliding and dancing together. She tugged on his lower half with her legs, and he grinned, easing from her mouth and smiling down at her.

“Make love to me, Row,” she said in a husky tone.

He growled her name as he angled his hips and his dick nudged her pussy. He kept his gaze locked to hers as he pushed inside the tight confines of her body. He wanted to close his eyes and savor every inch that he claimed, but watching her eyes glaze over with passion and happiness was far better. Sliding his arms under her as he thrust forward, he held her close while their bodies wed tightly and he buried himself to the hilt. She crossed her ankles behind his back and tugged, her hands gliding over his shoulders as he loomed over her.

He could've stayed there forever, buried deep and unmoving, because the feeling of her soft heat around him was the most toe-curling, amazing thing he'd ever experienced. But more powerful than that was the connection that continued to blaze between them. She was his *adara*, the perfect mate for him, and this was just the beginning of their lives together.

He slid out of her slowly, his hands cupping her shoulders to hold her more closely as he pushed back in. Her knees hugged his sides as he began to move slowly in and out. Each push forward made his gums tingle, and each pull backward made him want to roar.

He began to increase his pace and she held to him tightly, relaxing into his hold as he pushed them both toward release. Her hips tilted, changing the angle of his thrusts, and he felt her pussy clench his every time his body brushed against her clit. He kissed her throat and then sucked on her flesh, feeling her pulse thunder under his tongue as they moved together, thrusting and rubbing and touching. Her thighs tightened on his waist as his fangs emerged, scraping her throat. Bears didn't mark this way, but wolves did, and he wanted her to have everything that he could give her.

Her head tilted, exposing her throat to him, and he growled as his fangs emerged completely and the idea of marking her drove his bear nuts. He struck, burying his fangs where her neck and shoulder joined. She howled as she came, her pussy clenching his cock and pulling his climax from him. He came buried deeply in her, her body vibrating as she growled and hugged him close with her arms and legs. He eased his fangs

from her neck and licked the wound as she shivered. His dick spasmed and he arched into her, which made her moan, her fingers scratching his back as she writhed.

He'd never come so hard or so much. He lifted his head from her neck and looked down at her. Her eyes were clear amber, beautiful and bright, and the connection between them deepened.

“You're mine, Kammie.”

She blinked and tears slipped from her eyes. “You're mine, too, Row.”

He rolled gently onto his back, bringing her with him. She lay across him limply, her face glowing with happiness. His bear rumbled its approval. Row stroked her back, gentling her from the heights of their combined pleasure.

They were starting off their new life together in the best of ways, and he couldn't wait to see what the future would bring.

CHAPTER SIX

*K*ammie woke slowly, aware that she was entirely naked, with a man—also naked—holding her tightly. It wasn't just any man who held her exposed body so close and tenderly, even in sleep; it was her mate. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, her fingertips lightly tracing the top of Row's hand, which was planted firmly on her lower stomach, and searched for unease and fear. She didn't find any. She was entirely comfortable with Row now, and the freedom of not worrying about him seeing her scars was liberating on a level she hadn't expected.

Row's hand flexed against her stomach. Her wolf growled happily as Kammie slipped onto her back and Row rose above her. He smiled, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. "Morning," he said, his voice a deep rumble that made every feminine instinct inside her cheer.

She cupped his face with both hands, smoothing her thumbs across his stubble. "I'm so glad you're here."

His brow arched. "Where else would I be? Here, in this bed, with your sexy body plastered to mine...this is my definition of heaven."

They'd made love all night. He'd taken her to places of bliss that she hadn't known existed outside of romance novels. When they'd crashed for the night, bodies tangled tightly together, she'd never been happier. How long had it been since she'd felt so safe and so cherished? She couldn't even recall.

As she stared up at her mate, she knew she didn't want to stay in Wilde Creek a second longer. She wanted to go to his home so he could follow the traditions of his people.

"I'd like to leave."

His brows furrowed. "What?"

She chuckled. "I want to go to your home so we can go to the mating cave."

His eyes darkened and a low growl rumbled in his chest. "Do you, little wolf?"

She loved when he called her that.

"There's no reason to stay here. We have a two-day journey ahead of us; plus I'd love to meet your mom. Promise to keep me warm in the cave?" she teased.

His hand slid down her side to grip her thigh, lifting it up so he could move between her legs. "Definitely."

She arched up under him as he slid into her heat, and they made love twice more before they made it out of the bedroom.

While Row made a late breakfast for them, Kammie stood in front of her closet and looked at her clothes. She only wore long things—long skirts, pants, long-sleeved tops and sweaters. Hardly any of her clothes bared her skin. It was still winter, so it made sense for her to have these things, but being with Row made her want to make him proud. He'd told her over and over that in his sleuth, her scars wouldn't be a liability, and she believed him. He'd been nothing but good to her since they'd met, and she wanted to honor him the way that he honored her.

Digging into the back of her closet, she found a short-sleeved top that she'd bought on a whim a year earlier. It was deep purple, with a v-neck and a scalloped edge along the hem. It was feminine and lovely, and she'd never worn it.

Discarding her towel, she changed into her prettiest lingerie, a white lace set that seemed to highlight her curves and showed off the scars. After the way Row had worshiped her body, she realized that her scars didn't have to hold her back anymore. She didn't have to be ashamed of them; they were badges of honor, proof that she could survive anything that life threw at her.

She dressed and then went into the bathroom to look at herself. She lifted her hair and inspected the mating marks that he'd given her. They'd already scarred over and healed while she'd slept, leaving behind the evidence that Row was her mate. It had been so sweet she'd wanted to cry, but she'd done her best to just enjoy how wonderful it felt to have family who cared about her.

Using small clips, she twisted her hair up to show off the marks, and smiled at her reflection. The urge was there to cover up her arms, especially the right one which had a long line extending over her elbow, but it was a small urge and she ignored it. She would honor Row by baring her skin in this little way. She wouldn't be ashamed anymore.

Joining him in the kitchen, she said, "It smells good in here."

Row turned from the stove and smiled. "It's because you just came in."

She chuckled. "And there's the bacon."

"It's one of my four food groups, along with pasta, hamburgers, and chocolate cake."

Immediately she started thinking about how to make a casserole with everything he loved—except the chocolate cake. He kissed her and shooed her to the table. She sat down and watched as he set everything on the table and then fixed her coffee just the way she liked it. Over-easy eggs glistened on her plate along with seasoned potatoes and a pile of bacon. He poured orange juice for both of them and sat across from her with an identical plate.

"I'd like to get going after we eat, sweetheart."

“I’m almost done packing. Is there anything special I need to bring?”

He swallowed a bite of food. “Something nice so I can take you out on a real date.”

“Aren’t we past the dating stage?” she asked, quirking her brow at him.

“Not hardly. I want you to have every experience I can give you, and that includes me taking you on a date.”

“Did you use to date a lot?”

“Not really. I did a little when I was younger, but once I was old enough to take part in the battles my life became about making myself a better fighter. Even though they were brutal, the battles helped to focus my attention where it mattered.”

“On beating other shifters up?”

He laughed. “Sort of. It helped me prepare for anything that might happen. As I trained, I learned how to fight—not only to win the battles, but to defend myself and my family. Finding you made all that worthwhile. I feel confident in my ability to keep you and our cubs safe.”

Her heart clenched at the thought of having a child with Row. “You want kids?”

“Of course. I want to be the best father to our kids and the best mate to you. I’m technically an only child. Even though Dani is the sister of my heart, I always wished I could have a blood brother or sister.” He looked at her hopefully. “Do you want kids?”

She swallowed back the emotions that rose in her chest. “I didn’t give much thought to having kids before I met you, but yes. I’d definitely like to have kids.”

He grinned broadly, relief and happiness shining in his eyes.

“Why didn’t your mom have more kids?” she asked.

“My dad died. She was pregnant with me when it happened. Bears form very tight bonds with their mates, and sometimes the one left alive will die of loneliness. She always said I was her salvation, because if she hadn’t been pregnant she might have just wanted to curl up and die. She lived for me, to honor her mate. My name is evidence of the burden she shouldered alone.”

“Row?” she asked, confused.

“My name is Sorrow, but I go by Row for short. My middle name is Nathaniel, for my dad.”

“That’s sweet and sad. She never wanted to be mated again?”

“After losing my dad, she said she was content to live her life without a mate. I think if she met someone she was attracted to she might mate him, but she’s never dated.”

Kammie hummed in thought and finished her meal. She was sad for Row’s mom, but admired her courage in not giving up. It couldn’t be easy to be a single parent, but she’d done it, and had even opened her home to Dani. Kammie already loved Row’s mom and she hadn’t even met her.

“Will our kids be bears or wolves?”

“I don’t know; it depends on whether they take more after me or you. They could be either, or a combination—like a wolf with my black fur or a bear with your gray fur. Whatever they are, they’ll be well-loved.”

She had no doubt of that. Row was protective and possessive, and those were qualities that she knew would extend to their kids. He wouldn’t let anyone hurt someone he loved, and she suspected that would be especially true for her and their family.

When the dishes were put away and the kitchen cleaned, she finished packing and they loaded up into his truck. After stopping by to say goodbye to Adam and Dani, Kammie and Row began their two-day journey to his sleuth.

Row stopped for gas just before they entered the town of Oakville. Kammie got out and stretched to ease the ache of riding in the truck for so long. They'd stopped overnight at hotels along the way, talking long into the night about their hopes and dreams. They took turns driving, and filled the hours between stops with stories from their youth.

She felt closer to him than she'd ever felt to anyone. With every day that passed, the connection between them grew, and she could feel her feelings for him deepen. He was amazing—not only did he have a body that made her wolf pant, but he was kind and sweet, always making sure she was taken care of first. That he put her happiness above his own made her like him that much more, even though his happiness was paramount to her, too.

“What are you thinking about, *Adara*?” he asked, leaning against the back of the truck.

She moved to him and slid her arms around him, snuggling into his embrace. He caged her in his arms and drew her even closer. “How crazy I am about you.”

“Are you, little wolf?” He gazed down at her with pure adoration.

“Very much. I didn't know it could be like this. My wolf is happy, I'm happy, and I hope I make you happy.”

His eyes darkened. “You make me *very* happy, Kammie. I'm not just crazy about you, I love you. I love everything about you, from your beautiful brown eyes to your sexy toes, to the way you snuggle against me when we sleep and how you take care of me.”

Tears pricked her eyes at the sweet words. “I love you, too, Row. I didn't think there would ever be anyone for me, but you're perfect.”

“I'm not hardly, but I'm glad you think so.”

“You’re perfect for me,” she insisted. “We fit together like puzzle pieces. You make me melt with your amazing smiles and the way you hold me after we make love. I’ve never felt so sexy, so cherished. I forget everything when I’m in your arms.”

His eyes smoldered as he looked down at her. “You’re the most important person in my world, Kammie. You’re mine and I’m yours.”

“Forever.”

He nodded and kissed her, before releasing her so he could pay for the gas. As she walked around the truck to her side, she danced a little jig. Row loved her!

She climbed in the cab and pulled the door shut.

“I saw that,” Row said with a chuckle.

She grinned. “I’m happy. My mate loves me.”

“Trust me,” he said as he pulled away from the pumps, “my bear is doing cartwheels right now and can’t wait to get you home.”

Leaning against his shoulder, she sighed contentedly. After such a long stretch of time when nothing went right for her, finally Kammie was on the receiving end of some good luck. She couldn’t wait to see what the day would bring.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The brick house where Row had grown up sat on a quiet street, surrounded by the homes of sleuth members. The flower beds were covered with snow, but as soon as spring came his mom's favorite crocuses would bloom, heralding the coming warm weather. Kammie walked beside him as he led her into the house. It smelled like chocolate chip cookies, which reminded him of his childhood. He'd always found the scent comforting.

His mother stood in the front room wearing a chocolate-smudged apron. She smiled, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Mom, this is my mate, Kammie. Sweetheart, this is my mom, Alice."

"It's nice to meet you," Kammie said, and then chuckled as Row's mom hugged her tightly.

"Aren't you beautiful?" she said, cupping Kammie's face. "My son is a lucky male."

"I'm lucky, too," Kammie said, winking at Row.

His mom gestured for them to move into the family room. Row took Kammie's coat off and hung it on the hook by the front door, along with his own. Since the day they left Wilde Creek, Kammie had been wearing short-sleeved tops. At her request, Row had taken her to a store to pick up some clothes that would show more skin. Even though it was cold out, she seemed to really enjoy wearing more revealing things. The top she wore now was a v-neck, and he loved how her collarbone

was exposed. It made him want to tug the top aside so he could kiss her skin inch by inch.

As he and Kammie sat down, his mom said, “I Skyped with Dani this morning and she’s doing well with her new mate. She’s going to come visit in the spring, but I was thinking about going there myself if you think that would be okay with the alphas.”

Row didn’t particularly want his mom to be around the wolves who’d treated Kammie so poorly for such a long time, but he’d never keep his mother from visiting Dani.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Kammie said. “The alphas are good people.”

Row held back his snort of derision. Perhaps the female wasn’t bound by the same rules as the pack because she was human, but the male had tolerated and even seemed to encourage a ranking system within the pack that put those who needed help at the bottom. Every time he thought about returning to Wilde Creek, he wanted to throw something.

