



Fated Despite the Moon

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: The humans may have nothing in common – but that doesn't bother their wolves one bit.

Makayla Devamar is in denial about the stupid one-night stand mistake resulting in her getting pregnant. But when she sneaks in one morning after a night out to find her bags packed, and her mom waiting with an ultimatum—go to Wolf River, Idaho to be mated to the son of the Alpha, or turn over her credit cards and cell phone and make her own way alone. Caleb Reed keeps to the solitude of his half-finished cabin and stuffs down the pain caused by his girlfriend's death years prior by too much work and too little socializing. But when he's approached by his father to take on Makayla as his mate and be a father to her baby, Caleb agrees. As Caleb and Makayla learn the ins and outs of cohabitation, sparks of attraction arise along with the pains of their pasts. And they may just find the healing they each need, and the happy future they both crave- if they can just find some common ground.

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Chapter One

As dawn broke over the horizon of the Sunset strip, Makayla tiptoed to the front door of her mother's Beverly Hills mansion, a pair of designer black stilettos in her hand. Her designated driver duties over, she was happy to be home for a day of crashing with her besties before they restarted the partying.

"Ouch!" A giggle sounded behind her.

Makayla turned. "Shhhh..."

Rachael slammed her hand over Mindy's mouth, and both of them stifled their laughter.

Makayla couldn't help but laugh too despite the fact there'd be hell to pay if she woke up her mom.

She pushed her sweat soaked blonde hair out of her face and unlocked the front door. Pushing it open she listened for a moment then padded across the enormous entrance to the security alarm on the wall. Punching in the code she disarmed it, then waved her friends in.

They closed the heavy door with a bang making Makayla's heart jump. Mindy and Rachael hung onto each other like conjoined twins, trying to hold back more drunken laughter.

"Come on," she whispered. "Get up to my room before you two fall down, and my

mother thinks you're burglars and shoots you."

The trio headed toward the large winding staircase.

"Makayla." The soft yet firm sound of her name coming from the living room raised goosebumps on her arms.

She closed her eyes and blew out a harsh breath. Damn. Mindy and Rachel stared at her from the bottom step. "Go on. I'll be there in a minute."

The two nodded and stumbled up the winding staircase. She prayed they didn't vomit on her mother's pristine carpet. If that happened, she'd never hear the end of it.

Makayla straightened her spine and tried to pull down her too short skirt as much as possible to appease her mother before heading for the living room. As she trudged across the cold granite floor she ran through various excuses as to where she had been, and why she was returning home at five thirty in the morning. Unfortunately, in the last month she'd used them all already.

She reached the step leading down into the plush cream salon and stopped. Her mother sat in the high wingback chair her father had used only for business or family meetings. A chair that hadn't been occupied in over six months. Despite the graying hair hanging casually over her shoulders- and being swathed in a peach silk bathrobe- Makayla's mother's straight spine and tense posture told Makayla her mother was anything but pleased.

Makayla swallowed hard at the sight of her older brother Colt standing like a living statue behind their mother. If Colt was home, she was in for a serious tongue-lashing. She donned her best smile and descended into the room where her toes sunk into the thick pile carpeting.

"Colt. Great to see you. I'm glad you could take—"

Her mother waved her hand. "Have a seat Makayla."

Makayla folded her arms over her chest as the rebellious streak that had taken root in her over the past months reared its ugly head. "I'm good here, thanks."

She needed to keep on her feet in case things got too annoying, and she had to make a quick getaway.

Her mother and brother stared at her, and she fought the urge to squirm. Even in human form her mother wore the countenance of an Alpha female.

"Where were you this time?" her mother asked.

Makayla opened her mouth then shut it again. Why lie? They'd know anyway. They most likely already smelled the tobacco and sweat wrapping every inch of her.

"I just went dancing with some friends."

"And drinking?"

She wished her mom would give her some credit. She wasn't that stupid- or heartless.

"No, mother. I was the designated driver."

"How can you do this to us, Makayla? Flaunt yourself in public for everyone to see? As if our reputation hasn't been tarnished enough by your actions. Now you stay out all night clubbing with your friends? What would your father say?"

"Stay safe?"

Her mother's expression hardened, and her eyes flashed.

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Wrong answer.

"I'll have no more of this. You aren't a child, but you do live under my roof and off what I give you. You don't work. You don't study. You don't help out. You dropped out of college—"

"You know why I did that." Anger whirled inside her like a tornado.

"Yes." Her mother nodded. "We all grieve the loss of your father. But you no longer have time to be a selfish child. You yourself will be a parent in only five short months. How do you plan on taking care of a child? Provide for it? It's obvious the father will not step up. Not that I would expect him to."

"Don't say that about Derek. He'll come around, he just—"

"No." Her mother shook her head. "He's had time. Three months' worth of time. As have you. But what do you do? Go out clubbing all night with friends. Sleep all day. It's enough. I will not have a grandchild of mine raised like this."

"And what about Colt? Did you give him this same talk when he knocked up Gianna? I don't see him running off to do his duty."

Colt took a step forward. "I wanted to marry Gia. She is the one who said no."

Her mother held up her hand. "This isn't about Colt. It's about you. And I am done allowing you to sully your father's good name, and his pack, by acting like the spoiled—" Her mother sucked in a sharp breath. "Your time is up. You have not

made any right decisions since finding out you were with child, and I will no longer allow you to continue down this destructive path. It's finished."

Her mother rose from her chair and rang the bell on the coffee table. A set of heavy footsteps sounded on the granite floor moving toward the front of the house.

"What... what's going on?" Makayla tried to keep the fear from her voice.

"You are being sent away," her mother replied.

Mark, her father's right-hand man, walked into the hallway carrying Makayla's two largest suitcases.

A chill raced up Makayla's spine. "You can't do this."

"Can't?" her mother asked. "I most certainly can. This is my house, my money, my pack. I make the rules. If you don't like them you are welcome to leave your cellphone, credit cards, and car and walk out."

Makayla's mind whirled. She was being sent away. All because she was pregnant and had no mate.

"Where are you sending me?" her voice came out barely a whisper.

Her mother nodded to Mark, and he walked out the front door.

"You are going home."

"This is my home."

Her mother shook her head. "No. This is where we live. You're going home. To rejoin

our pack in Wolf River."

"You're sending me to backwoods Idaho?" A shrill tenor tinged her voice, and panic raced over her skin.

"Jeremiah has spoken to the men of the pack. One of his sons has agreed to take you and your child in. To care for you and make you his family."

"Whoa! Wait a second. Make me his family? You mean... marry me?"

Her mother's blank stare told Makayla that's exactly what she meant.

"An arranged marriage?" Makayla cried. "To some back hills country bumpkin?"

Her mother was across the room in a blur of movement. "Your father was from Wolf River. My family is from Wolf River. You would do better to show some respect."

Anger rippled off her mother and forced Makayla to step back. The commanding presence of an Alpha wasn't something she could ignore, no matter how much she wished she could.

"But... marriage? You want me to mate someone I don't even know. Someone that I'll be with... forever. You always told me mating was something I was supposed to take very seriously. That mating wasn't something I could take back. And now you are just selling me off like a prize mare?"

"We did always tell you that mating was a serious commitment. But you are twenty-five, and you have yet to show up at our door with even one male suitable for the only daughter of Alphas. You've rejected every male we have introduced you to. And now with this latest development of yours, there is no one from our pack who will want you. Petty, I know, but there it is. You know Jeremiah, and you know his boys.

They are good men. Griffin is already mated, and his mate is expecting their own first child. So, you will already have someone with something in common to talk to. Both Logan and Caleb are successful and good boys. You are fortunate to have one of them as your mate. And as a father to your child.”

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Makayla remembered the three wolf boys who'd taunted and teased her every summer since she was a child. She'd not seen them in forever though. When she'd reached junior high age their family vacations together had ended as their fathers grew busier.

Colt joined them and laid his hand on his mother's shoulder. "Maybe it's best if I take her."

Her mother shoved an envelope into Makayla's hands. "Here is the information you need. The jet is already waiting for you at Burbank airport. Colt will see that you get on the plane. Should you refuse or run, I will cut you off permanently. No more money. No phone. No trips. Nothing."

Makayla looked down at the envelope. Her mom was sending her away. All because of one stupid mistake. But more likely because...

Her mother's voice softened. "I love you Makayla, and I believe in the person you were before, and the person you can become. Believe it or not, I think this is actually for the best. And so, did your father. It had always been his wish that you would marry one of Jeremiah's boys."

'Uncle Jeremiah,' as Makayla had known him, was her father's oldest friend. They'd left Wolf River together to go to Stanford and then on to start a fortune five hundred company in Silicon Valley. They'd sold out right before the bust. And though Jeremiah had returned to Wolf River, he and her father had remained close and continued to do business right up until her father's sudden death. Now Jeremiah did business with her brother Colt. She wondered if that business relationship had

anything to do with Makayla's new status update of "Engaged to be Married". Was she partial payment for something?

Her mother embraced her. "I do this because I love you, Makayla. And hopefully someday you will thank me. But even if you don't thank me, maybe you'll understand at the very least... once you become a mother yourself."

A blanket of numbness floated over her shoulders and shrouded Makayla in dread.

Her mother released her, and Makayla dropped her sparkly high heels to the floor. "Guess I won't need these anymore."

Chapter Two

"Mom really is trying to help you," Colt said as they drove to the airport.

Makayla stared out the window at the passing buildings. How long would it be until she saw California again?

"It's not so bad there. There's green like you can't imagine. And the air is fresh and the water doesn't need to be filtered into bottles and—"

"Stuff it, Colt. You're not the one being sold off to the highest bidder in the Rocky Mountains."

"That's not what's happening, sis."

"Isn't it? Mom is ashamed of me being knocked up, so she'd rather marry me off to some guy I haven't seen since I wore a training bra than to let me just be single and raise the baby alone. Besides, Derek may come back."

Colt snorted. "Even you can't believe that. The jackass didn't even wait a full five minutes after you told him before leaving town. No one has heard from him since. Besides, if he did come back, I'd kick his ass along with half our pack. Especially Gideon. He vouched for the rogue, and this is the thanks we get? Never again, I can assure you."

Makayla shook her head. She'd known Derek was a bad boy rogue wolf from the moment she'd laid eyes on him at a club downtown. All leather and tight t-shirts, boots and jeans. He'd been just what she'd been looking for. And the last thing she'd needed.

They pulled off the freeway and exited toward the airport. This was really happening, not just a scare tactic. She was going to Idaho.

"Do they even have a doctor there that can deliver a baby?" she asked.

Colt shook his head. "Trust me. It isn't as bad as all that. Wolf River is just an hour from Moscow and two hours from Coeur d'Alene. It's beautiful, and they have everything we have here. Except for the pollution, corruption, clubbing, traffic—"

"I get it."

Colt pulled into the private terminal and stopped the car. Her mother's plane sat waiting on the tarmac. A small metal tube to fly her to her own private hell.

Colt jumped from his seat and pulled open the back door. Removing her bags, he carried them to the plane and handed them to the stewardess. Makayla glanced at the keys in the ignition. She'd make it only as far as one tank of gas and the thousand bucks in her purse would take her. But... then what?

Colt opened her door and held out his hand. They stared at each other for a minute.

Since he'd taken over their father's business dealings, she'd barely seen him outside family dinners on Sundays. And since the announcement of her impending bundle of joy, Sunday dinners had been cancelled.

"Hey." He pulled her from her seat and into a hug.

She grabbed on to the back of his sports coat, taking in his familiar cologne. Tears threatened to rain down on his shoulder and words begged to be spoken. Words to convince him to help her. To get him to see she could do it on her own. That she didn't need a man to raise her child. That she shouldn't be sent away... But the words stuck in her throat like a strangled scream.

"It's going to be okay. I think a change of scenery is exactly what you need. And Jeremiah's sons are great guys. Either one of them will take care of you and do right by you and the baby. I wouldn't let you go if I wasn't certain of it."

"Wouldn't you?" she pushed away.

He touched her cheek. "Don't be like this Kaly, you know I wouldn't."

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"Don't call me that."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Do me a favor when you're there, all right? Look up Gia and Paige. Tell them... Tell them... Just make sure they're okay." Sadness spread over his face. He'd loved Gianna and had wanted to marry her. Makayla remembered overhearing the long conversations between Colt and her father about it. But Gianna had been strong and had stood on her own two feet and told Colt to go back to Los Angeles after his summer there. So why was it now that she wanted the same thing Gianna had, they wouldn't let her?

"I will," she said. If for nothing else but to garner an ally to help her.

Colt kissed her head and then led her to the plane. "I suggest you take a shower and change on the plane," he said. "Wouldn't want to scare your would-be husband with your club funk."

Makayla laughed and shook her head. "Maybe I do. Maybe I want to scare him all the way out of my life."

Colt pulled a small box from his pocket and handed it to her. "This is for you. It's from mom."

Makayla looked down at it. Great. A goodbye forever present.

"Congrats honey, I am so proud of you." Makayla's father looked over at her from the driver's side of his luxury Tesla.

"I'm pretty sure mom won't be so proud."

Her dad reached over and squeezed her hand. "You and your mother are like a snake and a mongoose. Ever afraid that if you give up the fight for one moment you'll be killed off. I don't understand it. But I do understand this. Your mother loves you more than anything. Even if she doesn't always tell you."

He looked over at her and smiled.

A hand shook Makayla's shoulder, and she started awake. "Miss, we're here." It was the stewardess.

Makayla glanced out the window to find the plane surrounded by towering evergreen trees.

Idaho.

Two men waited outside by a monstrous dirty pickup truck.

The tall dark-haired man with the scruffy beard and broad shoulders she recognized instantly as Jeremiah. Beside him stood a shorter blond in a thousand-dollar suit and expensive shoes. Logan. Logan had been the only fair-haired one of the three Reed boys. But from his clothes he looked more like he'd fit in with her Beverly Hills crowd than the backwoods of Idaho.

Jeremiah waved.

Busted.

She closed the shutter and blew out a breath then ran her fingers through her hair and swiped under her eyes, hoping to remove the worst of the mascara. She was pretty

sure she might actually frighten them off with her morning breath, bedhead, and club funk. Maybe she'd get lucky, and they'd ship her right back to LA.

Makayla shut her eyes and groaned. No use prolonging everyone's torture.

The stewardess unloaded her bags, and the pilot thanked her then waited for her to deplane.

She picked up her purse and glanced at her phone. There were no texts. No missed calls. And no cell signal.

Great. Just great.

She descended the stairs of the plane and stepped down onto soft dewy grass, wrapping her arms around herself. For early spring the heat hadn't rolled in yet, and at ten a.m. a chilly breeze caressed her bare arms.

She squinted against the sun and took in the two men. Well, if she had to be married off to someone, she could have done worse than Logan Reed. The years had gotten him far from the scrawny teen that had chased her around the park trying to get her to flash her boobs.

Jeremiah strode forward. "Kaly girl. Long time."

She pushed her hair behind her ear. "Yup. And it's Makayla, thanks."

His jaw clenched but then he smiled. "I know this isn't where you want to be or what you want to be doing, but I think you'll be happy here, and we'll take care of you."

She nodded. "So I've been told. " She looked at her phone again. Still no signal. "Does this place get cell service?"

He picked up her bags as if they weighed no more than throw pillows. She hadn't really realized just how strong he was when she'd been a girl.

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"There is some signal in town, but it's spotty."

Of course.

"Let's get you settled in the truck."

She nodded and followed him.

Logan joined her. "Well, Kaly Marie. You got taller." He threw her a dimpled grin as they walked.

"And you got better taste in clothing." She returned his smile.

He chuckled.

"Let's move. I have stuff to do today," said Jeremiah.

Logan led her around the truck, and he jumped into the back seat as she slid into the front.

It surprised her how nice the truck was on the inside. Its completely spotless interior was the exact opposite of the muddy outside.

"The last time I was in a pickup I was four wheeling in the bed of it," she said.
"Almost lost a tooth doing it too."

Jeremiah slid into the driver's seat and pulled the truck off the landing strip. "You

have meetings?" he asked Logan.

"I'm meeting with two potential clients this morning via virtual meeting, and then I need to head back to the office," said Logan.

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"I have meetings the rest of the week but I'll be home for the weekend."

"You don't live in Wolf River?"

"No," replied Logan. "I live in Coeur d'Alene. It's about two hours north."

Sweet! So she wasn't going to be staying in the middle of nowhere after all. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. At least until her mom changed her mind and let her come home.

Chapter Three

Caleb pulled his pickup truck up to the front of his parent's large cabin style house and stopped. He stared at the red front door. What the hell was he doing? He'd agreed to marry a woman he hadn't seen since her hair was in braids and ribbons. His father had warned him about Makayla's... predicament, but it didn't matter to Caleb. The moment he'd found out that Makayla needed a mate he'd said yes without even thinking twice. The pickings were slim in Wolf River and always had been. That combined with his painful past... yeah, if he was going to try and move forward he needed something completely different. Bringing new blood into town—or old blood back to town in this case—was good for all of them. It was what they'd been working on for the last decade. And it started with getting the founding families like the Devamar family to come home. Makayla was the first step.

He hopped from the driver's seat and headed toward the front of the house. He pulled on his red flannel, straightening it. Should he have changed? Dressed up more? What was the point? He was who he was, and it wasn't like he was suddenly going to start dressing like Logan to work construction. He glanced at his boots making sure he didn't track mud into his mother's house.

A peel of laughter rang out as he opened the front door. His gut clenched as he sniffed the air and caught three different scents. His father's, Logan's and a scent resembling the girl he'd known as a child. Only it had morphed with age. Matured. Deepened. Sensualized. His wolf sat up for the first time in over five years and paid attention.

He followed the sounds of laughter and talking through the hallway to the kitchen where the group sat at the table.

Makayla glanced up at Caleb, and her smile faltered a bit as she looked him up and down. Suddenly he'd wished he'd changed out of his work clothes before heading over. Her straight blonde hair hung down just past her shoulders, and her heart shaped face had a tan California kiss. Only her bright blue eyes belied what she'd been through in the past year, eyes rimmed with shadows and puffy bags as if she hadn't gotten a good night sleep in months.

"Caleb, there you are." His father rose from the table. "Coffee?"

Caleb shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and shook his head. "No thanks. I've had enough this morning."

His father walked over and embraced him then squeezed his shoulder. "Caleb heads our construction company here in town. He's been rebuilding the bed-and-breakfast and oversaw the building of the theater and new school as well as all the new shops."

"Wow." She didn't sound impressed as she sipped from his great grandmother's teacup.

Logan stood. "Well, I should get going. Much to do. But I'll be back on Sunday for dinner."

Logan hugged Caleb. "Good luck," his brother whispered. "You're gonna need it."

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Caleb's eyes never left Makayla. "I believe you."

Logan chuckled then hugged their dad before turning back to Makayla. "I'll see you the end of the week. Welcome home."

Her brows furrowed. "Wait. You're leaving me here?"

The three men looked at each other.

"Not here," said Jeremiah. "You can't stay with me. How would that look? A young pregnant female in my house? No. You're going with your betrothed, Caleb."

Caleb saw the wheels turning in her head as she looked between the three of them. Her gaze fell on Caleb, her unhappy expression making his gut twist.

"Caleb?" She gave him the once over as if inspecting an inferior prom dress.

Logan bro hugged Caleb, and then headed out the door.

"Yes," said Jeremiah. "Caleb is the one who offered to take you on." A hard-protective edge came into his father's voice. One Caleb recognized all too well. His father was a good and benevolent man, but speaking against his family or his pack wasn't something he tolerated-at all.

Her gaze went to the door. "I just thought..."

"Logan will lead our pack after I am gone. He couldn't possibly take on a female in

your... situation. And not to be indelicate, my dear, but not many wolves would. Caleb is a strong, loyal man and the hardest worker I've ever known. You are fortunate he agreed to this."

Caleb didn't want it to start like this. "Dad—"

"Well, if I'm such a burden why did you agree?" Her eyes burned with anger and shame.

"Because it's the right thing to do," Caleb spoke up. Left to his dad, things might very well spin out of control until Makayla refused the marriage and ran.

She gripped her teacup so tight he feared she'd crush it; and if that happened his mother would lose it.

The front door opened. "Hello? Where is everyone?" called Caleb's mom.

"We're in the kitchen," his dad replied.

His mom entered, her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and her clothes covered in dirt.

"Hi. Sorry I wasn't here when you got in but I ran late at the garden center. Spring planting is huge with people up here." She crossed the room and took Makayla's hands in hers. "I won't hug ya, but look at you. All grown up. You're what? Twenty-three now?"

"Twenty-five," Makayla replied.

"Twenty-five. My gosh how time flies." His mom shook her head. "So pretty. Just like your mama."

"Thank you." Makayla's voice held a subdued nature.

"Well okay then, let's get on with this, I have stuff to do today," said his mom.

"Get on with what?" asked Makayla.

"The bonding," replied Jeremiah. "It is the first of three rituals to mate you and Caleb. First comes the bonding. Then the turning. And finally the mating. Usually they are done all in the same month but as you are with child and cannot turn, the rest will have to wait. This, however, can be done now. It will bond you with Caleb and make sure all the other males know they are not to pursue you, and females are not to pursue him."

She stared at Caleb, her face paling. "So, we won't actually be getting married until after the baby is born?"

"That's right."

Caleb's chest tightened, and his wolf growled. It was written all over her. If she didn't have to marry him today, it gave her time to figure a way out of the rest of the ceremony.

* * *

This was not the wedding Makayla had ever dreamed she would get. Standing in a huge log cabin living room wearing a pair of black slacks and a silk blouse, surrounded by flannel shirts and jeans.

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Caleb was a mountain man if she'd ever seen one. Tall and broad shouldered like his father, he had his mother's dark hair and eyes, and a scruffy beard befitting a man who lived in Wolf River, Idaho. She had to admit the shaggy hair and scruff held its appeal. As did his tapered waist, and the mild bad-boy edge giving off the distinct, "not interested" vibe. Even so she preferred her men in expensive suits and fast cars. Not flannels and trucks. She'd learned this lesson from her dear Baby Daddy.

Makayla fidgeted as Jeremiah led them to a small area set up near the fireplace, with a table adorned with a deep blue tablecloth. On it rested dark wooden box, a red cord, and a cup with something in it.

"We gather today in the sight of wolves and God to bond Makayla Marie Devamar to Caleb Jonas Reed. Blood to blood, body to body, and heart to heart. Together they bind their blood and their lives from this day forward until they do part this mortal coil and return to the Earth from which they were formed."

Jeremiah turned to Mary, Caleb's mom, and she opened the wooden box, producing a large, ornately carved silver knife.

"Whoa! What the hell is that?" Makayla asked.

Jeremiah's solemn gaze fell upon her. "The Blood. The Moon. The Bite. This is the first part of the binding. Blood to blood." He handed the knife to Caleb. Caleb pressed the blade into his palm and a small pool gathered there.

Makayla's stomach roiled, and her skin broke out in a cold sweat. She plucked at her blouse and took a deep breath. "I didn't realize anyone still did this part."

"Here in Wolf River we keep to all the Blood Born traditions. It's our heritage. It's who we are."

Caleb held the knife out to her but she shook her head.

"Here," said Mary. "Let me help you."

Makayla stared at the knife trying to keep on her feet. Mary took it from Caleb and lifted Makayla's hand. Makayla fought against the urge to scream, watching the process as if a spectator. Mary pressed the sharp point of the knife into Makayla's palm and blood welled in the center. Her sight blurred and her mouth dried completely.

Mary handed the knife to Jeremiah and picked up a red ribbon. Caleb placed his palm on Makayla's. Mary wrapped the ribbon around both their hands. And tied it on top.

"Blood to blood you are now united," said Jeremiah. "If any soul should want to divide this union, they must do so with blood." He pressed their tied hands between his then nodded. "It is so."

"It is so," repeated Mary.

"It is so," said Caleb.

"It is so." Makayla barely got out the whisper before her knees gave way and everything went black.

* * *

Caleb caught Makayla around her waist before she hit the floor. Jeremiah chuckled and shook his head.

"That girl is nothing but trouble," he said. "I should have told her mother no."

Caleb's mother felt Makayla's forehead with the back of her hand. "She's broken out in a cold sweat. We should lay her on the couch. Jeremiah, get the girl a glass of water."

Caleb locked gazes with his dad who rolled his eyes. His mom unbound their hands, and Caleb picked up Makayla and laid her on the couch. Her beautiful face grew waxen and paler than before. He'd known she would most likely not be too keen on the idea of mating him, but he'd not expected her to be so resistant that she'd faint.

His mom covered her with a blanket and slipped off her shoes. "Give her time Caleb. She has been through quite an ordeal. This can't be easy for her. A girl used to living in the city comes here to be married the first day? It's a lot to take in."

"Is the baby okay?"

Mary smiled and squeezed his arm. "Listen. You can hear its heartbeat, strong and proud."

Caleb focused on Makayla, and the whooshing sound of a rapid heartbeat just below hers made him smile.

"She doesn't even show yet," he said.

"It happens sometimes. We'll take her to see Doc next week after she's settled a bit."

His mom linked arms with him, resting her head on his shoulder. They stood in silence for a minute both watching the rise and fall of Makayla's chest.

"Be patient with her. She'll come around."

He nodded and stared at Makayla. He got the feeling he was going to need lots of patience.

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An hour later Caleb drove Makayla to his house, through main street and headed toward the hills.

"There's the market." He pointed. "And that's The Hairy Dog bar. That's the library. It's small but it's connected to all the libraries in Idaho, so you can get just about any book or movie you want. And that's Josie's café. The coffee is good but the pie sucks."

Makayla pulled out her phone and glanced at it. "Is there anywhere around here that gets cell signal?"

"The best signal is in the library but if you hang on a minute, we'll pass by the church, and you can get a little for about a mile."

She looked around. "How do you live up here with no cell signal?"

"I've never had one so I don't know any different."

She stared at him incredulously. "You've never had a cell phone?"

He shrugged. "No need. I'm either at home, at work, at Josie's, at the Hairy Dog, or at church. Wolf River is a small town. If people need to get a hold of me, they know where to find me."

She laughed. "I don't even know how to respond to that." Her phone beeped repeatedly in rapid succession.

"Your mom trying to get a hold of you?"

She snorted. "Not likely." Her fingers flew over the phone, her long nails clicking on the screen faster than he thought possible. "It's my friends Rachael and Mindy. We'd just gotten home this morning when I was informed I was being married off, so they have no idea where I am."

She continued to type furiously as he drove down the road.

He furrowed his brows. "Wait. You only found out this morning?"

Her fingers stopped, and she looked up at him. "Yeeesss." She stared at him. "How long have you known?"

Uh-oh. No use lying to her. "A week."

"A week?" Anger flashed in her eyes like lightning. She clenched her jaw and went back to her phone.

He slowed slightly as the end of the pavement drew closer. "We're gonna hit the end of the cell zone."

She didn't respond. Instead she typed even faster.

He came to a crawl as the road faded into dirt. He stopped the truck at the edge of the asphalt and waited.

Her phone beeped several times, and she scanned the screen.

"Everything okay?"

"Peachy." Her fingers flew again then she tapped the screen off. "Okay. I guess the rest can wait."

He nodded, and she pushed her hair from her face giving him a glimpse of her slender neck. His wolf paced at the sight.

She leaned her head against the window and closed her eyes.

Caleb continued down the road. Gradually the road grew bumpier and the truck jolted, making Makayla open her eyes.

"How far out do you live?"

"Not much further."

She stared out the window. "There sure are a lot of trees here."

"Well, this is a forest."

"And you live in it?"

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"Some people enjoy solitude and nature to busy malls and traffic jams."

"I'm guessing there aren't any health food stores around here, either."

"No, but I whip up a mean steak."

"I'm a vegetarian."

Of course. "Moscow is an hour west. They probably have one there. If not Coeur d'Alene is two hours north. We could drive there next week if you want."

"An hour to a real store?"

He shrugged. "The local market supplies all we need. Or we grow it ourselves. Or hunt it."

She eyed him incredulously. "You hunt for food?"

She really had been removed from the ways of wolves.

They hit a giant hole, and she flew out of her seat and grabbed the door handle.

"Sorry. I've been meaning to throw some dirt in that hole for months now. I'll try to get to it this week." He came to the mailbox and stopped. "This is us. I'll get you the address in case you want to send a letter or need something delivered."

He turned left and headed up the dirt drive toward his cabin.

"You really do live out in the sticks."

Caleb held back a sigh. "I like the beauty and the quiet. I also like being able to get out and run whenever I want, on my own land. You may learn to like it here."

"People keep saying that."

Caleb shook his head. Makayla was no longer the spunky, pretty girl he remembered as a boy. She was exactly what he'd expect from a girl who'd grown up in a Beverly Hills mansion- and not at all what he was looking for in a mate.

Chapter Four

Makayla prayed she was dreaming, and that she'd wake up to find it had all been a terrible mistake, and she was back in her bed in LA. Rachael and Mindy snoring on the floor, the maid Susanna coming in to pick up her clothes and make them food... Then they'd hang out, get dressed up, and go out for the night again.

Instead she was wide awake and pulling up to the front of an enormous log cabin that was to be her new home.

"I didn't realize log cabins could be so big. First your parents and now yours."

"It's not finished all the way. I just got the roof put on before the first snowfall this past winter. The fireplace works well for heating, and there's running water, but no internet yet and no television."

"No internet or TV?" "What kind of hell is this?"

"To be honest, I don't have much need for either, so I haven't taken the time to install it."

"Then what do you do up here all day?"

His eyes darkened, and he swallowed hard.

Her gut clenched. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be such a bitch, I really don't, but this is all..."

"Fast?"