His mother gave him a long look and then said, “I cleaned your place and changed the sheets. I’m sure you wouldn’t want Kammie to know how you lived.”

“Mom,” he protested, his cheeks heating in blush.

Kammie laughed, but it was a forced chuckle and Row’s bear growled in worry. Something was bothering her, and he needed to know what it was. She and his mother talked about the differences between Wilde Creek and Oakville while they ate the light meal she’d prepared. When the meal was over, Row stood and held out his hand to Kammie. “I want to show you my home, sweetheart.”

She smiled at him, heat and happiness dancing in her eyes, and then she slid her hand into his and stood. He grabbed their coats and kissed his mom goodbye. “I need to take Kammie to the cave,” he said. “I want to talk to Fayar about doing that.”

“How long will you be staying?”

“We’re not in a hurry to leave,” he said.

His mom smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. Maybe Kammie and I can go shopping and out to lunch one afternoon."

"I'd love to," Kammie said.

His mother added, "I stocked your fridge and pantry, too."

He kissed her cheek. "Thanks, Mom."

Row took Kammie's hand as they walked back to his truck. He left his mother's driveway and drove two doors down to his own. Turning off the engine, he reached for her hand again and asked, "Why did you seem unhappy when my mom said she cleaned my house?"

She looked surprised and then smiled gently. "How is it you know me so well already?"

"Because you're my *adara*, Kammie. I don't want you to be upset, ever. If I can fix it, just tell me what it is."

"You're too good to be true."

"I'm right here." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the top. "Tell me."

Sighing lightly, she said, "You're not a housekeeper."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Returning to Wilde Creek means that you'll be serving the pack with me. You could work outside of town, find another job that you'd like to do, but you seem so adamant about being an omega with me. Your mom saying that you aren't naturally neat just reminded me how much you'd be giving up to stay in Wilde Creek."

He brushed his thumb across her jaw, tilting her face until she really looked at him. "I would give up everything for you. I hope you realize that. I don't know if I could tolerate being without you, knowing you were working alone in unmated males' homes while I was out of town, if I could even find work. The best thing for me and my bear is for us to be together. If Wilde Creek is where you want to be, then I'll be by your side, no matter what you're doing."

"It's not fair to you."

“I get to have you in my arms at night, Kammie. Whatever happens during the day, it’s a very fair trade.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, staring at him. “After we unpack, can you show me around your sleuth’s territory?”

He knew she was still holding onto something she wasn’t sharing with him, but he decided not to push her. He’d give her a little time to sort it out on her own.

“Yes. I want to introduce you to my king, Fayar, and get permission to use the sacred cave tomorrow night.”

They exited the SUV and moved to the back to unload their luggage. He slung several bags over his shoulder and ensured that Kammie only carried one light thing. He didn’t want to take a chance on her slipping on the icy sidewalk.

He unlocked his front door and let Kammie in. Then he left his bags on the floor and hustled out to the truck, returning with the remaining bags. Once he was finished, he shut and locked the front door and found Kammie in the kitchen, looking out the sliding door to the backyard. He slid his arms around her, drawing her close and pressing his face into her neck.

He kissed her throat, and she tilted her head to give him better access. “This is what I always wanted.”

She shifted her hips, rubbing herself across his growing erection. “Me?”

“Our connection. The knowledge that we’re perfect together, that we fit together just right because we’re meant to be mates. Anything else would be false and my bear would never be content.”

“My wolf wouldn’t either.” She turned in his arms. “I’m glad you’re mine, Row.”

He kissed her gently, teasing her lips with his until she pressed against him and growled in eagerness. He lifted her into his arms and turned toward the bedroom. “How about a tour?”

“A naked one?”

“I love how you think,” he said, chuckling.

Row and Kammie spent several hours in bed. He knew she was happy to be off the road and settled for a little while. She'd taken two weeks off from her duties with the pack, and he planned to make the most of that time. He hoped that while she was here she'd fall in love with Oakville and want to stay; to leave Wilde Creek behind and embrace being his mate in a place where her scars were marks on her skin and not the definition of her being.

She stretched out on the bed, rubbing her toes along his calves as they snacked on a plate of cheese and crackers. Having naked conversations was one of his favorite things to do with his mate.

After they finished their snack, they unpacked their belongings. He gave her the top two drawers in the dresser and half of the closet, and helped her hang up her clothes. He loved to see her things hanging next to his—her pastel-colored tops alongside his black shirts.

“I saw some steaks in the fridge. Want to grill for dinner? I have this great recipe for cheesy potatoes you make in a foil packet on the grill,” she said.

“Sure, sweetheart.” She liked to cook for him, but he liked taking care of her, so they'd come to an agreement to both help during mealtimes. He liked sharing household duties with her. He didn't mind running a broom around the kitchen, when it was for her.

They dressed warmly and he took her on a walking tour of the sleuth's territory before it got dark. The territory was several hundred acres, and he'd grown up exploring them. They walked to the mating cave first. He couldn't wait to take her inside and hole up for a night so he could mate her in the traditions of his people.

She stood in his arms and looked at the entrance to the cave. “Remember, you promised to keep me warm in there.”

“You know I will, sweetheart.”

She peered up at him and smiled. “I can’t feel my toes.”

“It’s pretty damn cold. Let’s go see Fayar and then I’ll warm you up properly.”

“And grill some steaks for dinner?”

“Eventually.”

She chuckled and took his hand. They walked side by side toward Fayar’s home. Fayar and his mate, Gloria, lived in a large house in the center of the sleuth’s territory. Their children were all grown. Only the youngest, Rafe, had remained in the sleuth, primed to take over the kingship when Fayar was ready to step down. Rafe was an honorable male and only a year older than Row. The two had been friends since they were cubs.

Row knocked on Fayar’s front door. Gloria answered, her face lighting up as she opened the door wide and gestured them inside.

“I heard you’d found your truemate, Row! Come in, we were expecting you!”

Fayar strode into the room and clapped Row on the shoulder. “Congratulations on finding your mate.”

“Kammie, this is my king, Fayar, and his mate Gloria. This is my *adara*, Kammie.”

Gloria hugged Kammie lightly and said, “It’s wonderful to meet you. Come into the kitchen while the males talk. I hope you like snickerdoodles; I just made a batch for Rafe, but there’s plenty for everyone.”

Kammie smiled at Row. He squeezed her hand and let go, and she walked with Gloria into the kitchen. Row’s bear didn’t like her being out of sight, but he trusted Gloria to take good care of her.

Fayar gestured to the furniture in the living room and Row sat on the couch. Fayar settled in an easy chair across from a small wooden coffee table and cleared his throat. “Your mother called Gloria to tell us that you were bringing your

new mate home, which is why Gloria said we've been expecting you."

"I'm not surprised. Mom is really happy for me."

"She should be. It's a good thing when males find their true mates. I understand Dani also found her mate. Is he taking her on to her people?"

"I think she's scrapped that and is planning to just stay in Wilde Creek."

Fayar's brows lifted. "You don't seem happy about that."

Row lowered his voice. "The wolves don't take care of their injured."

He nodded slowly. "It's because of how they view weakness. For males especially, if an injury prevents them from being at their top strength, then they're not seen as whole."

Row explained about Kammie's scars without going into too much detail. "I wish I could convince her to stay here."

Fayar's brow was drawn. "I don't understand an alpha who would allow the abuse of a child, or anyone for that matter, to continue. Wolves are curious creatures. Very fierce, but they're small shifters compared to bears or big cats, and I've always thought that gave them a bit of a complex."

"Maybe. I dislike the idea of being in Wilde Creek, but it's her home. The fact that she drew the short straw on family members shouldn't be held against her any more than the color of her fur."

"How long are you staying?"

"Ten days."

"I'm sure you can convince her that Oakville is a better home for her, and for your future cubs, in that many days. From what you've shared, her life isn't that good in her pack, and life is different in the sleuth. Show her the truth of that and she'll see the light on her own."

"Thanks."

“I won’t talk to you about your position here until your future location has been decided, but know that the training job is there for you.”

“I’d really like to do that.”

“Do what?” Kammie asked as she carried a plate of cookies into the room and set them on the table. Gloria followed with a tray of mugs and a carafe of hot chocolate.

For a heartbeat, Row considered not telling her anything yet, but he never wanted to lie to her. “Before I left, Fayar offered me a position teaching the young males how to hunt and fight.”

Her eyes widened. She sat next to Row, and he put his arm around her. Her coat was gone, and she was wearing a short-sleeved top that showed some of her scars. He was proud of her for baring her skin, even just her forearms, to strangers. He kissed her temple.

Kammie said, “Gloria was telling me about her granddaughter, Ahmani.”

Row was disappointed that Kammie changed the subject from his job, but he shook off the feeling, deciding it really was too early for him to expect her to want to move from everything she’d ever known.

“How old is she now?” Row asked, taking the cookie that Kammie handed him. Ahmani was the daughter of their oldest son.

“She’s six. Quite a fierce little female,” Fayar said, smiling proudly.

Row couldn’t wait to give his own mother some grandkids to fawn over. As the small group ate snickerdoodles and drank hot chocolate, they talked about everything but the elephant in the room—Row leaving the sleuth and joining the wolf pack. He wasn’t sure how to show Kammie that Oakville was better for her than Wilde Creek, but he knew he’d figure it out.

“Kammie and I would like to use the sacred cave tomorrow night,” Row said.

Fayar nodded. “When your mother told us that you were coming home with your true mate, I had the cave cleaned and prepared. Everything you need is inside. Breakfast will be the following morning at nine so you have a chance to sleep in.”

“We almost missed our breakfast,” Gloria said. “It’s easy to lose track of time in the cave because it feels so secluded inside.”

“Thank you,” Row said, standing and shaking Fayar’s hand.

“Keep me apprised of your situation,” he said.

Kammie said goodbye to Fayar and hugged Gloria before donning her coat. Row took her hand as they left the house and began their trek back home. She was quiet, and he let her have the silence. He wasn’t sure what to say anyway. He wanted her to *want* to live in Oakville, but he understood how used to her old life she was. He’d live and serve with her in Wilde Creek if that was what she chose, but he hoped like hell that she’d see how much better she’d be treated in the sleuth and want to move.

“Would you have to keep doing the monthly battles if you lived here?” she asked suddenly.

He squeezed her hand. “Before I left to take Dani to her people, I told Fayar that I was growing tired of the battles and he offered me the position as trainer to the young males.”

“That would be your job within the sleuth?”

He nodded. “Why?”

“I was just wondering what you’d do if you—if we—were living here.”

He stopped walking and she turned to face him. “What are you thinking about, *Adara*?”

“This place is different than Wilde Creek. I mean, I knew it would be, but just from what your mom shared, you have a place of good standing here. You’re a valuable member of the sleuth, not an afterthought.”

At his confused look, she clarified, “In Wilde Creek, you’d be my mate.”

“I’m your mate wherever we are.”

She shook her head. “No, it would be *what* you are in the eyes of the pack. You’re a powerful male and a good fighter. Here you’re respected, but in Wilde Creek the definition of what you are is related to me—you’d become, in essence, a lowly omega. I can’t stand the thought of you being reduced to that when you’re worth so much more.”

“I don’t care what my title is as long as I get to be with you.”

“*I* care. You hate how my pack treats me, but I’m used to it. Do you think I could handle you being treated that way?” Tears glistened suddenly in her eyes.

His bear growled in approval. She might want to move to the sleuth!

“*Adara*, what are you saying?”

“Gloria took my coat and saw my scars,” she said, absently rubbing her elbow. “She asked me who hurt me, and then she growled. It was soft, but it was angry. She looked like she wanted to hunt down my uncle and kill him. She looked like you do whenever we talk about my past. Brynn is sweet, and concerned that everyone is happy, but she has limited power because Acksel is truly the law of the pack. He won’t deviate from the rankings, and he’s very much an ‘it’s always been this way’ sort of guy. Your queen wants to kill on my behalf and she’s known me for an hour. I thought you were unique and that you felt the way you do because you’re my true mate, but I think it’s all bears. Your mom also told me that she wanted to hurt whoever hurt me.”

“I don’t think bears are the only ones who don’t like to see their people abused.” He rubbed his neck and growled. “*I do* think that Acksel and Brynn wouldn’t allow the sort of suffering you dealt with to happen now. They both seem honorable. But they’re steeped in tradition that says physical scars are a weakness that can’t be tolerated. Instead of

teaching you how to protect yourself so no one ever lays a hand on you again, they shoved you to the bottom of the hierarchy and allowed their people to treat you as if you don't matter."

"I've hated for you to see how I'm treated." She flushed in embarrassment, and Row shook his head.

"I've hated it too, but it doesn't have to be that way anymore, sweetheart. We can take a different path, together."

Her eyes shone brightly with tears as she looked up at him. "I want to live here. I want to leave the pack and join your sleuth, and raise our kids here."

Emotion filled him. He knew it couldn't be easy for Kammie to choose to leave the only people she'd ever known, but she was doing it for him, and he loved her for it.

"If it's what you want, then it's what I want."

She snorted and laughed, brushing at the tears that spilled over her cheeks. "You wanted to take me out of Wilde Creek from day one."