"Foreign. I mean, last night I was dancing in clubs in LA, and today I'm in a truck in the woods learning I won't even have a television to watch."

"I get it. I do. I went to Seattle for school. I know it's an adjustment coming here. I can't say that living the life you have I'd choose to make this move on my own, either. But this is how it is. My suggestion is you try to make the most of it because it isn't changing in the foreseeable future. For either of us."

Us?She hadn't had an 'us' since her father had died.

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"Caleb, why did you say you'd marry me sight unseen? I could have grown up to be hideous."

He shrugged. "Everyone is beautiful in some way. You just have to look for it."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"You needed help. I have the means to help you. Our families have been friends for generations. It seemed like the right thing to do."

"Even though this baby isn't yours?" Hell, she didn't even feel like the baby was hers yet. How could she expect him to feel a sudden connection to a life no bigger than a plum?

"Family isn't always about blood. It's about who you choose to love, protect, and fight for."

She stared into his dark eyes noticing his long beautiful eyelashes. She herself had only been able to achieve the look with lash extensions. Not that she'd be getting those done anytime soon.

She fought for words. Caleb couldn't possibly be so nice. No one was that nice. And... did she detect a sadness in his walnut-colored eyes?

"Come on. Let's get you inside so you can take a nap. It's been a long day so far."

Caleb carried her bags up the stairs to the front door. She followed, taking in the large

wooden structure. A large porch wrapped around the front complete with two rocking chairs and a swing. He opened the pine green front door and walked inside.

"Guess you don't need to lock the doors out here."

Inside, she looked around the large, sparse room holding a couch with a flannel throw hanging limply over one arm, and a chair in the corner. A set of stairs ran up the right-hand wall leading to a loft area and a landing with two doors on it.

The living room area opened into the unfinished kitchen. A refrigerator stood surrounded by boxes of what she assumed were cabinets. Canned food covered the granite kitchen island, and beyond the kitchen lay a nook with floor to ceiling windows, just like the front of the cabin.

The beauty and open floor-plan of the structure surprised her. She liked the airy feel of it, and the exposed beams in the ceiling. The warm tones of the wood were such a stark contrast to her mother's cream and white modern style. The way the front room opened into the kitchen as if the entire space belonged to everyone. In her parents' mansion everyone had their rooms and common rooms were used only for guests. But this felt like a family home. A place where people could gather and spend time together.

"I'm sorry I haven't gotten everything finished. I hoped to at least get the kitchen cabinets in before you arrived, but I thought you might like electricity a bit more."

She scanned the wooden walls and the ceiling with its exposed beams. It looked like something right out of Town & Country magazine. If it had been finished. And decorated.

"Did you do all this yourself?" she asked.

"Mostly. The framework I got some help with, but I picked out every log by hand, and I hammered every nail."

She walked to a beam running from floor to ceiling and pressed her palm into it. She had to admit, the craftsmanship was beautiful.

"How long did it take?"

"I've been working on it for about a year, give or take. I bought the land about four years ago and built a smaller cabin in the back. I stayed there while I worked on designing and building this one." He crossed his arms over his chest, and his body seemed impossibly larger. Solid and strong, like the house.

"I'm impressed." She dropped her hand from the beam.

"Why? You didn't think a guy like me could building something like this?"

"No. Because building things like this is a lost art form. It's beautiful, Caleb."

Caleb's shoved his hands into his pocket.

She fought the urge to smile at obviously making him nervous.

In the shops of Rodeo Drive a guy like him was more likely to be treated like a joke than to be taken seriously for anything. And if she'd ever met him at a club, she wouldn't have given him a second thought. Not because he wasn't good looking. He was, ruggedly so. But because... he was too nice and reserved. And modest.

"Let me take your things upstairs for you. You can have the big room." He picked up her bags and headed for the stairs.

"Where... where will you sleep?" She followed him up.

"My room."

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They hit the landing, and she looked around the loft. A futon sat in the middle, low to the floor. On one side bookcases flanked the wall, filled with dozens of family photos as well as a few trophies she assumed were from high school, as well as colorful models of vintage cars and trucks. A desk sat on the other side, strewn with blueprints and papers.

"This way." He led her across the landing to the first door.

He pushed it open with his boot. The vaulted ceiling led up to a center chandelier made from antlers. A large wooden bed faced the door, decorated in a bright pink floral comforter and pillows. It was all so very... country- but not in a cute shabby chic kind of way. A beautiful antique dresser stood in the corner under a large picture window, by the closet. And directly across from the bed, a large stone fireplace burned low with embers next to a door leading to the bathroom.

"Did you pick out the bedspread?" she asked.

He set down her bags and snorted. "Nope. That was all mom. She thought it was time for an upgrade from the quilts my grandmother made. So, she got that off the internet. If you don't like it, I can get something else."

She wrapped her arms around herself and nodded. It was all too much. Him, his mom, the room, all of it. Every inch of Wolf River spoke of family, tradition, and unity. Something she'd only ever felt with her father. And now that he'd passed on... Memories of the accident bombarded her.

"I think I'd like to take a nap." She barely managed to choke the words out as

everything that had happened to her piled up in her mind like a stack of bricks ready to topple over and crush her.

"Of course." He headed for the door, pausing as he neared her. For a moment she thought he might touch her, but then he continued out.

Makayla closed it behind him then ran to the bed and flung herself onto the hideous bedspread. She pushed her face into the pillows as tears streamed out. Images flashed in her mind.

Red and blue flashing lights. The sound of ripping metal. Damp asphalt on her back. Her father hanging upside down in the driver's seat of his Tesla.

She pulled the pillows closer and tried to hold herself together. If only her dad was still alive, then none of this would be happening.

* * *

Caleb stared at the instructions for setting up the cabinets and arranged the boxes accordingly. He glanced at the clock on the microwave then glanced upstairs. Makayla had been asleep for over four hours. Or at least, she hadn't made an appearance in four hours. It was half past six, and his stomach growled. He scanned the cans of ravioli, spaghetti, corn beef hash, and soup, and his eyes lit on a can of condensed tomato soup. It was about the only thing in the house that didn't have meat in it.

He opened the can and took it and a saucepan to the hotplate. Turning it on, he set the pan on top then plopped the tomato soup inside. He grabbed milk from the fridge and stirred some in then fixed a grilled cheese for her as well. She needed to keep her strength up, and though canned soup wasn't the most nutritious food on the planet, the milk and cheese had calcium in it. That was good for babies, right?

Sandwich plated and soup in a bowl, he set the feast on a tray with a glass of water and headed upstairs.

He knocked on the door but there was no answer. He entered to find her curled up under the covers completely asleep. He set the tray down quietly on the nightstand.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Sorry if I woke you." He ran his hands through his hair.

"You didn't." She pointed to the tray. "What is it?"

Red blotchy patches marred her cheeks and deep circles shadowed her eyes. The damp scent of salt hit his nose. She'd been crying.

"Uh... I didn't have much vegetarian stuff, so it's just some tomato soup and a grilled cheese."

"I can't have dairy."

Damn. "Oh. No problem. I can go to town and—"

"I'm not really hungry, but thanks."

"Is there anything I can get you?"

She shook her head. "I think I'm just gonna get some more sleep."

"Shouldn't you eat something? At least for the baby?"

She blinked and opened her mouth to speak, then closed it, and opened it again. "I

think the baby will be fine waiting to eat until tomorrow. They are supposed to just take what they need from me anyway, so the baby won't starve."

He wanted to protest but it wasn't really his place, not yet. So, he walked out and closed the door behind himself.

He'd known it would be hard for her to adjust to life in Idaho, but nothing had prepared him for this.

Chapter Five

Makayla hadn't left her room in four days. Unable to resign herself to her fate, she tried to devise a plan to get her mom to let her go home—so far, to no avail. No matter her excuse. No matter her apology. No matter her plea. Once mother's mind was set, there was no changing it.

Outside her window the wind swayed the trees. The leaves had just begun to bud in the soft spring light, and grass sprouted from underneath the last bits of morning frost. What would the temperature be in Los Angeles today? There, people would be dressed in shorts and flip-flops, sunning on the beaches and splashing in the ocean. Here, she wore a long-sleeved shirt and pants, and still she needed a sweater to keep warm.

The gravel drive crunched under the wheels of a Jeep as it pulled up to the front of the cabin. A guy jumped out of the driver's seat and ran around to the passenger's side. His dark hair and tanned skin bore a striking resemblance to Caleb. A dark-haired woman slid out of her seat, laughed and smacked him on the chest. He pulled her in tight and hugged her. Makayla's ribcage squeezed at the sight. She'd never had someone care about her that much except her dad.

The man closed the passenger's door and Makayla's stomach dropped. The woman was pregnant. Really pregnant. Makayla's hand went to her own belly reflexively but she pulled it away and took a deep breath. She tried to place the guy, and a memory flashed in her mind of a fat toddler sitting on Mary's lap. Griffin. Logan and Caleb's baby brother. Meaning the pregnant woman must be his mate Dakota.

Dakota waddled to the front door with Griffin at her side, his hand resting on her lower back. Makayla wondered if Caleb would want to be so doting when she was as wide as the cabin door.

She stepped from the window as a knock sounded from below. She didn't feel like entertaining. Getting used to being up all day and sleeping all night again—the reverse of her LA schedule—was taking its toll both mentally and physically. All she wanted to do now was sleep forever. Her stomach growled, and her vision fuzzed over. Not good. She stumbled to the bed and sat as someone pounded on her bedroom door.

"Makayla?" Caleb called.

She tried to focus on her hands to keep from passing out. Dark spots blurred her vision.

"Makayla?" The door opened. "Makayla!" Heavy footsteps rushed to her side. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head and breathed in deep several times. Her eyesight slowly returned like a camera lens opening.

"I'm just a little light-headed."

"Probably from lack of eating."

She bit her tongue keeping back a smart retort. "Probably." She'd done little more than picked at the food he brought her over the past four days.

He held his hand out to her. "Let's get some food in you before you waste away."

She snorted. "In California you're fat if you don't waste away."

He shook his head. "Well this ain't California honey. Here we like our women strong and sturdy. So, let's finally get some calories in you."

Caleb had tried to be kind to her over the past few days. Giving her space. Not prying or demanding anything of her. Making her food. Nothing could pull her out of her melancholy state. Guilt swept through her. He'd been utterly kind to her so far and she'd only been distant.

She tugged the hem of her oversized silk shirt. She wore her only pair of leggings underneath because somehow in the last week she'd stopped fitting into her regular pants. She wasn't sure exactly when it had happened, and she couldn't see too much of a difference in her belly, but her abdomen had gotten firmer. Like she could suddenly feel the organs in her body.

She walked downstairs with Caleb right behind her. Griffin spotted them and stood from the couch.

"You probably don't remember me," he said.

"Griffin, right?" She crossed to him and shook his hand.

"Yeah. And this is my mate Dakota."

"It's very nice to meet you Makayla."

Makayla nodded. "You too."

The group looked at each other for a minute.

"I'm gonna make Makayla some eggs and toast. You guys want some?" Caleb walked into the kitchen.

"No thanks," said Dakota.

"I'm good," replied Griffin.

"Come sit." Dakota patted the spot next to her on the couch.

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Makayla's eyes couldn't leave Dakota's stomach as she sat.

"I'm seven," Dakota said.

Makayla looked up, and her cheeks flushed with heat. "Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare."

Dakota waved her off. Her tanned skin and dark hair were striking with her high cheekbones and pouty lips. If she'd been in California she would have been a perfect model for maternity clothes.

"You're pregnant too right?" Dakota asked.

Makayla swallowed hard. "Yup." She could barely get the word out without wanting to throw up. She tugged on her shirt as if making it less clingy would hide the truth.

"How far along are you?"

"About four months or so, I guess."

Dakota looked at her strangely making Makayla flush with guilt.

"I need to see a doctor," Makayla finally said. "To find out exactly how far along I am."

Dakota chuckled and threw Makayla a smile that calmed her. "Griff makes me go like clockwork. He has every appointment on a huge calendar that he is using to count

down the days till our little guy is born."

Makayla nodded, unsure of what to say. Unlike Dakota and Griffin, she wasn't at all happy to be pregnant. But that didn't mean she was willing to terminate the pregnancy either.

An idea struck her. Maybe if she could form a friendship with Dakota, it might lead to a little freedom. "I heard there's a library in town," Makayla said. "Maybe you and I could go, and I could pick up some books. I'm not sure I know what else to do out here besides read."

"Oh, there's tons to do. You can go on a nature walk and pick berries. You could help Caleb paint and stuff. I know how happy he was that you'd be coming. He didn't want to do anything to the baby's room without your permission, so I'm sure he'd love your help with that. You could start a garden. I have some chickens. I'd be happy to give you a couple hens, and the Millers in town will sell you a rooster. You could—"

Dakota's words faded away as Makayla gaped at her, reeling. Paint? Garden? Chickens? Makayla had never done any of those things. Unless you considered going to a farmer's market gardening. And painting her nails. And again with the baby. Baby, baby, baby. That's all her mother had talked to her about since she'd made her announcement. The baby needed to be her priority. She needed to look to the baby's future. She needed to do what was best for the baby. What about her? What about what she wanted?

"So what do you think?" asked Dakota.

Makayla blinked several times. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Going to town to talk to the Millers about a rooster, and to Mary's garden center to see what plants she has in so you can start a little garden."

Makayla had no interest in doing either of those things, but she did want to get out of the cabin.

"Sure. Let me just get my phone and purse." Makayla got to her feet as Caleb entered with a plate of eggs and toast.

He smiled and held it out to her. The smell of the eggs hit her nostrils, and her stomach roiled. She covered her mouth and shook her head.

"I can't." Bile pulled up her throat, and she pushed past Caleb and raced for the bathroom. She slammed the door and made it to the toilet just as she dry heaved into it.

How much mortification could she take? She heaved again as a fine sheen of sweat brushed her skin.

"Are you okay?" Caleb called through the door.

Makayla spit into the toilet and flushed it. She plopped onto her butt and lay her cheek against the porcelain bowl. "I'm fine," she croaked.

"Can I get you some tea?"

She burped and sucked down stomach acid. "No thank you."

Man, she'd thought the morning sickness was over. What if it wasn't? She didn't think she could handle more nausea. If it continued she really would need to go see a doctor sooner rather than later.

What she'd told Dakota hadn't been entirely true. She knew how far along she was. She was seventeen weeks and two days. How did she know it? Because that had been

the one and only time she'd screwed up and slept with someone without thinking. Before Derek, it had been over a year and a half since she'd had sex.

She pushed to her feet, went to the sink and splashed water on her face. Ginger ale. She was going to need ginger ale to get through this, and there was only one place to get it. Guess she'd be picking up chickens and plants at the same time.

* * *

Caleb watched Makayla and Dakota walk out the front door. Griffin clapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry big bro. Dakota won't let her run away."

Caleb chuckled but Griffin had no idea how true his words might be. Makayla had looked like she'd been ready to bolt since the moment she'd laid eyes on him. Every morning he'd half expected to wake up and find her gone along with his truck.