"True." He kissed her gently. "You're mine to cherish, Kammie, to protect and love. I just want you to be happy."

"I'd be happiest here, with you."

"Then this is where our life will be. I promise I'll be the best mate to you, and the best father for our children."

"You're already the best mate. You were willing to clean strangers' homes for me without complaint."

"My bear was complaining a lot."

She chuckled and leaned into him, resting her ear over his heart. "I love you even more for that. Thank you for not pushing me. I'm sorry I'm such a mess sometimes."

"I love everything about you. Wherever you are is home for me, and whatever the next chapter of our life together brings, I know it will be amazing because we're together."

"The next chapter of our lives begins tomorrow night in the sacred cave. We've got a date with some oil and old furs."

“And lots of love.”

She smiled up at him, and it was his favorite smile—the one that made him feel warm from the inside out because he could see that she was truly, sincerely happy.

“How about we head home and warm up right?” He swung her up into his arms and carried her the entire way to his house, over the threshold and straight to the bathroom where they warmed up under the hot spray of the shower. His bear rejoiced to know that Kammie wanted to stay with the sleuth. He’d thought it would take a long time to convince her, but it had happened quickly, and he was grateful. Even if she hadn’t realized it, she’d been ready for a change, and a bear stomping through the woods on the full moon was just the sort of change she needed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Row wouldn't let Kammie do anything to get ready for their time in the sacred cave. He said that the males were supposed to do everything for their females, and so she listened to his advice and walked to his mom's house for a short visit in the afternoon. Alice was a sweet woman who always seemed to have a smile on her face. When Kammie was welcomed into her home, she found a small group of women sitting in the living room with books in their hands.

"I'm sorry, I can come back another time," Kammie said, realizing she'd interrupted a gathering of some sort.

"Nonsense," one of the women said, putting a bookmark in her place and closing the book. "We're just having our weekly read-and-gab. Family is *never* interrupting, unless the bedroom door is closed."

Kammie smiled. Alice introduced Kammie to her friends, she-bears from the sleuth who'd been getting together to discuss romance novels—in between sharing laughs about their mates and families—for several years.

Aggie, who wore her silver-streaked hair in long waves, patted the couch next to her, and Kammie sat down. "Now, Alice tells us that you and Row are going to the sacred cave tonight. Do you have any questions about it?"

"He mentioned oil. What is that for?"

Delphi passed a plate of pecan pie bars to Kammie, and she took one. "The oil is used for anointing. Row will recite what amounts to marriage vows to you. They'll follow a basic

script, but he'll be able to make the vows his own. Then he'll touch lavender oil to both sides of your throat, over your heart, and to your lower belly."

"A lot of females become pregnant during their night in the sacred cave," Aggie said. "Our people believe that when a truemating such as yours occurs, the great bear spirit blesses the union with a cub immediately."

Kammie knew she looked surprised. "Wolves only go into heat once a year, in September. I can't get pregnant right now."

Stella smiled thoughtfully. "I think you might be surprised what happens when truemates come together, wolf biology or not. Besides, Alice has been wanting a grandchild to fawn over. The only question is whether she has to travel to visit her grandcub or if you and Row will be here in the sleuth."

Kammie felt all their eyes on her and she was glad she and Row had already made this decision. "We've decided to stay."

The women cheered, and Kammie found herself enveloped in a group hug that warmed her right to the core. As they settled back into their seats and Aggie gave Kammie her copy of the romance novel they'd read, Kammie knew she and Row had made the right choice.

Row disliked the wolves, but he'd seen only the bad side of things. Kammie knew that there were wolves who liked and cared for her. Jeremiah and his mate Honey, Brynn, Adam, and some of the other omegas. But the truth was that pack life was harsh because the laws made it so. The ranking hierarchy forced the alphas to evaluate their people based on their physical abilities. She wished that her pack had been as loving and welcoming as the sleuth. Even if Fayar didn't show affection to Gloria as outwardly as Brynn and Acksel did, there was no denying that the two loved each other greatly. For Kammie, that was all that mattered.

Tonight they were going to the sacred cave, and in the morning the sleuth would celebrate their mating and welcome her as one of their own. They didn't seem to care that she was a wolf or that her body was riddled with scars—they only cared that she and Row were mates and were happy. She'd

only been in Oakville for a short while, and already it felt like home, which she attributed not only to the kindness of the bears but also her amazing mate.

She'd show him just how thankful she was...later.

Row wouldn't let Kammie carry anything to the sacred cave. He carried the cooler containing their food, as well as a large pack on his back. Along with dishing about the sex in the romance novel, Alice's friends had advised Kammie to wear something sexy under her clothes and to treat the sacred mating the way a human male and female would treat their wedding night. Kammie didn't own anything remotely sexy, unfortunately, so she went a different direction. She hoped that Row would be pleased.

They neared the cave, and Row said, "Give me two minutes." He handed Kammie a flashlight, because the sun was setting and the woods were growing dark.

He disappeared into the cave and she heard a lot of hurried movements. True to his word, he reappeared shortly and said, "I wish I could carry you inside the cave, but the entrance is too small for me to do that."

"You're so sweet."

"Only to you."

She kissed him and gave him the flashlight. Going to her knees, she peered into the entrance of the cave. She had to crawl on her hands and knees for the first few feet. Row had set an electric candle where the tunnel turned sharply, and she followed more flickering candles for a little longer, before the tunnel opened up and she was able to stand in the rough-hewn chamber. The cave was circular, about ten feet across, with shelves hewn into the walls for supplies. Row had set electric candles on the shelves to illuminate the space. On the floor was a thick pile of furs, and he'd arranged pillows and blankets along one edge.

Row's hands slid around her waist and he kissed her neck. "What do you think, *Adara*?"

"I think it's amazing."

The air was cool but not chilly. She bent over and took off her boots and Row set them in the tunnel outside of the chamber, along with his own.

Row took her coat and laid it along one wall with his, then turned to face her. He took her hands and lifted them, kissing the tops. "When I left here to take my sister to her people, I never expected to find my truemate in the woods of a strange place. Meeting you changed my life in a heartbeat, Kammie. I would be lost without you."

Tears stung her eyes. "You're the most amazing mate, Row. I don't know what I'd do without you either."

He stared down at her intently. She could hear the faint rumble of his bear and knew that both man and beast were excited for what was to come. She and Row were already marked according to wolf traditions, but she was going to be joining his sleuth as his mate, and she wanted to wear the crescent mark.

He caught her around the waist and drew her against him as his mouth descended on hers with a gruff growl. She loved the way he kissed her, as if he couldn't get close enough to her or touch her enough. His tongue slipped against hers in a dance that made her skin tingle and her wolf growl happily. Tugging his shirt from his jeans, she ran her fingers up his back, feeling the heat of his skin. She raked her nails down lightly, then slid her hands up the front of his shirt, undoing the buttons as she went. His broad chest was thick with muscles that bunched and contracted as she traced them with her fingers. Rubbing her fingertips across his nipples, she circled them until they tightened under her touch and smiled against his mouth as his hands kneaded her waist.

She pushed the shirt off his shoulders, and he released his hold on her long enough to take it off and toss it aside. Then his arm was around her once more, his hand slowly caressing the front of her body. She could feel the heat of his touch

through the thin shirt she wore. He eased from the kiss as his hand cupped her breast, and she knew he could feel that she wasn't wearing anything under her clothes.

His thumb rubbed her nipple as it hardened under his touch, and he gazed down at her. "Is my sweetheart naked under her clothes?" His voice was rough and husky, and it made her toes curl.

She lifted her shirt, slowly baring herself to him. He watched intently, reminding her of the first time she'd stripped for him. She was aware of her scars and she thought she probably always would be, but she wasn't ashamed of them anymore. Row had changed her life so completely just by being himself and caring about her. She didn't even really recognize herself anymore, but she was glad for that. Starting their new life together with a new attitude was just what she needed to do.

He helped her tug the shirt off and growled possessively. "You're beautiful."

"I'm yours."

He kissed her and then slipped to his knees, wrapping his arms around her waist and rubbing his cheek against her stomach. "I'm yours too, Kammie."

He opened her jeans and tugged them slowly down her legs, kissing her flesh as it was bared to him. His growl, when he realized she wasn't wearing panties, sounded a lot like a purr. She would've liked to buy sexy lingerie for him, but she knew in that moment that her mate thought she was sexiest when she was naked. She loved that knowledge.

After she stepped free of her jeans, she went to her knees and undid his, cupping his ass in her hands as their lips met in a kiss that seared her all the way to her soul. She could feel his erection through his jeans, and it was a heady feeling to know she turned her mate on no matter what she wore.

He stood slowly as she pushed his jeans down his legs, allowing him to step free of them and toss them to the side. She reached for his cock, but he pushed her hands away

gently. “If you touch me, I’m going to forget to mate you properly, and it’s important to me that we do this right, sweetheart. I want to wear your mark on my arm and I want you to wear mine.”

Earlier in the day, he’d told her that he wouldn’t mark her if she didn’t want him to. He understood that she had enough scars to last several lifetimes and that she might not want another. It hadn’t even been an option in her mind, though. Taking Row’s crescent mark was a way to cement their mating, to make it clear to one and all that they were mates and nothing would separate them. She hadn’t had a choice with her other scars, but she would choose Row’s scar.

He lifted a Mason jar from one of the shelves and went to his knees before her. After unscrewing the metal lid and setting it aside, he placed the jar between them. He took her hands and placed them on his hips, patting them gently. Then he dipped his index finger into the jar, coating it in the clear oil.

“Kammie Townsend,” he said as he stroked his finger down the left side of her throat, “I, Sorrow Grayson, vow myself to you for all eternity.” He dipped his middle finger into the oil and stroked it down the right side of her throat. The oil was warm and smelled of lavender. “I vow to be the best mate to you, to care for you in every way, and to protect you from harm.”

He coated his ring finger with oil and brushed a slow line over her heart. “My heart is yours. My soul. My life. Everything that I am is yours, from this moment forward. I will honor and love you for all of my days.”

As he dipped his little finger into the oil, he gazed into her eyes. She’d never felt so connected to anyone in her life, and she believed it was meant to be this way—truemates were special and meant to be revered.

He stroked his finger across her abdomen from hip to hip. “I vow to love and protect our children, to see them safe from harm in all ways and teach them all that I’ve learned. I promise to be a good dad, and to love their mom fiercely.”

His hand rested on her hip, fingers digging into her flesh lightly as the words that he'd spoken hung in the air between them.

She felt his claws press into her arm, and she lifted her hand to his bicep. "The crescent moon," he said reverently, "holds a place of honor for bears. We gather under the crescent for celebrations, and the mark reminds us of our tie. I mark you as mine, Kammie."

The cut was a swift twist of one claw against her skin. The wound burned slightly, but she was too focused on his bicep to think too much about a small ache. She let her claws out and envisioned the curved mark in her mind, using the one he'd made as a guide. She moved as quickly as he had, cutting his arm with her claw in a curved line. She stared at the blood that welled on his arm, and then looked at her own. He rubbed his finger lightly over her cut, gathering her blood on his finger, and then rubbed it along his own. After mixing their blood on his arm, he stroked his finger over her cut, their blood now combined on both of their marks. The mixing of blood prevented the cuts from healing entirely, so that they would scar.

He lowered his mouth to hers with a growl. As their lips met, she slid her hands up his back. He drew her closer until their bodies touched, his cock trapped between them, hot and hard. She eased onto her back, tugging him with her as they settled onto the furs. Row held himself slightly above her, his fingers tracing slow patterns up and down her waist.

He nipped her lower lip and kissed her chin, nuzzling her throat. Cupping her breast, he fit his mouth over her nipple, sucking gently. Tingles raced through her as he hummed against her flesh, and she sank her fingers into his hair, fisting the soft strands as he feasted on her breast before moving on to the other nipple, sucking and licking it to a hard point.

He kissed down her body slowly, his hands following his lips as he mapped out her curves until he reached the apex of her thighs. Row was the only man she'd ever let between her legs this way, and she was glad she'd saved that part of herself for him alone. He teased her with his lips and tongue, driving

her forward to the height of pleasure, his hands wrapped around her thighs and holding her close as he feasted on her.

She screamed his name, writhing under him as he pushed her to another crest of pleasure, his fingers twisting and pumping as she shuddered under his touch. He climbed up her body and she lifted her legs to wrap them around his hips as his cock pressed into her slowly, filling her perfectly. He growled as their bodies met, and she pressed her hand against his cheek. She wanted to say a million things in that moment, to tell him all of the emotions that were rising up in her. Instead she chose the simplest and most powerful phrase she knew, which she had only ever said to him: "I love you."

"I love you, too, Kammie. My sweet, beautiful *adara*."

They made love slowly, keeping their gazes locked together as pleasure washed over them and carried them into bliss. After they'd come down from the heavens, they ate and talked and then made love once more, reveling in their time together in the sacred cave. As she drifted to sleep lying on top of Row, a fur over them both, she considered the strange turn her life had taken. One moment she'd been living a not-so-content life as an omega, unsure if she'd ever find anyone who would be able to handle her scars. The next, she was being hauled through the woods by her truemate, a demanding male who thought her scars were badges of honor proving she'd been tough enough to survive. She'd never felt as stripped bare as she did with Row, but she didn't fear that now. She could see her scars not as crippling marks to hold her down, but as proof that she was a survivor. She'd lost out on a lot because of them and her pack's belief that they made her weak, but she didn't see herself as weak any longer.