As much as he hated to see her leave, she needed to get out of the cabin. She needed to see what Wolf River had to offer.

"So, what are we doing today?" asked Griffin. "Kitchen cabinets?"

Caleb stared at the door for a minute longer. "Yeah. I think Makayla might appreciate not having the food and dishes all over the countertop."

"Great." Griffin clapped his hands together then pulled the instruction booklet off one of the boxes and flipped it open.

It filled Caleb with happiness to see Griffin and Dakota back together. They'd been through a lot, and they deserved all the joy the world had to offer up.

"I'll get my tool belt," said Caleb.

"And get a level," Griffin called. "Or three. We're gonna need 'em."

He wished Makayla had stuck around for just a few minutes. He'd barely spoken to her since she'd arrived, and since it was going to be her house too, he would have liked to get her input on how she wanted the kitchen laid out. A pit grew in his stomach, and his gaze drifted to the front door again. That was, if she didn't take off.

* * *

"You only want one rooster?" asked Mrs. Miller. "I'd give you a good deal on two." The old woman's face looked like wrinkled leather, and her clothes looked like they'd been rumped in a ball before she threw them on.

"No thank you," said Dakota. "She's just starting out, and she'll only have two hens. One will be enough for now."

"What about a hen house? Do you need one of those?"

Dakota smiled. "It's okay. Griff and Caleb can make one. We'll be back on Thursday to pick him up. The big one with the silky black feathers."

Mrs. Miller eyed Makayla. "She doesn't even look like she knows how to take care of chickens. I don't want him dying."

"I'm going to teach her myself, Mrs. Miller, don't you worry." Dakota pulled out cash and handed it over.

Mrs. Miller nodded and snatched up the money, shoving it in her bra. "We'll see you Thursday. And make sure to stop by Arnold's place and pick up some proper feed."

"We will." Dakota led Makayla back to the Jeep by her arm. "Bye, Mrs. Miller."

Dakota waved. "Sheesh," she said under her breath. "You'd think the woman was selling us her prize-winning poodle for all the fuss."

"She has prize winning poodles?"

"Are you kidding? That woman can't even wash her own clothes let alone take care of a prize anything."

Makayla laughed and got into the vehicle. "My mom is the same way with her French Bulldog, Muddles."

Dakota started up the Jeep and backed out of the dirt drive and onto the road. "Okay, so we need to go to Arnold's for some feed and other supplies. And we can stop into the diner for a bite if you're feeling up to it. And then I could introduce you to Doc if you want."

Makayla fought for a good reason why she couldn't go to see the doctor. "Caleb said he was going to make an appointment, and I'm sure he'd want to be there, so..."

Dakota looked over at her. "Of course."

"We're still going to go to the library, right?"

"Yup, we can do that too."

They drove down a road Makayla recognized as the one leading into town. She grabbed her phone from her purse and looked at it. Please let there be a text. Please let them not have forgotten about her.

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She waited as they bounced down the road. When the vehicle slowed at the stop sign she held her breath. Her phone went crazy, and she smiled. There were dozens of texts from her friends asking if she was okay and when she was coming back. She read through them quickly and typed away as fast as she could to respond.

"Wow. That's a lot of texting," said Dakota.

"I didn't really get a chance to talk to my friends before I left. They aren't like us, so they don't get why I am here. They just want to know I'm okay, and when I'm coming back."

"So, they're human?"

She scanned the text responses. "Yup. Telling them I was forced into an arranged marriage would be as foreign to them as if I told them I had decided becoming a nun was my calling in life."

"And the father of your baby. Is he a human?"

"No. He's Bitten."

Dakota stayed silent for a minute. "So, you were forced into this mating with Caleb? You didn't want it?"

"Want it? I didn't even know about it until ten minutes before my mom shoved me in my brother's car and sent me to the airport."

"Wow." Dakota shook her head. "I had no idea. So... you don't want to be here?"

"Nope." Makayla replied to a text from Tiffany telling her Derek, the baby-daddy, had been asking about her. She said to tell Derek that since he hadn't stepped up to do the right thing, she was now in Wolf River with someone who would.

Dakota pulled into a parking space along the main street as Makayla continued to text. There was going to be a party at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Damn. Everyone was supposed to be there, and she was stuck in a cabin in the woods about to buy chicken feed.

"Are you ready?" asked Dakota.

Makayla nodded and got out while still texting. She stepped up on the curb and almost bumped into a burly man carrying several pieces of lumber. She stopped just before knocking into him.

"Sorry." She gave him a tight smile.

He looked her up and down like she was an alien.

"Hi Chester," said Dakota. "This is Makayla. She's new to town. She's Simon Devamar's daughter."

Chester's eyes widened, and he nodded. "It's nice to meet you, Makayla. We were all very sorry to hear about Simon's death. He was dearly loved here in Wolf River. Give your mother my best when you speak to her please. She's a wonderful woman." Chester nodded again and continued on down the street.

Makayla stared after him. What the hell? He knew her mom and dad? Yes, her parents had grown up in Wolf River, but they hadn't lived there in over thirty years.

"Come on," Dakota said. "Let's see what Arnold's has for supplies."

Dakota said hello to everyone they passed and spoke to them by name and introduced Makayla. Every person greeted her with a smile as soon as they found out she was Simon's daughter.

"I don't understand," Makayla finally said as they crossed the street. "My parents haven't lived here since before I was born. They were that memorable to people?"

"Your parents may not have lived here, but they've done a lot for Wolf River. Your dad and Jeremiah built everything here, and your dad came up for a weekend every six months to make sure Wolf River had everything it needed. See the school house?" She pointed to a small brick building at the end of the street. "Your dad built that. And the church, he paid for the roof when we couldn't raise the funds. Your mom paid to have the Wi-Fi pulled here to town and for the library to be filled with books."

"My parents did all that?" It wasn't hard for her to believe her dad would be so generous, but her mom... It was like a punch to the gut. She'd thought that she and her dad talked about everything. She wondered what else she didn't know about her parents.

"Your dad was a great man, and your mom and Colt have continued to help."

Makayla swallowed hard. Her mom. The one who had sent her off in shame had helped this town to come out of the dark ages? Where had her mom been when she'd needed her?

"Come on," said Dakota. "Let's get the supplies and then head over to the diner for something to eat."

Makayla couldn't make her mouth work the entire trip to the store, and she didn't

bother to look at her phone, either. She'd never known her mom to be generous to anyone.

They entered the diner and again Dakota said hello to everyone. They took a table near the window, and a waitress came over, greeting them with a smile.

"Hi Dakota, how are ya?" The short dark-haired waitress pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. Her wide cheekbones and almond shaped brown eyes held an exotic quality.

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"Great, Hannah. How are things?"

Hannah nodded. "Mom is better today."

Dakota gave a tight smile, and her eyes softened. "That's wonderful. She's been grieving a long time."

Hannah looked to Makayla.

"Hi." Makayla gave a small wave.

"Hannah, this is Makayla. She's new."

"Nice to meet you. What brings you to Wolf River?"

Makayla wasn't sure how to answer that question. I got myself knocked up, and my mom sent me off to be married? Probably wasn't the best introduction.

"She's Simon Devamar's daughter."

Hannah's smile fell. "You're here for Caleb."

The tone of the statement slapped Makayla in the face.

"Yes," Dakota replied. "She and Caleb are to be mated."

Hannah continued to stare for a moment longer then blinked several times. "Will you

excuse—" She didn't even finish the sentence before beelining for the back of the diner.

Makayla looked at Dakota and then to the back of the diner again. "What? Did I steal Caleb from her?"

Dakota picked up a menu and handed one to Makayla. "Caleb and Hannah's sister Franny were high school sweethearts. Franny died a few years ago."

"Oh." Makayla swallowed hard as her skin flushed with heat. She looked at her menu running her eyes over the words but not reading them. She knew the pain of losing someone you were close to all too well. And if Franny had been the one Caleb had intended on mating... She couldn't imagine that kind of loss. Why hadn't he told her? Probably because she hadn't even given him a chance to. Come to think of it she hadn't talked to him much at all since the day she'd arrived. She'd been so wrapped up in her misery of being shipped off to be married that she hadn't even stopped to think what an arranged marriage might mean to Caleb.

"Are you girls ready?" An older waitress with graying hair gave her a friendly smile.

Makayla glanced around for Hannah but she was nowhere to be seen. She shut her menu and put it back in place. "I'll just have some toast and a cup of mint tea please."

Dakota ordered a huge lunch and then looked to Makayla. "So, tell me, are you planning on staying, or are you trying to find a way to cut bait and run?"

Direct. Makayla appreciated that.

"I have to admit. I've thought about running. But with my mom threatening to cut me off, I wouldn't get far."

“You’re marrying Caleb for money?”

“No. Yes... I mean... I don’t know. It all happened so fast. It really didn’t feel like I had a choice. I haven’t finished school. I’ve never had a job. I know that I can’t even make it on my own financially. Especially not with—” She couldn’t finish the sentence.

Dakota sipped her water then turned the glass in a circle. "Makayla, I don't know you, but I do know Caleb. He offered to take you and your baby as his own because he is a good guy. From what I gather, this isn't what you wanted for your life, but you could have done worse. Wolf River is a great pack of Blood Born. You'd be hard-pressed to find another pack as willing to accept you. But if you betray one of us, you betray all of us. Caleb is about as beloved as Jeremiah himself. All I ask is that if you plan on not sticking around, please don't lead Caleb on. I don't think he could handle a second heartbreak." Sincerity rounded Dakota's eyes, but the protective edge in her voice told Makayla she wasn't someone to be tangled with.

Caleb hadn't been anything but nice to her. She didn't want to hurt him. But she didn't want to be stuck in Wolf River for the rest of her life, either. She had to find a way out. Fast.

Chapter Six

"So why did you do it?" Griffin held up the birch wood cabinet as Caleb screwed it in place.

"Do what?" Caleb reached for the level and checked the placement.

"Come on, you can't BS me. Why did you take on Makayla? Was it because of Franny?"

Caleb's gut clenched at the mention of his dead girlfriend. "Why would I take in Makayla because of Franny?"

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Griffin looked up at him then pushed his shoulder into the cabinet. "You have a history of being a knight in shining fur for females in need."

Truth was, Caleb wasn't entirely sure why he'd agreed to take Makayla in. But when he'd heard about her plight, he figured, what the hell?

"Don't get me wrong," said Griffin. "She's pretty. She just doesn't seem to be the settling down and playing wife kind."

Caleb screwed in the back of the cupboard. "And what kind of girl do you think she is?" He tried to keep his wolf calm at Griffin's assessment of her. Though Caleb wasn't sure what to think of Makayla, his wolf had already formed an attachment Caleb couldn't understand.

"The kind that prefers Gucci to Outdoor Sportsman and Prada to Target."

"Well, she'll just have to get used to it, won't she?" He didn't need Griffin pointing out all the differences between them. From first glance Caleb had known he didn't deserve her.

"I wasn't trying to start anything. I just wondered why."

"Because she needed it, and I could provide. It's as simple as that." A lie, but the truth of why he'd said yes to Makayla's mom was too painful to voice. Even to Griffin.

Caleb stepped back and looked at their progress. They had all the cabinets finished except for a corner and the ones above the oven. He smiled at the sight of the

beautiful wood surrounding the dark granite counters. He hoped Makayla would like them as much as he did.

"I'll need to go into Moscow to get a stove and range," said Caleb.

"You'll probably want to get a fridge bigger than that mini thing you've got, too."

Caleb glanced into the mud room. "And a washer and dryer. I doubt Makayla is going to want to go into town to the laundromat, or to mom's." He wondered if she'd want a say in what he bought or if she'd even care.

Griffin chuckled. "Does she even know how to do laundry?"

Caleb had a feeling there were a lot of things Makayla would have to learn. He could be patient. After all this was new for her, and he wasn't the easiest of men. Hell, he didn't even have a proper house. But she was going to have to put in some effort as well. The past days with her shut in her room had made Caleb lonelier than ever. His wolf had wanted to get to know Makayla better, and shackling his other half away from hers wasn't going to last much longer. Just getting her in the same room would help ease his wolf's curiosity.

The sounds of a vehicle crunching up the drive pulled his attention.

"Girls are back," said Griffin.

"Too bad we didn't finish."

"Get the appliances you need in Moscow tomorrow, and then I'll come over, and we can install everything that's left on Sunday. I'd hate to have to rip these out because the sizes didn't match though, so make sure you measure right."

Caleb threw a towel at Griffin's face. "You act like I've never done this before."

Griffin laughed. "I hope they brought food. I'm starving."

"You could have had anything you wanted," Caleb replied.

Griffin clapped him on the shoulder. "Sorry man, but after getting spoiled by Dakota's amazing meals again, there's no way I could go back to eating out of a can."

It sure would be nice to get a home cooked meal. Not that Caleb expected Makayla to do all the cooking or anything, but he had hoped for a few perks from getting married.

The front door opened, and the women walked in carrying several bags. Griffin rushed to Dakota's side and took the bags from her.

"Griff, I'm not made of glass. I can carry some groceries into the kitchen."

"But why would you when I'm right here to help?" He kissed her cheek, and she shook her head.

Caleb jogged toward Makayla. "Need some help?"

"I'm fine." She gave him a tight smile and set the bags on the island.

She looked at the cabinets and then ran her hand over the nearest one.

He's stomach clenched as he awaited her verdict.

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"What kind of wood is this?" she asked.

"Birch," said Caleb.

She stared at them for a moment and then turned to him. "I really like them. They are beautiful but so natural feeling at the same time."

Caleb's cheeks heated from her praise. That was the exact reason he'd chosen them. He loved the beautiful grain of birch with the color of a deeper wood.

"I can't believe you guys got them almost all done," said Dakota. "I have to be honest, I'm a bit jealous. Maybe you can help Griffin upgrade ours."

Caleb nodded. "Just tell me when, and I'll be there."

Griffin snorted. "Let's get the baby's room done first."

"Come on," said Dakota. "You boys rest. Makayla and I will set the table and get out the food."

"You don't have to do that," said Caleb.

Dakota brushed him off. "Please. All we did was go to town and pick up a few things. It was you who were working all day."

The women walked into the mudroom and came back with paper plates and plastic utensils. He wanted to help but Dakota pushed him away, so he and Griffin sat on the

couch and chatted about basketball season. Even as they chatted, his eyes never left Makayla. A deep emotional turmoil poured off her though she tried to hide it. He knew the signs all too well. The feeling of guilt. Of anger. Of regret. Beneath her fancy clothes and pretty face hid a pain that smelled of bitter herbs.

Caleb was sure that given time and patience she would come to love Wolf River. She would find peace and be able to put her pain and regrets to bed once and for all. She only had to allow herself to give it a chance.

* * *

"What do you think of Wolf River?" asked Griffin.

Makayla looked up from her salad and glanced around the table. Obviously, Griffin spoke to her.

"It's small. Quiet. No traffic, which is a plus."

Griffin laughed. "I think the last bit of traffic we had was when the lumber truck tipped sideways on the ice, and the wood scattered all over the street."

"Yes, that caused what? A total of three cars to wait to get to the other side of town." A crooked smile graced Caleb's face.

Makayla's wolf sat up and took notice. She'd not seen him smile before. It seemed foreign but also... sexy. The way it cocked up one corner of his lips and crinkled his eyes. Her wolf howled at the sight of him. Caleb caught her looking at him, and their eyes connected.

"So, what would you be doing on a Friday night if you were still in LA?" asked Griffin.

Makayla broke her gaze from Caleb. "I usually head out with my friends to hit the clubs. By about two or three we head to a private party at someone's house, and then I get home about five."

Griffin gave Dakota a strange look, then squeezed her hand.

"Do you drink that whole time?" Caleb's voice held no judgment, only worry.

"No." Makayla stabbed a piece of lettuce with her fork. "I'm the designated driver. I haven't had a drink since..."

A look of relief crossed his face. A sweet expression that struck her in the heart. How could someone who didn't even know her care about her well-being and the well-being of a child that wasn't even his? Caleb was an enigma. Even the egg fertilizer of her unborn child hadn't wanted them. But Caleb did somehow.

She swallowed hard and pushed the food around her plate. She didn't deserve him.

She set her fork down. "You know, I'm pretty tired from walking so much today. I think I'm going to head up to bed."

"You've eaten hardly anything," Caleb protested.

"I'm not really hungry." She rose from the table and tried to think of something to say. "The cabinets look really nice, Caleb and Griffin. Thank you, Dakota, for taking me into town."

Dakota nodded. "Hopefully, the boys will get the chicken coop together tomorrow, and we can bring over those hens."

"Caleb's heading to Moscow tomorrow," said Griffin.

"Moscow?" asked Makayla.

"I need to pick up a stove and fridge. You want to come help pick it out?" The hopeful look on Caleb's face struck her in the heart. Did he really want her input on how he put his kitchen together?

"Uhm... maybe. We'll see." She headed for the stairs. She wanted to glance back at them, to see if they were watching her go. If he was watching her. But she couldn't bear to see the look in their eyes. She knew it would mimic the look her mother always gave her. The one telling her she wasn't worthy to be with them.

Chapter Seven

Caleb lay atop his covers listening to the sounds of the woods. What had he gotten himself into? For the past week he'd tried to form some kind of relationship with Makayla. Not a romantic relationship but a friendship, and she'd shown little to no interest. Like she was just doing her time until she could escape her prison sentence. But the night Dakota and Griffin had come over, she'd looked at him. Really looked at him, and for a split second he could have sworn that she felt... something. What it was, he did not know.

He stared at the ceiling directly below where she would be sleeping. They'd fallen into a routine but not necessarily a good one. He'd wake up early and get breakfast together for them. She'd come down around eight thirty, eat, and then head up to get dressed. By the time nine rolled around and he had to get to work, she'd jog down the

stairs and ask if he could drop her at the library. And there she would stay until evening when he would pick her up, bring her home, and fix dinner. As far as he could tell she didn't eat during the day, which in and of itself worried him. And she barely spoke two sentences to him after they came home. Even for a guy as quiet as Caleb, he knew it wasn't normal for them to be like strangers living in the same house.

He blew out a heavy breath and rubbed his face. What had he expected?

The couple of times he'd met her when they were younger, she'd been spoiled but sweet and fun and adventurous. The first to challenge him and Logan to a foot race. Or to see who could climb the highest in a tree. She ruined every fancy piece of clothing her mother dolled her up in by swimming in the lake, chasing rabbits in the brush, and having mud fights. Now she acted like her fancy clothes were as precious as gold. Her makeup perfect. Her hair always done in some elaborate way that seemed so silly to Caleb considering they lived in Wolf River. He's seen her in the mornings before she painted and primped and curled every inch of herself. She was beautiful without the adornment. He just wondered if she'd ever give him a chance to tell her.

A whimper pulled his attention, and his hearing perked up. Every night her moans, crying, and thrashing woke him. He didn't know what she dreamed about, but it always left him in anguish to hear her so distressed.

"No!" she shouted. "Daddy! Daddy!"

His heart hammered in his chest, and his wolf whined. He stared at the ceiling willing her to rest peacefully. But she cried out again. Louder and more distressed. His wolf growled and made Caleb lurch to his feet. He sniffed the air and waited. The fear she emanated floated all the way down to where he stood.

"Daddy!"

A crash had him rushing up to her room. He threw the door wide and found her on the floor.

"Makayla." He ran to her side where she lay in a cami and panties. He pushed the hair from her face. Thank God she wasn't bleeding. Her eyes widened, and she scrambled away from him until her back hit the wall. "Makayla, it's Caleb."

Terror laced her features in the moonlight. She scanned the room, blinked several times, and then looked him up and down.

"Caleb?"

"You're okay. You had another bad dream."

Her shoulders slumped, and she hung her head between her knees. She stared at the floor for a minute before finally looking up.

"Another bad dream?" she said. "I've woken you before."

He shrugged and crossed his arms over his bare chest realizing that he only wore his boxer briefs and tube socks. "It's not a big deal."

She stared at him for a minute.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head and got to her feet. "I'm sorry I woke you. I'll try not to do that again."

"Like I said, it's not a big deal. I..." He wasn't sure what to say. "I want to be here for you. If you need me."

She got back into bed and pulled up her covers. "Thank you. I think I just want to get some sleep though." She rolled over and faced the window.

Caleb waited for a minute wanting to say something that would help her. But no words came out so he walked out of the room. She locked her anguish deep inside her, unwilling to voice it except while sleeping. The question was, why.

* * *

The next morning Makayla didn't go down for breakfast. She was too mortified by how she'd acted, and by Caleb seeing her so weak. Back home she'd partied herself to exhaustion every night and taken just one of her doctor approved pills to help her get a few hours of rest during the day before going back out again. Ever since her father's death her life had been one big party. But now... she had nothing to dull her pain.

She remembered every detail of Caleb's taut muscular body as he'd rushed into the room to help her. Stupid nightmare had dumped her out of bed and onto the wooden floor, and she had the bruise on her hip to prove it. She'd been so embarrassed to find him standing there in his thigh hugging underwear asking her if she was okay. She'd not realized until seeing him in his underwear, just what his jeans covered. Powerfully sculpted legs worthy of Atlas who held the world on his shoulders. And damn if she hadn't always had a thing for a pair of muscular calves and a tight round rear. Her body tingled at the memory of him crouched over her, pushing her hair from her face. The smell of his cologne mixed with his own personal scent. The sensation made her body flush with heat.

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A knock on her bedroom door pulled her from her thoughts. She rolled quickly away from the door as embarrassment scoured over her.

"I'm going to head to work now."

She nodded but didn't speak.

"I left you some food on the counter."

"Thank you."

"I'd really like you to eat something today, please. For the baby's sake."

She squeezed her eyes shut. Not for her sake? Not so she was okay?

"I'll be back about five. Make sure to check on the chickens and the garden."

She sucked in a deep breath. The scent of his cologne wafted over to her, reigniting her thoughts and making her wolf wake up and take notice. What was that all about? She couldn't stand the smell of anything lately, why did he smell so damn good all of a sudden? Caleb's scent warmed her in places she didn't want to think about. Even if her body and wolf had decided they wanted to feel his skin pressed against hers, it didn't mean he wanted anything to do with her in that way.

"Have a good day," she managed.

He closed the door and his heavy booted footsteps receded down the stairs. The

silence of the house enveloped her as his truck crunched down the gravel drive and out to the road.

Her wolf grumbled, wanting to go with him.

Makayla threw the blankets over her head and closed her eyes – but that only brought more visions of Caleb in all his hunky glory.

* * *

Around three Caleb finally broke away from the work site to grab a sandwich at the diner. He walked in to the mostly empty restaurant and sat at the counter. An older woman stepped out of the back and noticed him.

“Hey Caleb.”

“Gladys. How are you doing?”

“Can’t complain.”

Caleb nodded taking in the wrinkles crinkling around her tired eyes.

“Sandwich and coffee to go?”

“I think I’ll eat here today.”

Gladys nodded and walked into the back.

Caleb hung his head. He fought the urge to look at the corner booth where he used to sit with Franny. It surprised him how his thoughts of her had lessened with Makayla’s arrival. Guilt struck him at the realization, making him sigh. Moving on was a good

thing, right? It's what he hoped for. What he wanted. So why did he feel like being with Makayla was a betrayal?

A plate plopped down in front of him hard, the force making the top bread slide off his lunch. Caleb looked up to catch a pair of fiery eyes. Hannah. Damn. He thought she got off at noon.

"Hannah." Caleb pushed the bread back onto his sandwich.

"Caleb." She crossed her arms over her chest.

He'd tried hard to avoid her since Makayla's arrival. Franny's older sister had a tongue like a bullwhip and the temper of a rabid Alpha.

"New wife not so domestic I hear."

Caleb's wolf growled at the insult. Caleb bit into his ham sandwich avoiding Hannah's accusation.

"Hear she prefers to sit in the library all day texting her city friends and doing status updates over spending time with you."

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Caleb tore off another hunk of his sandwich ground it into mush before swallowing. Hannah's pain hadn't dimmed since Franny's death, and with their mother's failing mental health and Hannah having to take over the running of the diner, she had a lot on her plate. Even so... he'd not seen her so venomous in over a year.

"Makayla and I are just starting to get to know each other. Wolf River isn't really what she is used to."

"Seems more like you aren't really what she's used to."

Caleb dropped his sandwich and growled. He didn't need Hannah pointing out that things between him and Makayla weren't exactly how he'd hoped. He felt the distance between them every single minute he in his house.

"Why did you even choose her? There are dozens of Blood Born you could have chosen from. Many of them have tried to get you in their bed, and yet you chose a stuck up, prissy, designer label, mall rat."

Caleb slammed his fist on the counter making it shake and his coffee spill. He took a deep breath and pushed down his snarling wolf before speaking.

"Because you are Franny's sister, I will let this go. Just once, Hannah. But if you ever speak of Makayla like that again, the conversation will have a very bloody end for one of us."

The fear in Hannah's eyes could not be denied. Even so, she continued to stand defiantly, offering no apology.

Caleb pulled out a ten-dollar bill and slapped it on the counter. “You let everyone else who comes in here know what I said. If anyone speaks ill of her, even my dad won’t be able to save them from my wrath. Got it?”

She nodded almost imperceptibly. Caleb stalked to the door and threw it open so hard he thought he might break it.

He didn’t want other people in his business. And the last thing he needed was for gossip to start about his relationship before it had even cemented. Problem was... everything Hannah had said was the truth.

Caleb opened the front door to find all the lights off in the house. It was almost five fifteen, and the food he'd made Makayla for breakfast still sat on the counter untouched.

For the first time his anger spiked, and his wolf growled at the sight. He stomped into the kitchen and tossed the eggs in the trash. He snatched up the toast and headed out the back door to the chicken coop. The chickens pecked at the dry ground, both their water and food containers empty. He tossed the toast into the pen and scooped up some feed and poured it in their bowls along with some water from the run-off barrel.

He shook his head as he stalked back into the house. His pile of laundry still sat next to the washing machine untouched.

He clenched his fists several times then paced into the kitchen and pulled noodles from the cabinet, setting them to boil. His laundry went into the washer, then he grabbed the dirty dishes from the sink, and shoved them into the drying rack.

Husband. Mate. Cook. Maid. Servant. Slave.

He set his palms on the counter and took a deep breath. Hannah’s words floated back

to him just like they had every few minutes for hours. “Seems more like you aren’t really what she’s used to.”

Being a bachelor and having to do stuff for himself was one thing. But being in a marriage, even an arranged one, he thought would at least bring him some sort of comfort. Companionship. Someone to share with. To talk to. To spend time with. He didn't expect much. But hell... He looked up at the closed bedroom door where she'd stayed every moment that she wasn't out of the house.

He'd picked out all the appliances when she hadn't wanted to join him. Griff had helped him put them in and finish the cabinets. He'd made her a chicken coop. He'd given her space. He'd done everything he could think of to make her comfortable and happy. And still she wanted nothing to do with him.

Caleb stormed to his bedroom and took off his boots, chucking them into the closet. He stripped out of his work clothes and wrapped a towel around himself and headed for the shower. He let the cold water rain over his skin calming the fire in his gut and sending his wolf back into a deep slumber. The fire alarm blared to life, piercing the house.

Shivering he jumped out of the shower and threw on some sweats and hurried to the kitchen. The water had boiled away and burned noodles stuck to the pan. Damn. How long had he been in the shower? He grabbed the pot handle, and it seared his palm.

"Shit!" He dropped the pot and the hot noodles splashed on his feet. "Shit!" He hopped back as the fire alarm continued to shriek.

Running into the front room he opened the windows and the front door, letting the smoke out. The door to Makayla's room finally opened, and she stepped out in the same cami and underwear from the night before. She covered her ears, and she scanned the scene.

Finally, the alarm turned off leaving his ears ringing with the echo of it.

"What happened?" she called down from the landing.

He stormed back into the kitchen and grabbed a rag. Scooping up the noodles, he plopped them back in the pot and threw the whole thing in the sink.

"Was that dinner?"

Caleb's muscles twitched, and his foot throbbed. He worked his jaw for a minute before blowing out a breath and turning to look at her.

"Yes," he said calmly.

She chewed her lip for a minute. "So, there's nothing to eat?"

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The anger that had subsided from the frigid shower burst back to life with a vengeance. His wolf was on its feet snapping at Makayla and urging Caleb to put her in her place.

"Yes," Caleb said. "There is plenty to eat if you want to come down here and make it."

She licked her lips. "That's okay. I wasn't really hungry-"

His restraint shattered. "Not hungry? Well, did you ever stop to think that I might be hungry?"

Her eyebrows pushed together. "I'm sorry?"

"Me? You know, Caleb. The guy who has been cooking for you and cleaning for you and putting food on your plate and hanging a roof over your head. Did you ever think maybe I might be hungry?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I didn't ask you to put a roof over my head. You and my mother decided that for me."

His wolf snarled. "Excuse me?"

Her expression softened. "I'm just saying I didn't really get a choice in the matter. It was come here or be cut off."

Her words slammed into him like a wrecking ball to the gut. "You chose me so you

could keep your father's money?"

She bit her lip.

His anger mixed with embarrassment at the revelation. She'd married him for money. Her own money. How much more could she possibly insult him? "I didn't have to help you. I could have said no."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Why did you help me? In case you haven't noticed, I'm not really the domestic type. It's not my fault you made a deal that you now regret. Just say the word, and I'll get on my plane and head back to California and out of your hair forever."

His limbs shook with rage. "Is that what you want? For me to give you an excuse to run? Fine. The bonding ritual was never fully completed and the mating never consummated, so I release you. I release you from your obligation to me. And I am thereby released from my obligation to you and your child. That door is never locked. Feel free to leave anytime."