It had only taken falling in love with a bear and a few naked conversations to get her to the place where she saw herself as a valuable woman, with an opinion worth hearing and a life worth living. She owed it to herself to live her life to the fullest, and that included this new chapter with Row. Eventually they'd have kids and she'd teach them to never be ashamed of anything they went through. She'd be the role model to her children she'd never had herself.

She smiled and let sleep claim her.

CHAPTER NINE

Row felt Kammie's weight slide off him suddenly. She screamed in alarm, and he shot to his feet with a warning roar as he watched her being dragged from the chamber by something he couldn't see. He raced after her, lunging to catch her hand as she was slammed into the side of the tunnel. Her fingers slipped from his and he bellowed in rage as he charged out of the cave and found himself facing Hector and three males Row recognized from Hector's sleuth.

"Release my mate," Row demanded. Kammie lay naked on the snow, facedown and unmoving. He could see the rise and fall of her chest, so he knew she was alive, but he could also smell her blood.

Hector tilted his head and blinked slowly. He placed a booted foot on Kammie's back, and Row snarled. "I could kill her right now."

"What do you want?" Row forced himself to think past the blinding rage. Not only had Kammie been literally snatched from his arms, but she was in danger.

"I want your claws pulled out," Hector said, making a sweeping gesture with the hunting knife he brandished. "I want your blood spilled and your life ended, but not before you watch me fuck your mate and then hand her off to my friends."

"That will *not* happen," Row said, his bear surfacing enough for his body to bulk and fur to sprout from his skin.

“I think it will. I think,” Hector tapped his chin with the tip of the blade, his eyes gleaming feverishly, “that my friends will make sure you can’t do anything but watch: watch me fuck her, watch me take what’s yours and make it mine, over and over, while she begs for mercy.”

Row swept his gaze over the three males standing with Hector. They were savage fighters; Row had faced all of them at one time or another and beaten them. That was one-on-one, however. Row was a great fighter, but he wasn’t sure he could take on three males at once, and he was certain they weren’t planning to fight honorably.

His bear bellowed, and he let the rage bloom inside him until it eclipsed everything else. He had to save Kammie. He’d promised to keep her safe for the rest of their lives, and their lives sure as fuck weren’t ending today.

Letting loose a savage roar, he leaped at the males as his shift took over. They weren’t playing fair, so he wasn’t going to play fair, either. The males shouted in surprise as he landed on top of one of them, hearing the satisfying crunch of bones as his heavy bulk hit full-force. Vengeance rode him hard. No one took what was his. No one threatened his mate.

Kammie felt something press hard into the center of her back as she came to. Her head ached and her vision was blurry. She blinked rapidly to clear her sight, watching as Row roared loud enough to hurt her ears and flew through the air, shifting into an enormous bear. Whatever had been holding her down disappeared as the scent of blood and the sound of shattering bones and screams of pain filled the air.

Ice and snow stung her skin as she pushed herself up and raced into the chamber. She navigated the tunnel and skidded to a stop on the furs, facing a male with shaggy blond hair holding a knife. He pressed it to her throat, his eyes glinting in the flickering candlelight.

“I knew I’d get you one way or another,” he said darkly.

Row couldn't get to her unless he shifted into his human form, and she could still hear him fighting outside the cave. She was on her own. Fear slithered over her, and for a moment she wanted to curl up and take whatever beating the male had planned for her. But as she stared up at him, she realized she wouldn't survive if she didn't fight. Row was fighting three males outside the cave, and although she was no fighter herself, she had one ace up her sleeve—her wolf.

She willed her pulse to slow, and her wolf rose to the surface, waiting for the moment she could let her free. "What do you want with us?"

The knife tip pressed more firmly into her throat. He was tense, his eyes wild and his chest heaving as he snarled. "Suffering."

Fuck. That.

She'd already suffered more than enough in her lifetime, and Row—who she could hear roaring outside the cave—had suffered through monthly battles, too. As the male's hand curled tighter on the knife, she noticed the rough marks on his thumb. She realized he was the one who'd tried to claw off Row's dick, which was a part of her mate's anatomy she happened to really enjoy.

What would such a male do to her? She wasn't about to find out.

She thought about Row, fighting against multiple opponents outside the cave. This was one guy. One nutcase with a knife. She'd faced off against one of those males in her youth and survived. She could do it again.

"Go to hell," she said, letting her wolf free. She pushed herself to shift as quickly as she ever had. Her beast exploded from her, anxious to harm the male who'd hurt their mate. He'd lost his claws and clearly lost his mind, and she wasn't about to spend a second longer with a knife pressed to her throat.

He shouted in rage as she shifted and lunged for him. The knife swung down and her shoulder burned as it cut through

her, but she ignored the pain and leaped, jaws wide and fangs ready, sinking them into his thigh. Her body twisted as she slid between his thighs, and he screamed, slamming his fist into her nose. Blood filled her mouth and she dug her teeth into his flesh, tearing through his jeans. Row shouted Kammie's name as he raced into the chamber, crashing into Hector and knocking him away from her. Row roared, a deep and furious sound, and grabbed Hector's head, twisting it sharply to the side and ending his life with a loud crack.

Her mate lifted her from the floor and cradled her in his arms, hurrying with her from the chamber. He leaned against the cave and buried his face in her neck, his whole body trembling.

“Are you okay?” His voice was rough.

Kammie whined softly. She knew she was bleeding from the cut on her shoulder, but all she could feel was relief that Row had managed to come out of his shift fast enough to help her. She wasn't sure if she would've been able to get away from Hector on her own.

The sound of racing footsteps filled the air. Row stiffened for a moment and then relaxed.

“We're over here,” he called as Fayar and two other males came into view.

“We heard you roaring and came as fast as we could. Damn,” Fayar said. “What in the hell happened here?”

Three males lay motionless on the ground.

“Hector came for me. He's in the cave.”

“Dead, I trust,” Fayar said.

“Yeah. Kammie needs help, she's bleeding.”

Fayar gestured to one of the males and said, “Get his body out of there.” Then he took his phone out of his pocket and made a call, asking whoever answered to meet Row and Kammie at Row's house.

“You did well,” Fayar said. “Head home and wait for Tessa; she'll give Kammie whatever medical help she needs.”

And be sure to get checked out yourself.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know, but humor me. We’ll handle things from here. I’ll stop by later today and see you.”

Row straightened and seemed to wobble slightly before he let out a gruff growl and moved past Fayar, toward home. Kammie whined softly and licked Row’s throat, and he hugged her close.

Row didn’t bother gathering their clothes from the chamber. Fayar would handle everything. All he wanted to do was get Kammie home so Tessa, the sleuth doctor, could help her. He knew that wolves healed fast, but the cut on her shoulder was still bleeding even though his hand was pressed tightly to it. He strode naked through the woods until he reached his home. Tessa was waiting on the back porch, a medical bag in hand.

“I called your mom and she’s on her way over. I wasn’t sure how long it would take you to get here.”

“Thanks. I walked as quickly as I could without jarring her.”

Row led Tessa into the house. He tugged a blanket from the back of the couch and stretched it over the cushions, then laid his sweetheart on her undamaged side. Her paws flexed and she whimpered, the sound tearing through him like the knife that had struck her. “I’m so fucking sorry,” he whispered, kneeling beside her.

Tessa inspected Kammie’s wound. The front door opened, and Row looked up to see his mom rush inside. “Oh, honey,” she said, stopping next to the couch. “What happened?”

“Hector showed up with three bears from his sleuth and pulled Kammie from my arms. While I was tangling with his three friends outside, Hector cornered Kammie in the cave. I was lucky I could force myself back into my human form, because my bear couldn’t fit through the opening.”

Her eyes flashed and she growled in the back of her throat. “Tell me they’re dead.”

He nodded sharply.

Tessa spread the fur aside to get at the wound on Kammie’s shoulder, and squeezed a thick liquid into the cut. Kammie snapped her jaws together as she snarled.

Row bared his teeth at Tessa for hurting Kammie.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s just a liquid bandage. It’ll stop the bleeding and hold the edges of the wound together as she heals. It’s a deep cut, but it should heal without scarring after she’s able to shift back into her human form.”

Row stroked Kammie’s head. Her bright amber eyes stayed on his as Tessa closed the wound. When Kammie was taken care of, Row let Tessa examine him. His ankle ached and he was pretty sure he’d broken a couple of ribs, but aside from several claw marks, he hadn’t been badly hurt. Considering that the three males had advanced on him at once, he knew he could’ve easily died on the ground outside the chamber, leaving Kammie at their mercy.

When Row was bandaged up, Tessa said, “When Kammie shifts back, the wound should be healed. If it starts to bleed again or if it doesn’t heal, give me a call. She looks exhausted, so let her sleep and stay in her shift as long as she can.”

“Wolves heal better in their shifts, right?”

She nodded. “Particularly bad injuries sometimes require shifting back and forth over the course of a day or two, but Kammie’s wound isn’t that serious.”

“She bled so much.”

“But she’s going to be fine.” Tessa put her hand on Row’s shoulder, and Kammie growled. Tessa lifted her hand quickly and smiled. “Sorry, Kammie. Be well, and call if you need me.”

Tessa, who was his mother’s age, walked with her to the front door and they spoke quietly for a moment. Row tweaked Kammie’s ear. “Is my little wolf jealous?”

Her lip curled and she huffed.

“There’s nothing to be jealous of. She’s like an aunt to me. Her and my mom have been friends for a long time, and her son and I were good friends in school. The sleuth is like a big family, and we all watch out for each other. One time, Tessa came to school to pick me up when my mom wasn’t able to come get me. I’d been in a fight and gotten sent home. Tessa dragged me from the principal’s office by my ear and gave me a good talking-to before she took me home. Then my mom did the same thing.” He grinned.

Kammie’s lip lowered and she whimpered. He kissed her muzzle and stood. “I’m going to clean up. Mom?”

She turned around after waving at Tessa and shutting the door. “Yes, honey?”

“Would you grill up a few steaks for us? I’m sure Kammie would like to eat something, if she doesn’t fall asleep first.”

“Will do. Are you okay?”

He glanced at the couch where Kammie was watching him intently. “I am now.”

His mom nodded and he headed to the shower to clean the blood and dirt from his skin, careful to avoid the bandages Tessa had put on. By the time he came out into the family room, Kammie was chewing on a thick steak while his mom watched. She gestured to the coffee table and Row’s stomach growled as he picked up a plate with a steak on it.

“Feel better?” his mom asked.

“Definitely.”

“Good. It’s not the best way to start off your mating, but I’m actually thankful that it happened.”

His mouth fell open. “What?”

“Oh, no! I mean, I’m not happy you and Kammie were hurt, I’m just glad that Hector is dead, and his cronies with him. I always wondered if he might come back for retribution.”

Row nodded. “I expected to see him again at a battle at some point. It never occurred to me that he’d come after me this way. I feel like I let Kammie down because I wasn’t prepared for this. We were entirely vulnerable in the mating cave, and I trusted I could keep her safe.”

“The mating cave is sacred; there was no reason for you to anticipate that someone would attack you there. And only a coward attacks in a group like that.”

Row agreed. Hector was a good fighter, but he wasn’t a good person. Row had no regrets for ending his life, or the lives of the three males who’d come with him.

His mom sat with him until he finished eating, and then she left, promising to stop by later. He lifted a sleeping Kammie into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. The liquid bandage had done the trick and sealed the wound. He couldn’t scent any more fresh blood on her. He stroked her fur. She was beautiful—gray and brown mottled fur, with a white belly and paws. Settling around her, he rested one hand on her stomach and closed his eyes, willing himself to stop thinking about how close he’d come to losing her. He didn’t want to envision a life without his sweetheart in it.

CHAPTER TEN

*K*ammie woke up and found herself back in her human form. She'd shifted while she was asleep. She wasn't sure how long she'd been out of it, but her wound had healed completely without leaving a scar. She sat up and rubbed her fingers over the place where Hector had struck with the blade.

Row touched her back and she looked down at him.

"Are you okay, *Adara*?"

"Yeah. No scar." She twisted to show him her skin.

"I'm glad, but it didn't matter to me. I would rather you have a scar from him and be alive than the alternative."

"Me, too. Are you all right?"

"I'm still healing, but I'm fine."

She inspected the bandages that covered his claw marks. She growled, and he cupped her cheek. "You and I are both alive. That's what matters the most."

"If they weren't dead I would kill them."

"My fierce mate."

She leaned over him and planted her hands on either side of his body. She gazed into his eyes. "You've changed me completely."

His brows lifted. "What?"

“You charged into my life like a wrecking ball. Now *I’m* like a wrecking ball.”

He laughed. “How so?”

“When Hector came into the cave, I knew he wanted to hurt me and kill you. There was a part of me that wanted to curl up and let him do his worst, but I knew I couldn’t live without you. It’s strange to think of myself as standing up to someone so scary, but I did. I attacked *him*.”

Row sobered. “You could’ve been killed. I would’ve preferred that you run.”