He stomped to his bedroom and slammed the door. He threw on a shirt then shoved his feet into his boots. Grabbing his coat, wallet, and keys he headed back out the front door. He had to leave before he said something even worse.

"Seems more like you aren't really what she's used to." Hannah's words pummeled him again and again.

He jumped into the cab of his truck and threw it into reverse. He'd be damned if he'd spend one more night in a house where he was unappreciated. All he wanted was to get to know her. To comfort her. To care for her and her child. But all she wanted was her fancy houses and money and ability to do what she wanted when she wanted. No wonder her mother had wanted her to come to Wolf River. Makayla was nothing

more than a spoiled little rich girl who would rather be a trophy wife to some millionaire than use the brain in her head to get what she wanted. Hell, with her stubbornness, she could be anything in life, but instead she was content to do nothing.

He spun the truck around and gunned it down the drive. He had never expected to meet and be bound to someone so completely the opposite of himself.

* * *

Makayla stood rooted in her spot at the top of the stairs, watching Caleb's tail lights grow dimmer through the front window. Her stomach grumbled, and her gaze traveled to the stove. The burner was still on. She hurried down to the kitchen and turned the button on the stove back and forth until the flame extinguished. She stared at the knobs and turned each of them making sure they were all in the "off" position.

Then she slid to the floor and shook her head. Caleb had told her she could go, but in truth... there was nowhere for her to go. Her friends had begged her to let them come up and get her. They'd promised to take care of her and the baby, but she was no fool. As much as she wanted to pack her bags and run, she couldn't.

Every day for the last week she'd gone to the bank in town and taken out three hundred dollars from her trust fund. She couldn't take out more because of the ATM limit, and if she went into the bank and tried to make a large withdrawal, she was sure her mom would flag the account and shut it down before she'd made it out the door. So far she had less than twenty five hundred dollars stuffed in her suitcase. Hardly enough to get her anywhere.

Caleb's words floated back to her and punched her in the gut. "The bonding ritual was never fully completed, and the mating never consummated, so I release you. I release you from your obligation to me."

Her selfish, childish behavior had even made the gentlest of giant turn to anger and contempt. Caleb who'd been kind to her from the start. He hadn't even known her when he'd said yes to taking in her and her baby. He'd not forced himself upon her in any way. He'd not pushed her to finish the ritual. He'd only asked her to take care of the chickens. Not help fix the house or clean or cook. He'd given her space to do what she wanted. He'd not pried about her past or pestered her to tell him about the baby daddy. And all she'd done is be a selfish, ungrateful pain in the ass.

Tears dripped down her cheeks. How had she become this person?

She knew how. She knew the very minute she'd changed and why. The problem was, she'd spent so much time building up walls to shut people out that she didn't know how to be anyone else anymore.

Back in California she'd hidden from her pain. She'd made friends with humans. Hung out with Hollywood elite. Pretended to be someone else—anyone else. Pretended to forget. Pretended the partying and the dancing and the late nights had made her happy, when all they did was serve as a distraction from the pain. From the truth of what she'd done. And it had worked... to a degree. But here, in her parents' hometown, people were constantly reminding her of who she was. Simon's daughter. There was no escape in Wolf River. No forgetting. No distractions. And every stare in the library, every whisper as she walked down the street, every fake smile as she bought items at the market told her what they all thought of her.

She was unworthy. An unworthy daughter, an unworthy mother, an unworthy mate.

Maybe they were right. Maybe she was unworthy, but that didn't mean Caleb was. Caleb deserved more. Deserved better than she had given him. Her mother had made it clear. If she left, she'd be cut off. Maybe that's what she should do. Maybe she should leave before Caleb found out the truth about what she'd done and rejected her. Save them both an agonizing life together with him always looking at her the way

everyone else did.

Her father's stern gaze floated into her mind. "I didn't raise you to be this woman, Makayla Marie. I didn't teach you to be strong so you could use people and run over them. Don't disgrace my memory by being a spoiled California cliché. This town needs you. He needs you."

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She sucked in a deep breath and pushed the tears from her eyes. She wasn't only disgracing herself by acting this way, she was disgracing her father's memory as well. And after everything that had happened, she couldn't bear the thought of doing that. She'd dug her own pool, now she got to swim in it.

She couldn't deny the growing affection her wolf had shown whenever Caleb was near. Nor could she deny the way her body responded to his when he came into the room. Even so, she couldn't afford to let someone else in only to hurt them, or be hurt by them. But... wasn't that what she was already doing? Wasn't she already hurting Caleb with her actions?

She ran her fingers over the beautiful cabinets he and Griffin had installed. He'd put them in by hand. For her. He'd picked out appliances. For her. He'd put in electricity and running water... All for her.

The washer beeped, and she pulled herself to her feet, resting her hand on her belly. It'd become heavier in the past two weeks. Almost like her stomach was slowly filling with concrete. Her muscles fluttered under her hand, and she looked down. The strange spasming felt like nothing she'd experienced before.

"I know you're in there," she said feeling silly talking to her stomach.

She rubbed her hand over the small bump that was still barely noticeable. She stared at it, and her wolf chuffed contentedly. A maternal feeling washed over her for the first time. A protectiveness. A tenderness. In less than five months I'll be a mother.

And once that happened, there was no going back to who she'd been before. Only

moving forward.

Moving forward. The thought lightened her spirits.

For the first time in a long time she thought maybe a future might be possible. Maybe... Maybe a future where she wasn't so bad. Maybe this was a chance for her to start over. To reinvent herself. To become a whole new person. How many times had she looked for a way to get out of her mother's house and become her own woman? To live her life out from under her mother's scrutinizing gaze? Wolf River wasn't the place she'd ever imagined spending her life, but if she wanted a new start, a new life, a new her, it very well could be the place to do it. Hell, it was about as opposite from LA as any town she'd ever been in. If she really wanted to change, what better place was there to do it? Maybe she could even do what she and her dad had talked about before he'd died.

For the first time since her father's death she saw hope. A future for herself... Maybe not a future of flannel shirts and cowboy boots... but something else to look forward to. Something to grow. Something to build upon. Something of her own. Where she could stand on her own two feet.

But first, she needed to fix things with Caleb.

Chapter Eight

Caleb pulled up the gravel drive to his cabin, a pit of dread in his stomach. He'd spent the night at Griffin's house. He'd knocked on the door, and Dakota had taken one look at him, hugged him tight, and brought him right inside. They'd eaten, talking about nothing important, then he and Griffin had drunk beer until Caleb couldn't see straight, and he'd crashed in their guest bedroom.

Now back at home he had thirty minutes to shower and get to work. If Makayla

wasn't awake, he could be in and out in fifteen.

Caleb took a deep breath and stepped from the cab of his truck. He crunched up the gravel to the porch and stopped. Through the large window in the front of the house he saw Makayla in the kitchen. His stomach pitched violently at the sight. She hadn't been up early any morning except for when she wanted him to take her to town. He stared at her back, trying not to let his wolf awaken at the sight. She'd made it clear she wanted nothing to do with him, and she didn't want their mating, and so it surprised him she was still in the house, let alone in the kitchen.

He opened the front door, and the smell of fried eggs and veggies made his stomach growl. He closed the door, and she turned at the sound. Bags and slight puffiness marred her face but didn't diminish her beauty. She gave him a soft smile and then looked back to the stove. He crossed the front room and headed for his bedroom.

"I made breakfast."

He stopped. She held out a plate piled with food.

"Oh... uh..." Her eyes pleaded with him to try it. "Okay."

The smile that spread across her face made the world vanish. She tucked her hair behind her ear and set the plate at the counter next to a glass of orange juice. Caleb took a seat and pulled the plate toward him. The eggs were a bit overcooked but he wasn't picky.

She stood back and watched him. Fear gripped him. Please don't let him puke up the food she'd made. He stabbed a chunk of egg with his fork and moved it around a bit. Onions, tomatoes, and lots of small pieces of something green.. He chewed slowly and smiled at her, nodding. He swallowed and picked up another forkful. His mouth blossomed in flames. He coughed and opened his mouth, sucking in breath. Heat

scorched his throat and bloomed in his stomach. He reached for the orange juice and chugged it.

"Is something wrong?" Makayla's brow furrowed.

He coughed again and sucked in air. He looked down at the eggs.

"Jalapenos?" he croaked.

She looked at the eggs, and her smile fell. "Oh no! I made them too hot." She dashed for the fridge and grabbed the carton of OJ.

She refilled his glass, and he downed it again. "I'm so sorry."

Caleb breathed in again and looked at her through tear-soaked eyes.

"Are you okay? I'll throw them out."

She reached for the plate but there was no way he was going to let the eggs go to waste. She'd actually made him something to eat, and dammit, he was going to eat it.

"I just need... some ketchup," he managed.

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The timer on the oven beeped. Makayla shoved on some oven mitts and opened the door. The scent of cinnamon and nutmeg filled his nose. Makayla pulled a pan from the oven.

"You didn't have a muffin tin but you had a pan so I made something else for you as well."

Caleb stared at the brown looking loaves that smelled so tempting. Unfortunately, the eggs had told him that both looks, and smells, could be deceiving.

"I... uh... need to get to work."

"Oh... okay. I'll just pack it up then, and you can take it with you."

She was trying. The idea made all the anger in his heart begin to chip away and dissolve.

"That would be great."

"I finished your laundry. I didn't know where you wanted everything, so I just laid it out on your bed. I hope that's all right."

"You didn't have to do that, but thank you." He stood and walked toward his bedroom.

"Well, all right, then. I'll just wrap this bread up and get it ready to go with you." Her voice came out weak and sad, but with all that had happened in the past weeks... He

wasn't ready to just pretend everything was okay.

His wolf snarled at him. Caleb stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Thank you."

* * *

Makayla watched Caleb walk into his room. Okay. Things weren't going to be as easy as she hoped. How had she thought some eggs and a couple loaves of homemade cinnamon bread were going to make up for everything she'd done so far? It was okay, though. She'd do what it took to earn his affection... or at least his neutrality.

Makayla wrapped up one of the muffin cake loaves and put it in a bag. She tipped the rest of his eggs into the trash and then cleaned up the kitchen.

Caleb exited his room and stopped. They stared at each other in an awkward silence for several moments.

"Well... I need to get going."

"Here," she blurted. "It's not much but I made it and..."

He stared at her with his deep, penetrating eyes. Wrapped in his green flannel shirt and tight jeans something inside of her stirred. Something she'd never felt before. She usually preferred a pretty boy on a fast bike to the rugged type with a truck, but somehow when she looked at Caleb it just... fit.

He joined her and took the brown paper bag. "Thanks."

She nodded, unsure of what to say, and for a moment she just wanted to throw her arms around him and apologize.

"Did you need to go to town today?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm good."

"Okay, well I'm late so..."

"Yeah, of course. I'll see you when you get home."

He stared at her like he wanted to say something but then turned and walked out.

Makayla blew out a heavy breath as he pulled out of the drive. She stood for a minute, and her stomach cramped. Absently she rubbed her hand over her belly.

Makayla shoved all of the clothes she found on the floor in the laundry room into the washer. She stared at the knobs and buttons, trying to figure out what they did. The last time she'd watched the maid do the laundry, she'd been eight. She pushed several buttons and turned the knob to heavy then pushed start. She smiled when water poured into the unit. Then she walked into the backyard and fed the chickens. She watched them peck the ground while she listened to the sounds of the woods. Breathing deep she smiled. Somehow the quiet and solitude of these mountains pushed away all of her bad memories. Unraveled the pain, turning it to harmony. This place filled her entire body with peace.

She wandered through the trees, able to think clearly without all the pressures of having to pretend to be someone she wasn't. Amongst the trees and the animals, she was able to just... be.

In Los Angeles everything had been go, go, go. From traffic to parties to shopping. All of it kept her head in a constant state of movement. But for the first time the prospect of having nothing to do all day left her with a sense of tranquility she'd never known. For a moment she wanted nothing more than to strip off her clothes and

shift so she could run through the woods. But shifting was dangerous while pregnant.

Makayla strolled to Caleb's small garden and noticed two large zucchini and a squash. She stared at them wondering what she could make with them. Did Caleb even like squash? Did she?

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Her ears picked up the sounds of tires crunching up the drive, and she headed back inside to the kitchen. She looked out the front window to find Dakota waddling toward the porch. Makayla went to the door and opened it.

"Hey!" Dakota smiled at her.

"Hey. How are you?"

Dakota entered and dropped her bag to the floor. "I'm good. Caleb forgot his jacket at the house last night, and I wanted to bring it back."

A pain shot through Makayla. "He stayed with you guys?"

Dakota gave her a sympathetic smile. "Yeah."

Makayla nodded. At least he hadn't slept in his truck.

"Do you want to stay for some tea?"

Dakota smiled. "That would be great. Thanks."

Makayla closed the door and headed for the kitchen.

Dakota followed and sat at the counter. "So, how are things going here at Cabin Caleb?"

Makayla swallowed hard as she poured water into the tea kettle. "I'm sure he told you

all about last night."

"Nope. He didn't say a word."

Makayla stared at her for a moment. Was she serious? Back home gossip flew faster than a 747 in the gossip pack community.

Dakota gave her a kind smile. "Caleb isn't much of a talker, in case you hadn't noticed. Especially when he's upset."

"Oh." Makayla set the kettle on the stove. What did she say? Should she confide in Dakota? If Caleb didn't even tell Dakota what happened, maybe she should just keep it to herself.

"I know this isn't easy for you. It isn't easy for him, either. You two seem to be about as opposite as two people could be," Dakota finally said.

"Because I'm a spoiled city girl, and he's a mountain man?"

Dakota chuckled. "I wasn't going to say it like that, but..."

Makayla faced Dakota. "It's just—"

"Just what?"

"I'm not used to people being so nice to me. I mean, yes, the house staff was always nice, but they had to be. And my friends are nice because I'm fun and have money. But I've never had someone just be nice to me because it's how they are. Not since my dad. I just... I'm afraid of being let down. Of getting close. Of getting hurt."

Wow. That was more honest than she'd been with someone in a long time.

"Makayla, believe it or not, I understand not being able to trust. So does Griff. So does Caleb for that matter. We're simple people. We like good friends, good food, and family. There's not much more to us up here. People are going to take you for who you are, if you give them a chance. I know this isn't how you saw your life going. Caleb really has the simplest needs of all of us. He does deserve someone who at least wants to be with him."

Makayla looked at her feet as a pit grew in her stomach. "He released me last night."

Dakota's eyes widened. "Wow. Well that's... great, I suppose."

"Then why does it feel so terrible?" Makayla's wolf whined, and tears formed in her eyes.

"Maybe because in your heart you know you belong here," Dakota said in a soft voice. "What does your wolf tell you? How does she feel about being here? About Caleb? Your wolf knows more than you think. If she's happy here, you should give that serious consideration."

The kettle whistled, and Makayla turned off the stove. She swiped at her eyes so Dakota didn't see her tears. Her wolf had been more content in the last weeks than she had been in years. But did they belong here? Makayla wasn't sure, but at the moment, she wanted to be there.

The fluttering sensation raced over her belly again. Makayla's hand went to it, and she looked down.

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"Is your baby kicking? Mine kicks all the time. I feel like he's gonna kick his way out before his due date."

Kicking? That was her baby kicking? Makayla smiled, and for a moment she wished she had someone special to share the moment with. Her mind traveled to Derek but she pushed the thought away as soon as it came. Her thoughts moved to Caleb. If she gave him a chance, maybe next time he'd want to feel the little stirrings within her.

She looked to Dakota. "Can you help me with something?"

"Sure."

Makayla picked up the squash and zucchini. "Can you teach me something to do with these?"

* * *

Caleb sat at a table outside the church looking over a report as his father pulled up in his truck and approached him.

"I think the roof is going to need to be replaced completely on the old church," Caleb called.

"There's no saving it?"

Caleb laughed and shook his head. His dad always wanted to save the past.

"Dad. Some things are worth saving. Some aren't."

His dad sat across from him. "That's very true." The weight of his father's penetrating stare fell on Caleb like a slab of granite.

Caleb set down the report. "Griff told you."

"No. But this is a small town, Caleb. You know that. So, when my son's truck is parked in his brother's driveway all night, less than two weeks after his new bride arrives, people notice."

He should have known his dad would hear.

"What's going on?" asked Jeremiah.

Caleb rubbed his face. "I took a mate from Los Angeles who I hadn't seen since she was a kid, and I brought her to my world and thought everything was just going to work out from day one."

Jeremiah shrugged. "I think that's a pretty good analysis."

"I knew it would be difficult, dad, but I just had no idea how hard it would be. She doesn't talk to me, or do anything around the house. She doesn't cook, except for this morning, when she made me a breakfast that almost killed me. And this." He tapped the brown paper bag. "I'm afraid to even try it."

Jeremiah chuckled. "When I mated your mother she couldn't cook, either."

"Yeah, well, at least she seemed to like you."

His dad shook his head. "Caleb. I warned you before you said yes to this—"

Caleb threw up his hands. "I know. I know. I just... I think she really doesn't like me. It's almost like everything about me disgusts her. Even the baby—"

His dad sat forward suddenly. "What about the baby? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. She won't go to the doctor. She won't let me get near her. I can hear the heartbeat so I know the baby is at least alive in there, but it's stressing me out. It's like not only does she not want me, she doesn't want the baby, either."

Jeremiah sat back, pursed his lips, and folded his arms over his chest.

Caleb's wolf groaned. They knew that look. His dad was trying to weigh his words carefully.

"The relationship between the two of you is expected to be hard. But to not take care of your young, that's something completely different. I'll speak to your mom. Maybe she can do something."

Caleb nodded. Though he hated bringing his parents, or anyone into his problems, he'd take all the help he could get this time.

Jeremiah motioned toward the bag. "So, what's in that bag, anyway?"

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Caleb unrolled the bag and pulled out the muffin bread loaf thing and dumped it on the table. Jeremiah picked it up and sniffed it.

"Smells good."

"So did the eggs she tried to burst me into flames with this morning."

Jeremiah chuckled and unwrapped the loaf. He pulled off a small bite and ate it. His eye widened.

Caleb looked at it skeptically. "On a scale of you want to vomit to you only want to spit it out, how bad is it?"

Jeremiah chuckled. "You tell me."

Caleb broke off a piece and popped it into his mouth. He hesitated then chewed. The delicately sweet flavors danced across his tongue and made his stomach growl.

"Damn. That's great."

Jeremiah chuckled. "Your girl may not be able to cook, but she can sure as hell bake."

Now wasn't that interesting? Caleb grabbed the bread before his dad could tear off another bite.

"You know, I think I'll keep this for myself. After all, she did make it just for me."

Chapter Nine

Caleb pulled up to the cabin, and a lightning strike of apprehension lodged in his gut. He sat for a minute trying to prepare himself for the fact that Makayla had probably retreated to her room once again. When he could take the anticipation no longer, his wolf pushed him from the cab. He took in several deep breaths as he stomped up the steps of the porch. The smell of food had his stomach grumbling before he'd even opened the door. He told his stomach not to get too excited. The woman may be able to bake, but that didn't mean she could cook.

He walked into the house just as Makayla stepped out of the laundry room, a look of terror on her face. Caleb dropped his things and rushed to her in a blink.

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

Tears filled her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was trying to help, and I thought I knew what I was doing, but I guess I didn't, and I just..."

He tried to process her words. He scanned and sniffed her. He didn't smell blood.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. I'm fine but your clothes—"

Her words registered but they didn't make any sense. "My clothes?"

She led him into the laundry room. A huge pile of his clothes sat on a folding table. He looked over them, trying to understand what had her so scared and upset.

"I washed them, but I don't know what I did wrong. Maybe the water was too hot..." She picked up his once white undershirts. They had become a tie-dyed mess of blues

and grays. His tube socks had turned the color of week old snow. And his underwear... well... they used to be black.

He snickered then coughed at her horrified expression. "It's okay."

"I'm sorry. I've never done laundry before, and I tried to remember what my maid did last time I saw her do the laundry, but I was eight, and so it's been a while and—"

Instinctually Caleb pulled her into a hug. "It's fine. They're just clothes. It's not a big deal."

"I wanted to help so bad. You've been so great to me, and I've been a total bitch, and I made dinner and fed the chickens, and I wanted you to come home and see that I'm not such a bad person so you wouldn't kick me out."

Kick her out? "It's okay." He pushed her to arm's length. "Okay, just breathe."

A tear rolled down her beautiful face, and he swiped at it with his thumb.

"I'm not kicking you out."

"But you released me and—"

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"Yes. I did. And I meant it. Bringing you here, making you start the ritual when we didn't even know each other, that was wrong. We shouldn't have done that. So yes, I release you—"

"But—"

"Until you decide it's what you want. I don't want you to stay here because you have to. I want you to stay here because you want to be here."

She looked up at him with her beautiful big blue eyes, and his wolf begged to be let out to sniff and rub up against her.

"To tell you the truth... I... I think I do want to want to be here."

Well. It was a start.

Makayla wiped her eyes. "Stupid hormones. They've had me mushy all day. First with the baby kicking, and now this."

"The baby kicked?"

Makayla smiled and put her hand on her stomach. "I'm pretty sure that's what it was."

He wanted to reach for her. To feel the young growing inside her move at his touch, but he refrained.

The oven beeped.

"Oh. That's dinner." She scooted around him and headed into the kitchen.

Caleb watched her bustle into the kitchen and pull something from the oven that smelled like garlic and tomatoes. She'd made dinner. And she'd done laundry. What had happened in the last twenty-four hours to have her changing so much? It couldn't have been his outburst, could it? His gut clenched as her words replayed in his head.

"I wanted you to come home and see that I'm not such a bad person so you wouldn't kick me out."

Something had changed in her. He knew they still had a long way to go if they were to have a real relationship, but for the first time since she arrived, he glimpsed the real Makayla. Not the façade, but the person who she'd been trying to hide the entire time.

* * *

Makayla had to admit, the veggie lasagna wasn't bad. It was Dakota who'd done most of the work, but Makayla had written down the recipe and was sure she could duplicate it. She watched Caleb polish off his fourth helping with a beer.

He smiled. "That was great."

"And it didn't even have any meat in it."

He gave her a roguish grin. "Maybe it would have been better with meat."

She returned his smile. "Maybe it wouldn't."

He snorted. "When did you become a vegetarian? I've honestly never heard of a veggie wolf before."

"Veggie wolf? That's a new one." She picked a piece of squash from the lasagna and examined it. "I don't know. I was maybe nineteen, twenty. My mom was bugging me one night about not eating so I told her I was a vegetarian. She didn't believe me. We argued, and I just decided to stay a vegetarian to prove a point."

"And what point was that?"

"That she was wrong."

Caleb swiped his hand through his shaggy hair making it stick up a bit and chuckled.

"What?"

"That's quite some determination. Giving up bacon and hamburgers for what, five years? Just to prove a point."

"You don't know my mother." Makayla's rib cage tightened. Just thinking about her mom was enough to send her on a tirade. It was, after all, her mom's idea she come to Idaho.

Makayla reached for Caleb's plate but he placed his hand on hers.

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"The cook doesn't clean the dishes." His soft eyes connected with hers, and the heat of his hand rushed up her arm making her cheeks flush. Her wolf howled with delight.

"But you worked all day so you shouldn't have to do them, either."

He carried both their plates to the sink. "Then we can do them together."

"Fair enough." Makayla joined him at the sink.

"Do we happen to have any of that cake stuff left that you made today?" he asked.

"You liked it?" Happiness spread through her. She hadn't baked in a long time. She hadn't been sure she remembered her own recipe but she was glad she got it right. Stress baking had always been her go-to growing up.

"It was great. My dad even tried to pay me for it."

"Really?" She smiled. She'd done something right. "It's covered on the stove. I'll cut you a piece."

Caleb washed the dishes and set them in the rack to dry. "Have you been baking long?"

"Since I was a teen. I wanted to go to Culinary school and study to become a pastry chef but my mother wouldn't let me. Said it was beneath my status."

She cut a thick piece of the cinnamon bread and set it on a plate for him as he finished the dishes and put the leftover lasagna in the fridge.

He took the plate from her and grabbed a fork. "What about your dad? Did he want you to go?"

Her throat dried and closed at his words. She coughed and sipped her water in an effort to clear the lump threatening to strangle her. "Yes, he did. But he died."

Makayla's heart thundered, and she swallowed hard several times before chugging the rest of the water. Caleb ate in silence for a minute before looking up. His face fell.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine."

He set down the fork and stepped toward her. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"No. It's okay," she lied. "I am a little tired, though, so I think I'm gonna just head up to bed."

"Makayla—"

"Sorry again about your clothes. I'll go shopping and get you some new ones." She tried to make her voice light but it came out so strangled it almost cracked.

She headed to the stairs and hurried to her room. Door shut, she dropped to the floor and finally allowed the tears to flow. She'd failed her dad in so many ways. Getting into the prestigious culinary school had been the one thing she'd done right. The thing she knew had made him proud of her. But after what had happened, she just couldn't bring herself to go.

* * *

Caleb hated the sight of Makayla's slumped shoulders as she had rushed up the stairs and shut herself in her room. Again. He wanted to go to her, to ask her what he had said that had upset her. To let her know that he was sorry for whatever he'd done. Sorry for getting angry and leaving her the night before. Sorry for not being everything she had hoped he would be. But he didn't.

He looked down at the cinnamon strudel bread. She'd made it for him. And it really was amazing.

His gaze traveled to the stove and around the almost finished kitchen, still full of boxes and construction tools. If she was going to start cooking and baking, she deserved a fully functional kitchen to do it in.

Caleb grabbed his keys. He needed supplies.

Chapter Ten

Makayla awoke early and took a frigid shower before leaving her room to make breakfast again. At the top of the stairs she stopped and stared. Caleb lay asleep on the couch and the kitchen looked... complete. How the heck had she slept through it? The cabinets all had their doors on. The molding had been put in around the fridge. A rack hung above the island full of brand new pots and pans. And on the counter sat several cupcake pans and a Bundt pan and a few other decorative pans that made her smile. A fifty pound bag of flour and a fifty pound bag of sugar sat on the counter as well next to measuring cups and bowls and spoons. It was a baker's dream.

Her gut tightened. He did this for me.

The stairs creaked beneath her feet as she descended the stairs.

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Caleb roused on the couch and sat up. "Morning."

She entered the kitchen and ran her fingers over all the items. They were nice, really nice. Not the cheap plastic stuff but real baking items.

His heavy footsteps came up behind her, and she fought back her emotions as she faced him.

"You did all this for me?"

He rubbed his shaggy head and gave her a crooked grin. "Yes. Well, for us. I mean, I have to admit I did it for selfish reasons, really. I figured if I wanted you to keep making me those awesome cakes, you probably needed a place to make them and some stuff—"

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him hard. "No one has ever done something so nice for me before."

His warm arms wrapped around her tightly, and for a moment their heartbeats pressed together, and she connected with him. Her wolf woke up and howled so loud it made Makayla shake.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Makayla stepped back. What the hell had that been? She and her wolf had always had an uneasy truce. Makayla didn't shift unless she was forced to and hadn't since she'd turned eighteen.

"Yeah," she said. "I just... Thank you." She looked around again. "Wait. Where did you get all this stuff?"

"I went to Moscow. They have everything there. Dad came over last night and helped me finish everything. He really loved your cinnamon bread."

She laughed. "You guys must be starved for muffins up here."

"Amazing ones."

He looked at his watch. "Shoot. I have to get going. But I have some bins I ordered that should be here in a day or two for the big bags of flour and sugar. And I still need to finish building a pantry in the laundry room."

"Do you want me to make you something before you go?"

He jogged toward his room. "I don't have time. I'll call in an order to the diner and pick it up on the way to the old church."

Her heart sank at the idea that he was going to get food from the diner. She ran her fingers over the Bundt pan and imagined the different things she could do with it.

He came back out of his room shirtless, and she couldn't help but once again stare at his large toned body with the light sprinkling of dark curls across his chest and that trail down to and under the waistband of his low-slung jeans.

"Makayla?"

"Huh?" Crap! Had he been talking to her? She'd been staring like a stupid school girl. She licked her lips. At least she hadn't drooled.

He chuckled, a warm baritone sound that rumbled his chest and made his abs shake.
"I asked if you wanted to go to town today."

He pulled a t-shirt over his head then slid on a blue flannel.

"I think I'm good."

"I'll be back tonight then."

She nodded but couldn't get the picture of his hard, strong body out of her mind.

He stared at her quizzically for a minute then grabbed his coat and keys and headed out the door.

Makayla tried to sort through all the emotions and sensations running through her body as she watched him get in his truck. Something she hadn't felt in over five years coursed through her, and she finally put her finger on it. Desire. She wanted Caleb.

Makayla spent an hour putting things away in the kitchen and straightening up. Every little item he'd bought made her feel that much worse about how she'd treated him. From that day forward she'd make him cakes, cookies, breads, pies, and more every single day if it would put the smile she glimpsed the other night back on his face. Well, maybe not every day. She'd hate to spoil those wonderful abs.

A knock on the front door pulled her from her organizing. She hadn't even heard a truck pull up. She walked out of the laundry room. Caleb's mom, Mary waved to her through the front window. A nervous energy settled over Makayla but she put on a smile and headed for the door.

"Hi. Caleb didn't tell me you were going to stop by."

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"I didn't tell him. I've had a busy morning, and Jeremiah needs me to head into Moscow to pick up some supplies, and I wondered if maybe you wanted to come with."

"Um, sure. Getting to know the area is probably a good idea," Makayla added.

"I'll wait for you in the truck."