“Never,” she swore, baring her teeth.

He curled his arms around her and pulled her against his chest, sighing deeply as he brushed his lips over her forehead. “I’m sorry that my past came back to haunt us. I’m sorry I didn’t keep you safe. I’m especially sorry that you had to defend yourself. I never wanted you to have to do that.”

“It’s because of you that I had the courage to stand up for myself. You’ve taught me a lot in a short amount of time. I don’t want to be a doormat. I sure as hell wasn’t going to let an asshole with a grudge rape me and pass me around like a party favor.”

He growled, his whole body vibrating. Then he hugged her tighter. “I’m thankful you’re in my arms now, Kammie.”

She lifted her head and smiled. “I don’t want to keep being angry about what could’ve happened. I want to let it go, the way I’ve let go of a lot of things since I met you.”

“Like your insistence on wearing clothes?”

She chuckled. “Old habits die hard, but you’re worth making new habits for.”

His fingers crept down her back slowly, and he cupped her ass and ground her into his erection. “Let’s make it a habit to make love every morning.”

“And at night too?”

“Of course. I can’t sleep right without you naked and satisfied in my arms.”

“That sounds like a great habit.”

Kammie passed the grape jelly to a female bear named Desendra who sat on her left. “I was thinking about learning how to make jelly,” Kammie said.

“I have a great recipe that uses grape juice, it’s super easy. Unless you don’t like grape jelly, then it’s just a time-waster,” Desendra said, laughing.

“It would be fun to give out jars of jelly as a gifts.”

“I’ll teach you. I also like to make strawberry jelly the old-fashioned way. It takes a hell of a lot of work, but it’s delicious.”

Kammie and Row were seated at a long table in a big building in the sleuth territory. Kammie had thought it was for storage, until she found out it was used for gatherings of the sleuth and had a commercial kitchen in the back. Because she and Row were interrupted on their mating night and they’d both been injured, the sleuth pushed their celebration breakfast to that night, and Kammie had looked forward to getting to know the bears.

Row’s mom sat across from them, next to Gloria and Fayar, who sat at the head of the table. “I love Desendra’s cherry preserves. She sells them at a local market in the summer and makes a killing.”

“The jellies fund my shoe addiction.” Desendra pointed to the floor, where she tapped the toe of a pair of lavender suede boots. “If you want to learn how to make jams and jellies, I can teach you. We can work together, and split the profits.”

“I’d really like that,” Kammie said.

Row squeezed her thigh, and she glanced at him. “Are you ready to stand up in front of everyone and promise to be the

best mate to me in the world? Give me a blow job every morning and rub my feet?”

All the females at the table snarled, and Row laughed. “I’m just kidding,” he said, putting his hands up in defense.

His mom stabbed the air with her fork. “You better be.”

“I am, I promise. I’m the one vowing to be the best mate, because Kammie deserves the best of everything.”

“And the blow jobs?” Desendra asked.

Kammie blushed as Row’s mom laughed.

“I don’t think that’s what they’re called when it’s the guy on the girl,” Gloria said. “Maybe you could vow to lick her really good every morning. Now *that’s* an excellent way to start the day,” she said, winking at Fayar.

Kammie’s blush deepened. “Oh my gosh.”

Row leaned over and kissed her cheek and then whispered in her ear, “Every morning.”

“Only if you let me return the favor.”

He wiggled his brows.

“I need to find a mate,” Desendra said. “One who will lick me a lot. I like the idea of daily foot rubs, too.”

Fayar said, “Before we end up with a laundry list of things the males will be doing for the females...”

“Doing *to* the females,” Gloria said.

Laughing, Fayar continued, “Right. Let’s get to our ceremony. We’ve got a fierce female to bring into our sleuth.”

The bears clapped and cheered as Kammie and Row stood, following Fayar to the center of the building. Tables ringed the empty area, and Kammie could feel everyone watching them. There was a time in her life when she would’ve hated for people to be staring at her, but now she was reveling in being with her mate and joining the group.

Kammie unbuttoned her long-sleeved flannel shirt and tied it around her waist. She was wearing a tight-fitting teal cami

that displayed the scars on her arms and chest. Row took her hands in his and looked down at her in adoration.

“My fierce, beautiful mate,” he whispered.

Fayar spoke loudly. “Once upon a time, shifters stayed within their breed groups. Wolves mated wolves, bears mated bears, humans stayed the hell away from us.”

The bears chuckled.

“Now, we welcome any and all mates. Finding a truemate is an event to be celebrated. We don’t look at these two and see a bear and a wolf—we see two people who love each other deeply enough to kill. There is no greater love than that of true mates.” Fayar placed his hands on Kammie’s and Row’s.

Row said, “I vow myself to my truemate, Kammie. I swear to be the best mate for her. To treat her with the love and respect she deserves, and to always think of her first. I welcome her into my life and my heart.”

Kammie repeated the vows to Row, her eyes filling with tears as she spoke.

“As king of this sleuth, I welcome Kammie into our group as a member and a treasured mate. If any object, let them raise their voices now or remain silent forever.”

Kammie’s heart pounded as she waited to see if anyone would say she didn’t belong. Row squeezed her hands gently and smiled.

“I declare Kammie formally a member of the sleuth. Welcome!”

The bears lifted their heads and roared. The sound was so loud that the building shook. Kammie howled as Row joined in, and she felt, for the first time, that she was finally, truly home. The bears had opened their arms to her as if they’d been waiting all this time for Row’s mate. She hadn’t known a shifter group like the sleuth, and she was deliriously thankful to be one of them now.

Fayar squeezed their hands and said, “Welcome, Kammie. May your union be blessed.”

Row pulled her into his arms and kissed her as the bears cheered.

“I can’t wait to hunt with you,” Row said as he lifted from her mouth. “The next full moon is going to be amazing.”

“Maybe I won’t let you catch me this time,” she said.

“Oh, I’ll catch you,” he said, his voice husky. “Again and again.”

The following morning, Row walked Kammie to the gathering building, where Desendra waited to begin her first lesson on jam and jelly making. It was Row’s first day in his new position on the training team. He wore a black, long-sleeved shirt and dark jeans with hiking boots. The shirt fit him so snugly that she could see the outline of his abs, and she wanted to lift the fabric and explore him.

He tweaked her chin. “If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to be late for my first day of work.”

“I can’t help it that you’re so lickable.”

“I’m not sure that’s a word,” he said, laughing, “but I like it. You’re lickable, too.”

“Oh man, I need to get a mate!” Desendra said from the open door of the building.

Row kissed Kammie on the cheek. “I’ll be back to get you in six hours. Have fun, *Adara*.”

“I’ll take good care of her,” Desendra said.

Kammie waved at Row and entered the building. Desendra pulled the door shut behind her, and Kammie stamped the snow from her boots and took off her scarf and jacket, hanging them over the back of a chair. “I can’t wait until spring.”

“Me, too, although my bear does love snow. When I’m outside in the cold, all I want to do is find a cave and take a nap. I think it’s because regular bears hibernate and there’s a

part of me that wants to do that. Could you imagine sleeping for three months? I'd definitely need a bikini wax when I woke up."

Kammie laughed. "Fall makes me feel like that. Like I should be finding someplace warm to curl up."

She followed Desendra into the kitchen and washed her hands. "We're going to make an enormous batch of grape jelly. After we get that done, we'll use peaches I froze from last summer's harvest and make preserves. They look so beautiful in the glass jars. Are there any kinds of jelly or jam that you'd like to learn to make specifically?"

"Row likes blackberry jam on toast for breakfast."

"There are wild blackberries in the woods, but they're such a hassle to pick because of the thorns. We can buy them from the grocery store."

"They make thornless bushes; maybe we could plant some?"

"Great idea. See, I knew we'd work well together!"

As Kammie and Desendra worked, they talked about the sleuth and females' roles within the group. As Row had explained, the sleuth had no true ranking like the pack, but the males understood their place and did their jobs. Only Fayar had a rank, and his youngest son was poised to take over when he stepped down.

"Is Fayar's son mated?"

"No. He'll take a mate before he takes over kingship. The females need a leader of their own, someone who can speak on their behalf to the king. Gloria is a wonderful mate to Fayar and a good leader for us."

"Row said that Fayar doesn't show affection to Gloria in public because he doesn't want her to be taken from him in an attempt to get him to step down."

Desendra nodded. "The king before Fayar was his father. His mate, Fayar's mother, was kidnapped and tortured by a small group of male bears who wanted to take over the

territory. By the time his father found her, she was dead. He slaughtered the males and vowed to never mate again. I think Fayar doesn't want anyone to know how much he loves Gloria, but the sleuth knows. It would be impossible to hide that kind of love from people who know each other well."

"Bears love fiercely," Kammie said.

"So true."

"I know some wolves who love fiercely as well, but our people are very different, especially in how females are treated."

Desendra said, "I'm disappointed with how females are treated in your pack. You should never have been treated as if you were of no value. I've only known you a day and I already adore you. You're sweet and funny, and you survived a shitty childhood to become a female fierce enough to defend yourself."

Kammie looked down at the batch of grape jelly. "I never thought I'd be anything but what I'd been defined as by the pack. It's very freeing to be able to make my own choices."

Desendra nodded. "It's never a good idea to let others tell you who you are."

Kammie knew that was true. She wasn't going to let anyone limit her again. She was her own person. She'd found strength at the core of herself—because of Row and his confidence in her, but also for herself. She wished she'd been strong enough to fight off her uncle, but there was no use in wishing for things that were in the past. She had a bright future ahead of her, and that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Row smiled as he listened to Kammie tell his mom all about Wilde Creek while they drove down Main Street, heading to her house. Time had flown while they'd stayed in the sleuth, and Row would've rather done anything than bring her back to the people who hadn't protected her when she was most vulnerable. But they were coming back with a good purpose—to pack her the hell up.

“It's a wonderful little town,” his mom said.

“I've lived here my whole life. It's a mixture of wolves and humans. Wolves own a lot of the businesses and hire pack members to work for them. I like the sleuth, though. It's self-sustaining without feeling isolated.”

Row pulled to a stop in front of Kammie's home. The back of his truck was filled with packing boxes. None of the furniture was Kammie's—it had all come with the house—so they hadn't needed to rent a trailer. When they left Wilde Creek, his mom would drive Kammie's car and follow them.

“Do we need to check in with the alphas, since I'm a stranger to your people?” his mom asked.

Kammie said, “I texted Alpha Brynn that we were on the way and told her you were coming with us. I said we'd stop by and see them tonight.”

Row got out of the truck and Kammie and his mom joined him. “I hope you can pack fast,” he said. “I want to get home.”

“You're such a homebody,” Kammie teased.

“It’s a good thing when I have your sweet face to come home to.”

Her cheeks pinked and he chuckled as he kissed her.

Kammie was reaching for her key to unlock the door when it opened and Dani appeared, throwing her arms around their mother and hugging her. “I’m so glad you’re here!”

“Oh, I missed you, sweet girl,” his mom said. He could scent her tears and he put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

“Come and meet my mate, Mom,” Dani said.

They followed her into the house and found several boxes stacked neatly against one wall. Adam straightened from where he had been putting a bunch of DVDs into the top box, and smiled.

“Welcome back.”

“What did you do?” Kammie asked.

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

Kammie looked up at Row and grinned. “Did you know about this?”

“No, but I’m glad. I hate packing.”

“Me too,” Kammie said.

“Me three,” their mom said.

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

“I always wanted a sister,” Dani said.

Kammie stepped away as Dani introduced their mom to Adam. She joined Row in the kitchen, leaning against him and

wrapping her arms around his waist. “I can’t believe how sweet your sister is.”

“She’s your sister too.”

“I know.”

Row kissed the top of her head and looked around the kitchen. The cabinet doors were open and the shelves were empty. Dani and Adam had been working hard to pack up for Kammie, and Row was thankful. The less time they were in Wilde Creek, the less chance there was for someone to hurt her feelings. She was a much stronger female now than she was when they first met, but he couldn’t help but want to protect her from anything bad.

They joined Adam, Dani, and their mom in the family room and began to help with what was left of the packing. It wasn’t much; the house was almost completely packed up. It didn’t take long for the five of them to finish, load the truck and car with boxes, and make plans to have dinner at Luna’s, a pack-owned restaurant in town. But first they had to stop at the alphas’ home, which Row wasn’t looking forward to.

Acksel Moore leaned back on the couch and listened to his mate talk to Kammie about leaving the pack. The she-wolf had alerted them she was coming back to town after nearly two weeks away with her mate, and that she’d brought her mother-in-law with her. He could see that Brynn was upset, but he knew it was because she liked Kammie and didn’t want her to go.

When the call ended, Brynn turned into his shoulder and he hugged her close, kissing the top of her head. “It’ll be okay, sweetheart,” he said.

“I’m going to miss her.”

“Of course, but she’s got a mate who doesn’t fit in with us.”

“He would if you’d change the laws.”

Acksel stifled a sigh. She had no idea how hard it was to be the alpha male. He'd made many changes to pack law since he mated her, but doing so meant messing with the traditions of their people. He was all for progress, but he couldn't just scrap everything because his mate had a tender heart.

"The laws are there for a reason. I know you're worried about the future and our pups, and I am also to an extent, but I can only make so many changes at once or I risk losing pack members."

"We've lost some anyway, since you mated me." She tipped her head back and looked at him. He was struck momentarily mute by her beauty. That she was his, and willing to let him see her naked, made him thank his lucky stars every night.

"Because I changed the laws to do it. I know you don't like the hierarchy system, sweetheart, but it's in place for a reason. The strongest protect the weakest. And before you protest, I know that my predecessor failed to keep Kammie safe and she's paid the price for that all these years. I can't change how people think. The females see her as weak, partly because of the scars, but partly because the former alpha didn't care enough to stop what was happening to her."

"The laws say that injured males and females are the lowest of the ranks, and never allows them to change their status unless they mate someone of higher rank. I know you wouldn't allow someone to beat a child the way that Kammie's uncle hurt her, but it's just monstrously unfair that she's been held down all these years by other females because of something out of her control."

He stared into his mate's beautiful eyes. "What is it you really want here?"

"I want everyone to pull their own weight equally. Did you know that there are females who never lift a finger? If we say that all omegas work for the pack, then why don't *all* of them actually work?"

"You'd have the work divvied up more fairly."

She nodded. "I think someone should be in charge of the omegas who understands each one's particular skills and needs. Some of the omegas need help, but that's what the stewards are for. We've got females and males in their twenties who aren't lifting a finger for anyone but themselves. I just found out that Kammie used to clean some females' homes for them. Just because she has some scars on her body doesn't mean she's a maid, for goodness sake."

He kissed Brynn and she made a soft sound in her throat. "You're so caring, sweetheart," he murmured against her lips.

"I care most about you," she said. "But I also care about the pack members, and I wish there was a more equal distribution of the workload. Dade is handling the stewards, and I love that, especially with Adam and Dani joining Jeremiah and Honey, but I wish there was someone like a steward who watched over the omegas. If Kammie and Row were staying, we could've put them in charge."

Acksel didn't think that would've worked. Although Row was fierce, Kammie would have trouble getting some of the omegas to accept her in a position of power. Wolves could be weird about who bossed who around. It was easier with males, who could simply fight it out. Omegas didn't fight for rank.

"I want to have a going-away party for Kammie tonight. I talked to Dani and Adam about it, and they're going to stop here first so Kammie can say goodbye to us, but we'll really be sending her off with a nice party."

"If that's what you want."

"I think it's a good idea. I want to show her that she's important to me and to the pack. She might not have been treated well, but there are people who will miss her dearly, including me. It wasn't just because she cooked for us, but because she always had a smile on her face and was willing to do anything to help. She has a really giving heart and I think that should be celebrated. I want her to have a good last memory of the pack and to wish her well in the future."

"We can do that, just tell me what you need and I'll arrange it."

“I want the ranked males to help out, not the omegas.”

He blinked in surprise. “What?”

“I know I can’t change everything now, but I’d like to do this. Just for tonight, let the ranked males help out and get a taste of how hard the omegas work.”

Acksel didn’t think it would go over well with the ranked males to do something previously done by omegas, but he could see Brynn’s point. And he’d even help himself. Mentally making a list of males who would do the work without being assholes about it, he leaned in to kiss his mate, but she drew back slightly.

She gripped his wrist and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t want you to mark Kammie.”

“What?” Acksel blinked, wondering what the hell she was talking about.

“For her to leave the pack. I won’t let you put another scar on her. I let you slide about a lot of things, Acksel, but I’m putting my foot down. She leaves the pack without a single scar from you or I’m going to become very difficult.” Her eyes blazed brightly.

“Difficult? You mean you’re *not* difficult right now?” he teased, and she snarled softly.

“You haven’t seen me be difficult.”

He snorted, and then threaded his hands through her hair and drew her closer. He kissed her nose and her cheeks before brushing his lips lightly over her. She sighed and melted into him, and he smiled inwardly, knowing how easy it was to distract her with sex. Of course, later she’d remember and then she’d be pissed.

“I wasn’t planning to mark her. I only mark those who have been forced to leave, like the males who tried to hurt my sister and eventually came for you. The laws are very clear—in instances where a pack member leaves because they’ve found a mate or because of extenuating circumstances like job loss or family emergency, they leave with the alphas’ blessing

and aren't marked." He rubbed his thumbs behind her ears and she smiled. "No need to put your foot down, my fierce mate."

She opened her eyes and smiled mischievously. "I'd like to put my foot down about you leaving your underwear on the bathroom floor."

He growled and pulled her close, kissing her as she giggled. "I love you."

"Oh Acksel, I love you too. Even if you do leave your underwear *everywhere*."

Row stared out the window at the alphas' home. The house was dark, and the guards who'd been patrolling the yard the first time he and Kammie had come to visit weren't visible.

"Are you sure they said we should come tonight?" he asked. His mom, sister, and brother-in-law were in the backseat. "Maybe Brynn meant tomorrow night."

"I'm positive," Kammie said. "I told her we were going to dinner and she asked if we could stop by before, since she's been going to bed earlier because of her pregnancy."

Row unbuckled. "I'll leave the SUV on so you don't freeze out here."

"I'd like to come meet the alphas," his mom said.

Row turned in the seat. "Why?"

She shrugged. "I've never met alpha wolves before. Plus, I'd like to meet the people who run the pack that Dani's a part of now."

"I'm not really in the pack," Dani pointed out, "since I'm not a wolf."

"But you're going to be working with Adam as a steward, and...oh really, do I have to explain myself? I'm your mother and I said I'm going," she huffed.

Kammie chuckled. "It's fine with me. Brynn's really sweet."

"I'm sure she is," his mom said.

Row turned off the engine and got out, coming around quickly to Kammie's side to guide her up the sidewalk. He offered his mom his other elbow and she latched on with a chuckle. "Such a gentleman."

"You always said chivalry was important," he said.

"Thanks for that," Kammie said.

His mom laughed. "His father was old-school chivalrous. Row takes after him in many ways."

He could hear the sadness creep into her voice. Even after all these years, she still missed his dad. He wished he could've known him.

They walked up the sidewalk and onto the front porch. Row didn't think anyone was home, and he figured they'd all trooped up to the house for nothing. Kammie rang the bell and leaned against him with a yawn.

He was about to ask her if she wanted to skip dinner and go to bed early, when the front door swung open and Acksel stood in the doorway. "Come on in."

He disappeared into the darkness. Row's hackles rose immediately, but Kammie moved forward, and he wasn't about to let her go in without him. As soon as she crossed the threshold, an overhead light clicked on and a large group of people shouted, "Surprise!"

Kammie pressed her hand to her heart as she gasped. Noisemakers were blown and the people cheered and clapped. Row looked at his mom and sister; they were smiling in a way that told him they already knew about the surprise party.

"So that's why you didn't need to explain yourself?" Row asked his mom.

She winked. "Sue me for liking surprises."

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

Brynn moved forward and hugged Kammie, slowly pulling her away from Row and into the group of wolves. He let her go even though he didn’t want to, because he knew it was important to her to get to say goodbye to her people.

He joined Kammie and extended his hand to Acksel.

“Thank you,” Row said.

“Kammie was an asset to the pack. She’s going to be missed.”

Brynn clapped her hands and the crowd quieted. She put her arm around Kammie and said, “I can’t believe you’re leaving, but I’m so happy you found your truemate. Hunting’s a good thing I guess, huh?” She smiled and winked at Kammie.

“It can be,” Kammie murmured, casting a glance at Row.

“I know you’re heading out to dinner, but I hope you have time to stay and have some finger food and a piece of cake.”

To Row’s surprise, the males who’d been guarding the house the last time walked out of the kitchen with platters of food and set them on a card table against one wall. Kammie’s brow furrowed, and Acksel cleared his throat. “Brynn suggested that it wouldn’t hurt for the guards to know how to peel carrots and set the table.”

“I was a real slave-driver today,” Brynn said.

Adam introduced Row and Dani’s mom to the alphas while the crowd mingled and ate. Brynn and a female named Mia bracketed Kammie on the couch, asking for details about the bear sleuth and what she was going to be doing in Oakville.

Someone cleared his throat and Row turned to face a tall, broad-shouldered male holding a young boy. “I’m Malachi Slattery. This is my son, Jack.” He gestured to the couch where another female, with dark blonde hair, joined the others

on the couch. “My mate is Nila. She’s sad to see Kammie go. When she had trouble with her former mate, Kammie helped out by letting Nila’s friend stay with her while she recovered from an attack.”

“Kammie will miss some aspects of the pack,” Row said.

Jack wiggled in his arms and said in a very stern baby voice, “Carrot!” Malachi put the boy down, tousling his hair and smiling as the boy hurried to Nila. “I’m glad that things will be different for her with your people. Brynn, my sister, and my mate went to see Dani, and she told them about the sleuth. I’m sure you don’t have a good opinion of wolves right now, but things will get better with time.”

“Your alpha seems happy to carry on tradition.”

“He is, but he’s also anxious about his own family’s future. If his children don’t shift, they’ll be omegas. For an alpha male, that would be hard to take. I personally don’t care if mine and Nila’s children shift. I just want them to be happy.”

Row nodded. “I think that’s a wish all parents have.”

“The good ones, anyway.” Malachi said. “Dani won’t technically be part of the pack, but she’s going to become an honorary steward, and she and Adam will work with Jeremiah and Honey, who are running late because they were working with the retirees.”

“What’s a steward?”

“A wolf who is assigned to help out the feeble or retired wolves in the pack. It’s not technically a ranked position, but it’s not an omega either. Dani, Honey, Jeremiah, and Adam don’t work for anyone but Dade, who is Acksel’s dad, and they help the retirees. The pack pays them a salary as well. I’ve heard that two of the retired females are already teaching Dani how to quilt.”

The front door opened and in walked a male and female. Malachi said, “That’s Jeremiah and Honey. I’ll go get them so I can introduce you.”

After meeting Jeremiah and Honey, Row relaxed, not realizing that he’d been worried about Dani’s place in the

pack. Honey and Dani hugged like old friends, and Row's mom seemed content with her daughter's new home and friends. Dani could take care of herself, and she had a strong mate at her back, too.

The pack wasn't as welcoming to outsiders as the sleuth, but it had been Kammie's home for her entire life. There was good along with the bad. Row decided to put the past where it belonged and to stop holding the current generation of wolves accountable for the shortcomings of the previous one. Sure, they'd treated his sweetheart badly, but they had grown up believing that was the way things were supposed to be. It didn't make sense to him, but he didn't care any longer. Dani was safe and loved, and Kammie was going to live with him in Oakville, where they could start the next chapter of their lives.

He leaned over the back of the couch and kissed Kammie's cheek. "We can have dinner out tomorrow night if you'd like to stay longer and visit with your friends."

She beamed at him. "You don't mind? It would delay us leaving another day."

"If you're happy, I'm happy, little wolf. Don't you know that by now?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

The following day, Kammie pulled into a parking space in front of the mall and took a deep breath. Ever since their mating night in the den, she'd been aware that she had no sexy lingerie. Well, she'd always known that, but it had never mattered to her before what her undies looked like because she was the only one who saw them. She went for comfortable, not sexy. She knew Row didn't care about her panties or bras or what she slept in. He preferred her naked and took every opportunity to tell her so.

"I'm really doing this," she said out loud.

Before she could lose her nerve or talk herself out of it, she pushed open her door and got out. The frigid air caught her by surprise, but she just wrapped her scarf around her neck a second time and shut the door firmly. She was doing this for Row, but also for herself. She was actually going to stand in front of a mirror in a changing room and try on lingerie.

Holy freaking crap.

Hurrying to the entrance, she waited a brief moment for the doors to open automatically, and then stepped into the warmth of the mall. A large directory stood a few feet in front of her, and she used it to locate a lingerie store on the second floor.

When she told Row she wanted to go shopping, he'd wanted to come with her, but she hadn't wanted an audience. Row would be supportive, but he'd also probably tell her she didn't need to buy anything fancy on his behalf. Then she'd

have to explain that it wasn't just for him, although that would be a bonus. She was slowly getting comfortable in her own skin, and buying something pretty was another step in the right direction.

She paused for a brief moment at the entrance to the lingerie shop to gather her courage when a familiar voice said, "Hi Kammie!"

Her eyes widened as Mia Slattery, a fellow pack member, straightened from where she'd been leaning over a table of panties.

"Hi, Mia," Kammie said. Her feet were firmly rooted to the floor, and her cheeks were pinking. She was trying to have a milestone moment—by herself—and now she wasn't alone.

Mia moved to her swiftly and said in a low voice, "Are you okay? You look a little green. And embarrassed."

"I just...didn't think I'd see anyone I know."

Mia smiled in understanding. "Can I tell you a secret?"

Kammie blinked in surprise. She and Mia weren't good friends, but they'd known each other forever because of the pack. Mia and Alpha Brynn were best friends, and even though Mia was also an omega because she was a female, having a brother who was highly ranked in the pack meant that Mia wasn't as low on the totem pole of omegas as Kammie was. And Mia wasn't scarred from an abusive childhood, either.

"Of course, Mia."

Her voice lowered as she spoke. "My brother's business partner is coming in to have dinner with Mal and his family. Nila finagled me an invitation because I've had the hots for Lucian forever, so I was thinking that I should buy some sexy undies, even though there's no way in hell Lucian will ever see them on me."

"Why not?"

"Because Mal has made it clear to Lucian that I'm off-limits." She sighed wistfully. "Even though I wouldn't want to

ruin their friendship, I kind of wish that Lucian liked me enough to give up everything to be with me.”

“Do you think you’re mates?”

“I don’t get to spend enough time with him to know. He’s never in town because of his job, and when he does come into Wilde Creek, Mal never tells me. I’m pining away for a guy who may or may not be my mate, but because my brother meddles, I don’t actually know. It’s frustrating.”

“I bet. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well, me too. I’d actually like to spend time with him and see if we’re mates, but I have a feeling that Mal is going to squash things again.”

“I wish I could empathize, but I was an only child.”

“Well, he’s not all bad. He’s just overprotective.” She shrugged. “So, I told you about my unrequited love. Are you here to find something sexy for your mate?”

Kammie nodded. “I’ve never looked for anything sexy before.”

Mia smiled gently. “Would you like some help?”

“Thanks.” Kammie breathed out a sigh of relief.

She wasn’t sure what to look for, and as she walked into the sea of silk and lace and employees with headsets, she was glad to have Mia with her.

As they browsed, the two women talked about Row and the bear sleuth, and Mia’s undying interest in her brother’s best friend. Kammie entered a dressing room with a handful of items and closed the door. Mia moved into the room next to hers and said, “My mom took me to get my first bra when I was eleven.”

“That’s nice.”

“She invited my grandma.”

Kammie laughed. She’d never had any of those experiences. Maggie had taken her in after her uncle was banished from the pack, but the female, although kind, had

only had sons and didn't seem to remember what it was like to be a young woman. She'd provided for her as best she could, but all of Kammie's clothes had been hand-me-downs. She'd dressed to hide her scars and had never been told that she was pretty or that she shouldn't cover up.

Kammie stared at herself in the long mirror. It had taken four bras to find the right size. She was more confident in her skin than she'd been since before she was abused, but she didn't want a strange woman to measure her chest. Now she was wearing a teal lace bra with tiny flowers embroidered on it. She held the scandalously tiny panties in her hand, thinking they would probably melt to nothing in the washing machine. Staring at herself critically in the mirror, she looked past the scars to the woman behind them. She'd come a long way since she met Row. They were both fully marked and mated now, and his favorite activity wasn't just making love but lying around naked and talking. *Naked conversations*, as he liked to call them, were some of her favorite times with her mate, too.

"How's it going?" Mia asked.

"Good. You?"

"Meh. I'm just kidding myself about Lucian, and buying sexy undies isn't giving me the confidence I thought it would."

"I'm sorry," Kammie said as she stripped. She set aside the teal bra and panty set and lifted a satin baby doll from a padded hanger.

"It's okay."

Kammie slipped the soft material over her head and adjusted the sexy outfit, tugging on the hem as she looked at herself. "Would you wear a baby doll for your mate?"

"Oh sure. But don't buy a really expensive one. Brynn said that Acksel tears everything she buys because he can't control himself when she wears lingerie."

"That's good advice, thanks."

"Well, maybe Row isn't as much of an animal as Acksel is," Mia said with a chuckle, "but I think most guys love to see their mates take the time to wear something just for them."

Then they don't have enough blood left in their brain to think straight."

Kammie laughed and pulled the black babydoll off and set it on the bench with the bra set she was going to buy. She dressed, gathered her things, and left the dressing room. Kammie selected a few more bra and panty sets in different colors and followed Mia to the register. "I'm glad you were here," Mia said. "I wish we'd gotten to know each other better."

Kammie watched the girl ring up her purchases and then handed her credit card over. Glancing at Mia, she said, "Me too."

"Brynn does want to change things, but she can only do so much when her mate is steeped in tradition."

Mia paid for her items as Kammie stood next to her. "I think if packs don't change with the times, they'll lose their young. They'll want to leave for more progressive packs, or just leave their people behind entirely."

"Like you're doing," Mia pointed out.

"I wouldn't have left without Row's influence. If I'd mated a male in our pack, nothing would've changed for me."

Mia took her bag and walked out of the store with Kammie. "I don't think things will change for me unless I make the changes. I need to grow up. Brynn's my best friend, but she's the alpha and she's having a baby. Pining after a male who doesn't care for me enough to stand up to my brother isn't really worth my time."

Kammie looked at Mia and saw the determination in her eyes. They stopped at the mall's exit, and Kammie gave her a hug. "Whatever choices you make in your life, I wish you well. If Lucian really is yours, then it'll happen, and if not, then the male you do choose as your mate is one lucky guy."

"Thanks, hon. Have a safe trip, and I hope this next chapter of your life is full of love and happiness. You deserve it."

The two women parted ways and Kammie brushed at a few stray tears as she sat behind the wheel of her car. She was sad to be leaving Wilde Creek, but she couldn't bear for Row not be honored for the powerful and amazing male he was. He didn't deserve to be an omega, and she realized she didn't deserve the super-low status she'd been given either. She was a strong female. She'd stood up for herself in the face of a madman, and she could handle anything that the future threw at her. Especially with her sexy mate having her back.

Smiling at the package on the seat next to her, she shifted the car into drive and headed home. It was their last night in her house and then they'd be leaving Wilde Creek behind. If she had any regrets about her life, it was only that it had taken so long for her to meet Row. She would've loved to have been tackled by him in the woods when she was younger so they could've known each other that much longer.

She could imagine her sixteen-year-old self bouncing through the woods after a rabbit and having a big bear come crashing through to find her. She bet even at that young age she would've known that Row was meant to be hers. The connection between them was instantaneous and sweet, and grew stronger every day.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

That night, Row drove Kammie to Luna's, the only restaurant in Wilde Creek. Their mom rode with Dani and Adam; she was going to spend the night with them so she could visit with Dani longer. Row was anxious to head home, but he didn't want to take away from his mom spending time with his sister, and getting to know Adam. The party the previous night had been a big surprise. He appreciated that the alphas had thrown Kammie a going-away party, but he knew that Brynn was the driving force behind it. She seemed to feel guilty for Kammie's treatment, but the reality was that wolf packs were run by the alpha males and there were a lot of laws that ensured the strongest survived. Adam was injured, but no matter his physical impairments, Row knew without a doubt that he would guard Dani with his life.

Kammie turned in her seat as he parked and gave him a mischievous smile.

"What's that for, little wolf?" he asked.

She arched a brow and began to unbutton her top. His mouth fell open as he watched her fingers slip quickly down the front of her shirt and pull one side over to expose her breast. It was dark in the car, but with the parking-lot lights and his enhanced eyesight, he could see that she was wearing a very sexy bra.

"Sweetheart," he said, growling softly.

"This is what I did today," she said, her voice husky. "For you."

He was overwhelmed. His mate had bought sexy lingerie...for him. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, slipping his hand inside her top to touch the soft lace. "My sexy mate, you drive me wild," he said against her lips, and she moaned softly.

"You like?"

"Love." He leaned away and pulled his hand free, which took some effort. He buttoned her top back up and grinned at her. "I'm going to make you so happy later."

"I'm already happy."

He tweaked her chin. "I'm the luckiest bear on the planet to have such a sexy, giving wolf for my mate. I hope you didn't plan to get any sleep tonight."

"Bring it on, my mate."

He kissed her swiftly and got out of the truck before he could turn the engine back on and drive them back to her house as fast as possible. He opened her door and held out his hand. "Eat fast."

She laughed. "I'm glad your mom's not staying with us tonight."

"Me too, love."

A young wolf male led them to a table in the center of the restaurant and Row pulled the chair out for Kammie as the others joined them. Kammie pulled off her jacket and set it over the back of her chair. The blouse she wore was green and looked lovely against her skin. The few buttons left undone showed off her cleavage and one of her scars. He was proud of her. As he'd been helping her pack up her clothes, he noticed that she had a lot of turtle-necks and clothes meant to entirely cover her. She'd gone shopping with his mom before they left Oakville, and the clothes she wore now, while still modest in their own way, were more revealing. He was looking forward to warmer weather because the clothes she wore wouldn't be as confining. That she had bought lingerie for him that day just told him how far she'd come in her opinion of herself.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked as she picked up a menu.

“You in shorts.”

Her brow arched. “Shorts?”

He slid his arm over the back of her chair and leaned close, letting his lips brush her ear. “I love your body. I can’t wait to see you in less confining clothes. Warm weather means shorts, so I can stare at your gorgeous legs.”

She blushed and chuckled. “You’re insatiable.”

“I’m honest.”

“That, too.”

He kissed her ear and whispered, “Fucking love you.”

She turned to look at him, and the love in her eyes made him want to fall to the ground and worship her forever. It was powerful and honest. He’d never felt so lucky. “I love you, too.”

A waiter appeared and Row straightened, but didn’t take his arm off the back of Kammie’s chair. After placing their orders, he listened to Kammie, Dani, and his mom talk about the future. Dani was content to stay in Wilde Creek. She and Adam apparently made a great team when it came to being omegas. Row didn’t think much of the omega position in the pack because of the way that Kammie had been treated, but Dani was happy and that was all that really mattered. Adam, despite his burn scars, was well-muscled and fierce, and Row knew that he’d make sure that no one treated Dani badly.

“Tell me about being a steward,” Row’s mom said.

“They tend to the retired wolves exclusively. There’s a development in town where most of the retirees live. Dade, Jeremiah, and Honey assign duties to young pack members for those retirees—everything from shoveling the walk to helping with cleaning and home repairs,” Adam said.

Row’s mom smiled. “That sounds like an excellent job.”

“It’s been so much fun. The retirees are awesome. They’re friendly and so thankful to have someone care about them. Jeremiah and Honey are sweethearts. Honey and I have been handling the widowed females. There’s one female who hasn’t thrown out a newspaper since 1990. Her house looks like a newsstand threw up in it,” Dani said, laughing.

“I’m glad you found a place,” Row said, and he honestly meant it. Row knew that he would’ve been happy to be with Kammie anywhere, but he was thankful that she’d been ready to throw off the shackles of the pack and embrace a less restricted life.

When their food arrived, the conversation ceased. Row enjoyed a thick cheeseburger, while Kammie raved about her chicken ravioli in cream sauce. When their meal was over, the females excused themselves to the restroom and Adam leaned back in his chair.

“I’m glad you and Kammie aren’t staying. It’s hard to be a female omega like her.”

“Because of her scars?”

Adam nodded. “I’ve known her my whole life. She was a vibrant young girl, and then she was withdrawn. I never knew what had been going on with her uncle until she shifted for the first time as a teenager and I saw her scars. Unfortunately, everyone in the pack saw them, too. The alpha and many males knew what had happened, but they’d kept it quiet. The females our age, who’d considered Kammie to be a threat, began to treat her badly. She was ridiculed and ostracized for something she had no control over. It was the same for me, but my omega status came because my scars prevent me from running fast in my shift. The muscles are injured from the burns, and for the males in my pack, that makes me less than whole and unable to function fully as a wolf.”

“Why would the females think that Kammie was a threat?”

“Because she’s pretty and she’s kind. Females tend to see any beautiful female as a threat. I think it’s an ancient, in-born thing. Every female wants the biggest, baddest male to be her mate, and anyone who might take that male from her is a

threat. Females don't physically fight as much as males do with rivals, so they resort to undermining their confidence and shunning them."

Row shook his head. "It's still the biggest bunch of bullshit I've ever heard."

"I don't disagree. But you're talking to a guy who's been shunned as well. Someone told me once that Acksel would never trust me to guard Brynn because I can't run fast." He glanced at his hand, where light scars were visible. "I would've protected her if they'd asked me to. Dani's the first person who didn't see my scars as a liability."

Row knew he was that person for Kammie, too.

"How are you going to handle Dani shifting? I'm asking because I'm her brother and I want her to be safe."

"I do, too." Adam said. "I talked to Acksel about it. I'm going to fence in the yard. Acksel's making arrangements with the local construction company to put up what will amount to a security fence. I'll be able to stay with her in my shift, and she'll be safe within the confines of the yard. It's not ideal, but it's safer than taking a chance on someone mistaking her for prey."

Row nodded. "She's impulsive."

"I noticed."

The girls returned to the table and the waiter brought dessert. Row shared a slice of dark chocolate cheesecake with Kammie, and then they headed home. When he unlocked the door to Kammie's home and led her inside, he asked, "Would you like to stay longer?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"This is your home, the pack is all you've ever known. I just want to make sure I'm not rushing you from a place you love."

She pressed her palms to his chest and looked up at him. "I don't love Wilde Creek, I love you. And this place isn't my home anymore—my home is wherever you are. Do you know

how much you've changed my life? You give me the strength to be myself. I sat at a table tonight, in public, with a shirt on that clearly showed some of my scars. I don't even know if anyone was paying attention to them, because I honestly don't care. Because of you, because of your love and strength, I've found my own strength."

"I think you had it all along." He was humbled by her words, and profoundly proud of her.

She shrugged. "Maybe. All I know is that I don't care if anyone sees my scars anymore. I am what I am because of what I endured. I can let my past go, because the future is going to be amazing."

He lowered his head and captured her lips, drawing her close. She sighed and relaxed into him, her hands clenching in his shirt. He lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her into the bedroom and laid her gently on the bed.

Slipping his hand down the center of her body, he pushed her top up and kissed her stomach. She fisted his hair and sighed happily. It took him no time to strip her of her clothes, and then he spent the rest of the night worshipping her the way she deserved and making love to her one last time in Wilde Creek.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*K*ammie woke up early that next morning. She was used to waking up and getting out of bed immediately to get ready for the day, but she didn't have a job in Wilde Creek any longer. Before she met Row, she would've been out the door as soon as the sun was up to start working around town. She'd spent a majority of her time each day at the alphas' home, cooking meals for them; Brynn had told her once she thought of Kammie as her own personal chef. It hadn't been Brynn's idea to have someone cook and clean the house for them, but Acksel hadn't wanted Brynn to work too hard because of her pregnancy. Kammie knew that Row would be the same way once she became pregnant. He wouldn't want her to lift a finger. But unlike the alpha wolf, Row would take care of her himself.

Her mate slept quietly next to her, his big body warm against hers. She hadn't ever spent the night with a male before Row, but she adored the way it felt to fall asleep with his arms around her and his warm breath on her neck. She didn't think she'd ever get tired of how amazing he smelled and how safe she felt in his arms.

Row growled softly and pulled her a little tighter against him. She felt his erection against her back and smiled as she laid her hand on top of his where it was splayed across her stomach.

"You must always have sweet dreams," he murmured against her neck.

"Oh?" she asked, chuckling.

He hummed. “You smell extra sweet in the morning.”

She rolled to her back and he straightened his arms, caging her and gazing down at her with adoration and heat. “I was just thinking about how much I love to wake up with you.”

He smiled slowly, his eyes darkening. “You’ve come a long way from the female who made me sleep on the couch that first night.”

“Because of you. If I’d mated a wolf in the pack, nothing would’ve changed about my life. You’re a wrecking ball. You knocked down all my carefully constructed walls. I see myself more clearly now because of your influence.”

“You’re going to make me blush,” he teased.

She stroked her hands up his arms and gripped his shoulders. “It’s true. Without you, I don’t think anything would’ve changed about my life. I don’t think I believed I was worth loving.”

“And now?”

“Now I know I am.”

He nuzzled her throat with a growl and began to kiss down the center of her body. She loved the rough scrape of his stubble against her stomach, and she shivered as he kissed her navel and nuzzled her. He paused, burying his face more firmly against her and inhaling slowly. She brushed her fingers through his soft hair and scraped her nails lightly against his scalp.

He lifted his head, and his eyes were dark with passion. A smile spread swiftly across his face. “I think you’re pregnant.”

She blinked. “Um, no. I can’t get pregnant until my mating heat in the fall.”

He quirked a brow and pressed his nose into her stomach. She felt the air move across her skin as he inhaled. Lifting his head, he said, “You smell like a pregnant bear, sweetheart.”

She slipped her hand to her stomach and thought about their time in the mating cave. “Aggie said that sometimes

pregnancies happened during the mating time. I didn't think it was possible because of my wolf biology."

He lifted off of her and slid out of the bed.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To get you a pregnancy test."

"Wait," she said, laughing, as she rose onto her elbows. "You don't have to rush out now."

"Aren't you curious to know for sure?"

"Yes, but I want to finish what we were starting here, and then we can go to the drugstore."

He growled softly as he climbed back onto the bed, pushing her legs apart to make room for his broad shoulders. She dropped back to the bed with a soft moan as Row took them both to the heavens.

Kammie looked at the pregnancy tests spanning half of one aisle in the pharmacy. She-wolves didn't really use pregnancy tests. Normally, they could only become pregnant during the fall mating heat. A she-wolf would know when she became pregnant during the heat because the heat would actually cease, so there was little need for a test. Wilde Creek wasn't entirely wolf, though, and there were many human females who would have a use for the tests.

"Hi Kammie!" Nila, Malachi's human mate, said brightly as she led her son Jack down the aisle.

"Hi Nila. Hi Jack," Kammie said, squatting down to give the cute little boy a hug. He babbled in his baby talk, holding out a stuffed wolf and saying, "Woof."

"It sure is, kiddo," Kammie said with a laugh. It was a joke in the pack that Malachi's adopted son loved to woof like a dog when Malachi tried to get him to say wolf.

Kammie stood and leaned back against Row. “How are you, Nila?” Row asked as he wrapped his arms around Kammie and drew her back against his chest.

“Good, Row, thanks.” She glanced at the tests and down at her son who was shaking the wolf and giggling. “I think I might be pregnant. I didn’t want to take a test at Doc’s because I wanted it to be a surprise for Mal.” Nila was a nursing assistant and worked for the pack doctor, Gedding.

“We won’t tell,” Kammie said. “Congratulations, if it’s positive.”

“Thanks. I want to give Mal a baby of his own so badly. He treats Jack like gold, but I think all males want young of their own, you know? A wolfy sort of legacy.”

Kammie understood. “I don’t have any idea what I’m doing here.”

Nila’s head tilted slightly. “I thought wolves didn’t get pregnant outside of their heat.”

“We’re not really sure,” Kammie said and Row cut her off.

“*I am.*”

Rolling her eyes, Kammie continued, “but we think it’s because of how bears mate their females.”

“Because you’re true mates,” Nila said thoughtfully.

“Exactly,” Kammie said.

“How long has it been since the ceremony?”

“About two weeks. Row said I smell pregnant, but it’s so early. I’m not even sure if I can test yet.”

Nila turned to face the shelves and scanned the boxes. She pulled two purple boxes from one shelf and said, “This is an early detection one. They’re formulated so you don’t have to take them first thing in the morning, but we always recommend it. You can take one now and then one in the morning just to be sure.”

“Thanks, Nila,” Kammie said.

“You’re very welcome. And congratulations on your pregnancy.”

Kammie and Nila hugged briefly, and then Kammie gave Jack a kiss on the cheek before leaving the aisle with Row.

Row paid for the tests, and they held hands as they walked out into the cold morning. She shivered, and Row put his arm around her, giving her a squeeze as they navigated the icy parking lot.

“Do you want to get breakfast first?” Row asked as he opened her door and then handed her the sack.

“Nope. I’ve got a date with a pregnancy test and then we’ve got to get on the road.”

“In a hurry to get back to Oakville?” He chuckled.

“You bet. We’ve got the next chapter of our lives to get started.”

He grinned, and it was her favorite smile—the one that showed a hidden dimple and made his eyes dance. “Love you, little wolf.”

“I love you too. Now let’s get on the road!”

Kammie looked around the empty house. She’d already checked every room twice. This was the place she’d called home since she moved out of Maggie’s house. Now she had a new home in Oakville, with Row and the sleuth. Somewhere along the way, she’d stopped thinking of Wilde Creek as home and started thinking of Oakville that way instead. She knew it was because she felt like she finally belonged.

Row hugged her from behind and buried his face in her neck. He kissed her with a soft growl. “Are you sad, little wolf?”

She laid her hands on top of his and sighed as he kissed her throat. “Yes and no. There are things I’ll miss, but I’m mostly happy because you and I get to start our lives together.”

His hands pressed lightly against her stomach. The first pregnancy test had turned positive immediately. Row had growled happily and hugged her. She could count on one hand the good things that had happened in her life, and all of them had happened after Row tackled her in the woods.

She turned in his arms. “I have an idea for a name for our baby.”

“Oh?” He kissed her nose and squeezed her waist lightly.

She nodded. “If it’s a girl, I want to call her Joy.”

“That’s beautiful. And if it’s a boy?”

“Nathaniel, after your dad.”

Row smiled. “That’s wonderful, sweetheart. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Being my mate. Being amazing. Being yourself.”

“It’s my pleasure. Now let’s get this show on the road. We’ve got a nursery to get ready.”

“I can’t wait.”

She went up onto her toes and kissed him. Without looking back, she left the house and locked the door, leaving the key on top of the doorframe.

Row’s mom waited in Kammie’s car on the street. After Row and Kammie had returned from the pharmacy and she’d taken her pregnancy test, Dani and Adam had come to say goodbye, bringing Row’s mom with them.

Kammie wished that Dani and Adam were coming to the sleuth with them, but she understood that they’d made the choice to stay in Wilde Creek. Dani seemed remarkably content already.

Dani’s face was shiny with tears, and Adam was consoling her. “Take care of my sister,” Row said, shaking Adam’s hand and giving Dani a last hug.

“With my life,” Adam vowed.

“It’ll be spring before you know it, and you’ll be able to come and visit,” Kammie said softly to Dani as she hugged her closely.

“I know. I’m just being emotional. It’s hard to say goodbye, but it’s a good thing to move on in our lives, right?”

“Especially when we have such amazing males to move on with,” Kammie said.

She kissed Dani on the cheek and waved at Adam as Row guided her to his truck and helped her into the cab. It was warm because he’d had the engine running, and she snuggled against his shoulder after he climbed in and pulled away from the curb. He honked the horn twice and they waved at Dani and Adam. Kammie turned in her seat and watched the house disappear from view as Row pulled onto Main Street and accelerated.

“You know the first thing I want to do when we get to Oakville?” she asked as she turned in her seat and snuggled against her mate again.

“What’s that, sweetheart?”

“Make love in every room.”

“Oh?” he said with a soft growl.

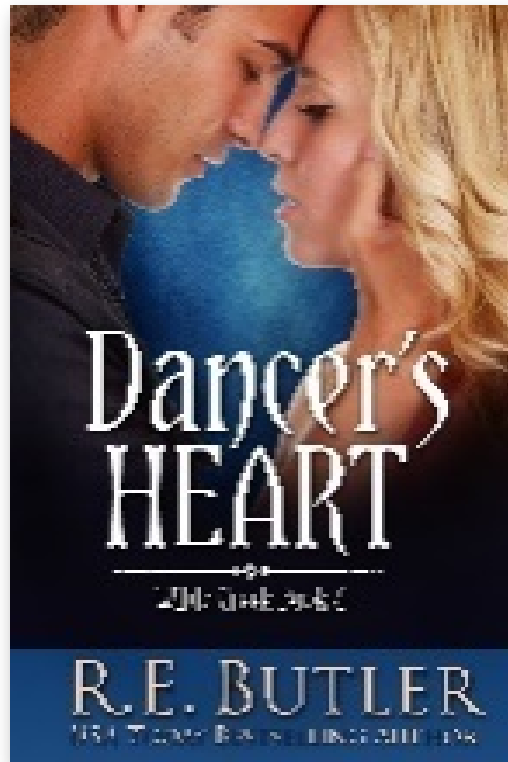
“Sure. We’re newly mated, and I want our combined scent in every room. Right now the house smells like a bachelor pad.”

He chuckled. “You can have anything you wish.”

She lifted her head to look at him. He glanced at her for a brief moment, and she couldn’t miss the heat in his gaze. “I have an amazing male for a mate, I’m pregnant, and I finally have a home in the sleuth where I feel like I belong. I don’t have any more wishes, because everything I’ve ever wanted has come true.”

“You’re my dream come true, too.”

Thank you so much for reading *The Scarred Heart*, Book Five in the Wilde Creek Series. I hope you enjoyed visiting the wolves in Wilde Creek. The Wilde Creek Pack stories continue in Book Six, [Dancer's Heart](#), coming October 5th, exclusively on Amazon and FREE in Kindle Unlimited. *Can Adam get to Dani in time when his father engineers her kidnapping?*



Adam Cruz has spent the last twelve years of his life wondering if he'd ever find his truemate. As a low-ranked omega wolf, with a body full of scars from a firebomb, he's had more than his fair share of trauma and shame. All he wants is to find his truemate and settle down, even though he wonders if his mate will care about his scars, or that he can't hunt as well as other wolves because of them.

As the only reindeer shifter in a bear den, Dancer Grayson knows what it's like not to fit in. When she runs into her truemate in the woods of Wilde Creek, she discovers that she fits right in with him. Adam's not ashamed to have prey as a mate, and she's not ashamed of his scars. Together, she's certain they can survive anything.

When Adam's gambling-addict dad hits him up for money and Adam refuses, his dad does the unthinkable, and Dani ends up kidnapped. What the kidnappers don't count on is that there isn't just a wolf pack looking for Dani, but her own kind. Can Adam get to her before she's harmed, or will she be lost to him forever?

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If you're looking for a sexy series about hybrid shifters looking for love, check out my [Cider Falls Shifters](#) series!

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Read on for an excerpt from [Dancer's Heart](#).

EXCERPT FROM DANCER'S HEART

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

She straightened, settling back on her heels and shaking the snow from her hands. The wolf growled, but she knew it wasn't meant as a warning. He drew close, lowering his head and whining softly as he laid on his belly and crawled forward.

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

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

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

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

“I’m Dancer, but you can call me Dani.”

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

“They’re burn scars,” he said roughly.

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

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He shook his head slightly. “Why?”

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

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

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

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

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

Want to read more? Click [HERE](#) to check out Dancer's Heart!

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R. E. Butler is a USA Today Best Selling Author of Paranormal Romance such as the Were Zoo and Cider Falls series. She lives on the water in New Jersey with her husband, kids, and furry pup.

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