Makayla nodded and jogged to her room. She rifled through her suitcase for a sweater and some decent walking shoes, but all she had was a pair of black flats. They were better than heels. She slid them on then slipped on her sweater and grabbed her purse.

As she closed the front door she realized she didn't have keys to the house. Not that it mattered, she supposed. Caleb never locked the door.

They backed out of the drive and headed down the bumpy dirt road.

"Caleb's done quite a bit to the cabin in the past few weeks. Before you came I thought he'd live in it unfinished forever."

"Yes. The kitchen is really nice. Please thank Jeremiah for helping him finish it."

"Makes me a bit jealous to see how nice yours is. Not that I'm complaining. I'm glad he has a nice place to call his own. He deserves it."

Makayla nodded and smiled. Mothers were not people she tended to get along with. And considering Mary was wife of the Alpha, and her sort of mother-in-law, had her

at a loss for what to say.

Silence fell between them until they hit town, when Makayla's phone went crazy. She'd forgotten she even had it with her. She pulled it from her purse. There were dozens of messages from her friends. One from her brother and one from—Derek.

The heat of Mary's gaze had her shoving her phone back in her purse despite the curiosity scratching over her skin and having her almost choking.

"Your friends afraid we're keeping you chained in a shed up here?"

Makayla laughed. "Something like that."

Mary's gaze slid to Makayla. "You know, we're really not all that bad if you give us a chance."

Makayla swallowed hard. It was going to be a long day.

After thirty minutes of silence Mary broke it. "Your mom called to see if you were doing okay."

Makayla snorted. "To see if I was doing okay, or to make sure I was still here?"

Mary laughed. "You remind me so much of her."

"What?"

"Your mom. She was just like you are when we were in high school and college. Man, I remember she couldn't wait to get out of Wolf River."

What?" I thought my mom loved it here."

"Oh, she does now. Now that she sees the value of it. But back then... When your dad and Jeremiah started that software company and decided to move to Silicon Valley, it was as if all of her dreams had come true. She had your dad, and your brother on the way, and she was finally getting out."

Her mom never talked about Wolf River, or about Mary, for that matter. "You two were close then?"

"Close as sisters back then. It was interesting to see her change."

"Change?"

"For me and for Jeremiah, Wolf River was always our home. We never wanted to stay in California. But your mom was so enamored with the fast pace of things. After we moved back to Idaho, your mom and I lost touch. I had the boys, and she had you two, your dad, and his business to help with. It makes me sad we went so long without talking, now that your father is gone. He was a good man."

"Yes. Yes, he was." Makayla stared out the window. It was strange to hear about her mother through someone else's experience. She'd never thought of her mom as a teen or as anything more than, well, her mom. But it made sense her mom was a person too. And at one point had been a girl with her own dreams and ambitions. But had her mom really wanted out of Wolf River? Had she really preferred the big city and all the things she'd spent her entire life trying to get Makayla to not want?

"Anyway, a while back your mom contacted me. She wanted to come home, but said your dad wasn't ready. It was the summer she sent your brother Colt to come stay with us."

Makayla remembered that summer. Colt had come home so angry and sad, and at the time, she hadn't understood why. "Apparently he didn't like it here."

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"Oh, no. Colt loved it here. He went home because of his broken heart."

Makayla knew all about Colt's teenage indiscretion. The one that no one talked about. She figured it was because the girl he'd gotten pregnant had been a bitten, or worse, a rogue female. She'd never once thought it was because he'd actually cared for her.

"I didn't realize," she said.

Mary gave her a sideways glance. "There are many things in this world that aren't what they appear to be. You have to look below the surface to see the truth."

What did that mean?

They pulled off the highway and drove into town. The rural town gave off the small town feeling but was sprinkled with newer businesses as well. Much larger than Wolf River but nowhere near as large as Los Angeles.

Mary pulled the truck into a parking spot outside a building called the Uma Center. Makayla stared at it for a minute.

"What's this?"

"Our first stop. It's a health center. We're going to get you checked out."

"Excuse me?"

Mary gave Makayla a hard look. "Jeremiah said you haven't seen a doctor yet and

you're what? Twenty weeks?"

Makayla plucked at her blouse. "About."

"Well, it's time we got you looked at. I didn't want to take you to Doc in town because everyone would see you go in there, and news would fly faster than a jackrabbit. But you need to see a doctor. We need to make sure both you and the baby are healthy."

"I'm fine."

"Maybeyouare, but what about your young? Do you care how the baby is doing?"

Makayla frowned and put her arms around her stomach protectively. "Yes." She hadn't realized until that moment just how much she did care about her baby.

"Well, then get your ass out of my truck and let's go." Mary hopped from the cab.

Makayla stared after her, unable to move. If she went to a doctor, it meant that everything she'd been avoiding was real. She'd have to face the truth of where she was and what was happening to her. There would no longer just be a little alien taking over her body, it would be a baby. A real baby. Her baby.

"I can always call your mom to come take you," Mary called.

Oh, hell no! Makayla blew out a breath and got out of the truck. As she looked up at the brick and glass building she had to admit, it would be nice to hear from an expert, to know for sure the baby was okay. She stroked her belly. My baby. If something was wrong because she'd waited so long she'd never forgive herself.

Makayla lay with her butt hanging out the back of a hospital gown, knees in the air,

ankles in stirrups, trying to focus on anything but where she was. She grabbed her phone for the third time and reread all the text messages. Her friends messaged her for the millionth time about where she was, was she okay, was she ever coming back? But it was the text from Derek that really got to her. Derek, no longer referred to as the baby daddy, because she'd changed his contact name on her phone to 'the sperm donor'. She'd read his message over fifteen times since she'd been waiting for the doctor, and now, while being probed and prodded, she finally had both the nerve and irritation to respond.

He wanted to know where and how she was.

It's been almost five months and now you care??? Why?

The reply came back almost instantly. Because you're pregnant with my baby.

Really? Because I think I remember you saying, quote, "don't they have those morning after pills?"

She slammed her phone on the table. The nurse glared at her.

"I'm almost done," said the doctor. "Everything looks just fine."

Her phone buzzed. She willed herself not to pick it up, but she couldn't help it.

I was in shock. I didn't know what to say. But I've been worried sick about you, especially after hearing you'd been shipped off to Idaho to marry some wild mountain wolf.

She smiled. Wild mountain wolf. Yeah, that sounded about right.

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What do you want from me, Derek?

I want to come get you. I'll provide for you and the baby. I'll marry you, if that'll make you happy.

Her wolf snarled deep inside. Make me happy? That's what you have to say to me? That's how you propose to me? You'll marry me, if it will make me happy?

She waited a second before continuing because her fingers shook so hard she could barely type words. You know what? I'm happy in Wolf River. And MY baby will be as well. So just leave us alone.

She slammed the phone down again. It beeped but she didn't pick it up.

"All right. Everything looks good, Makayla. So, now we're just going to do an ultrasound to make sure the baby is okay."

The doctor rolled away from the bed, and the nurse helped her out of the stirrups. He pulled out a chart and started writing on it. The nurse left the room and then wheeled in a machine from the hallway.

"Would you like your mom to be in here for this?" asked the doctor.

"She's not my mom. She's my—" Her what? Mary wasn't her mother-in-law, technically. "No. Thank you."

They pulled up her gown and covered her with a sheet. The nurse spread some warm

gel on her stomach, and the doctor came over and pressed a large round tool to her stomach. The black and white screen next to her hissed to life. It looked like an old TV on the wrong channel. He moved the tool around and finally she saw a space and a gigantic head. She stared in disbelief. There was a face and fingers and an arm and a body. A baby. A real baby.

A whooshing sound emanated from the machine. A rhythmical sound like the crashing of small waves against rocks.

The doctor smiled at her. "Your baby's heartbeat is good and strong."

Tears flooded Makayla's eyes. Her baby. Her wolf stood and howled. Their baby. Their young. Every maternal instinct her wolf possessed slammed into place, like the locking of a protective shield, around the baby. How had she been so stupid to wait so long to see her baby? To make sure that they were okay?

Never again.

From that moment on she would do every single thing she was told to make sure her baby was born healthy, happy, and loved.

The doctor took measurements and typed them into the computer. He looked and searched and scanned and did everything he needed to, and when he spoke, she heard nothing. All Makayla could focus on was the small little thumb stuck in her baby's mouth. Tears leaked from her eyes, and she wiped them away.

"Would you like to know if you're having a boy or girl?" asked the doctor.

She opened her mouth to say yes, but stopped. No. She didn't want to find out. Not without Caleb.

Mary and Makayla ran several errands and most of them were a blur since all she could think about was the fact she was really having a baby. Around late afternoon they passed a large strip mall.

"Can we stop in there?" Makayla asked.

"Sure."

Makayla pointed to the Old Navy store, and Mary stopped beside it.

"I'll park and then join you."

Makayla nodded. "I shouldn't be too long." She got out and walked into the store. To be honest she'd never been to an Old Navy before, but she'd seen their ads. They just had to have some more appropriate things for her to wear.

She grabbed a cart and browsed the women's clothing. She turned a corner and found a maternity section. Luckily there was a lot of black. She pulled out some leggings and large shirts. A pair of maternity jeans with a giant kangaroo looking pouch in the front. A couple of sweaters for when it got colder and a pair of sneakers. She stared at the sneakers trying to cover her distaste. She only ever wore them for exercise, but now they didn't look so bad. As she was heading out of the section, she spotted something she swore she would never be caught dead in—a pair of overalls. They actually looked comfortable. She grabbed a pair and threw them in her cart before she could change her mind. What the hell? When in Idaho...

She strolled toward the children's section and spotted several adorable little outfits. A strange sense of happiness came over her as she ran her fingers across a soft cream romper with little bears on it. A rush of longing made her smile. She could just see putting two tiny feet into the footies. And zipping up the front over a chubby little belly. Smelling the scent of baby lotion and shampoo. And hearing the sweet little

voice of someone calling her mama.

"That's adorable." Mary came up beside her.

Makayla smiled at her. "It is."

"Would you like me to get it?"

"Oh, no. Thank you. I don't even know whether I'm having a boy or a girl."

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She nodded. "Well since this one is for a boy, maybe I'll get it for Dakota and Griff. I could get a girl one, too, if you'd like. We Reeds tend to produce boys in the family but since..."

Makayla forced a smile, hearing the words Mary hadn't said. "Since the baby isn't really Caleb's..."

Would the rest of Caleb's family be as accepting of the baby as Caleb was himself? She'd never even thought to ask what Jeremiah and Mary thought about them mating.

"I think Dakota would really like it," Makayla finally said.

Mary picked out a boy romper and a girl one. "I'll get one of each. If you have a boy, Dakota's baby will have outgrown it by then, and if you have a girl, you can have the other one."

They made their way over to the men's section where flannel shirts abounded in every color. Makayla pulled a green one, similar to the one she'd ruined in the laundry, from the rack.

She looked at the tag for the size and realized she had no idea what size Caleb wore.

"He's an XXL," said Mary. "That is, if you're thinking of Caleb."

"I feel bad. I ruined a bunch of his clothes."

Mary chuckled. "Some of them are ready to be ruined. I don't think he's bought new

clothes since he was in high school."

Makayla searched for the right size. She moved along and found another flannel in blue and a couple of thermals in different colors. She tossed them into the basket and then grabbed some white undershirts as well as some tube socks. She stopped by the underwear section but quickly moved on. She wasn't ready to go that far. Heading toward the checkout she looked back toward the baby section again. She couldn't wait to start shopping for her baby.

They stopped for food at about noon, but when six rolled around, Makayla was starving. She and Mary walked through the front door of a fancy Italian restaurant, and the smell of great food made her stomach growl.

"Hey, Mary!" A pretty teenaged girl with a heart-shaped face and dark almond shaped eyes stood behind the hostess desk and smiled. Her smile seemed strangely familiar.

"Hey Paige. How are ya, honey?"

"I'm good. Mom's in the back. She's going to be so happy to see you."

Mary turned to Makayla. "Paige, I'd like you to meet Makayla."

Paige reached across the desk and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you. Are you new in Wolf River?"

"Yes. I just moved up here a few weeks ago."

"Cool. Where from?"

"Los Angeles."

Paige stared at Makayla for a moment, and her smile faltered. She looked from Makayla to Mary and back.

"Los Angeles?" she asked.

"Yup. My parents grew up in Wolf River."

Paige swallowed and stared at Mary. Something was wrong.

"She's mated to Caleb," Mary said.

"Your last name doesn't happen to be Devamar, does it?" Paige asked softly.

Makayla chuckled. Did everyone know about her? "Yeah, actually it does. How did you know that?"

Paige grabbed two menus. "Let me show you to your table, and I'll get my mom."

"Thank you."

Paige smiled but she looked like she'd seen a ghost.

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They walked to a booth near the rear, and Paige seated them. Makayla waited until Paige was out of earshot before speaking.

"What's going on?"

Mary feigned innocence. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. And so does that girl. Seems the only person who doesn't know what is going on is me."

A raven-haired beauty with the same eyes approached the table. The smile she wore was friendly, but her gaze scanned both of them like a predator.

"Mary. It's great to see you." Her voice came out anything but happy.

"Gia. It smells amazing in here." The two women hugged. "Gianna, I'd like you to meet Makayla. She's mating my son Caleb."

Gianna stuck out her hand and gripped Makayla's hand firmly. "It's wonderful to finally meet you after all these years."

Makayla looked between them. "I'm sorry, everyone seems to know something I don't."

Gianna crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, Mary didn't tell you? My daughter Paige is your niece."

Makayla stared off for a minute, and then it struck her. Paige's smile. It was exactly like her brother Colt's.

"You're the one my brother Colt—"

"Knocked up. Yup. I'm the heathen." She laughed.

Makayla fought for words. "Wow. It's really great to meet you. I wish I could say I'd heard all about you, but..."

"He's never spoken about me. I'm not surprised. We didn't part on the most friendly of terms. Anyway, let me get you ladies the house special for the night, all right?" Gianna didn't wait for their reply. She hustled back to the kitchen. Every word she'd spoken had been friendly, but underneath, every inch of her body language told Makayla that the woman wasn't ready to deal with anyone in the Devamar family.

Makayla's phone beeped, and she pulled it out and swiped the screen. A picture of an expensive looking diamond ring popped up on the screen. It had to be at least two carats. How the hell could Derek afford a ring like that? Had he stolen it?

The caption below read. I'm a jackass. I'm sorry. Forgive me.

"Wow. That ring is huge! Caleb must have done something pretty bad to give you that." Paige set two glasses of water on the table.

Makayla shoved her phone back in her purse and looked over to Mary. The frown on Mary's face sent spiders crawling all over her skin. She sipped her water and gave Paige a sheepish smile.

"So, you're my aunt, huh?" Paige lounged against the booth near Mary.

"Seems so."

"You don't look like my dad."

"Makayla looks like her mother," Mary replied.

A thought occurred to Makayla. "Have you ever met your dad?"

"Sure. He comes up in the summer. I meet him in Coeur d'Alene, and we stay up there for a couple of weeks."

How did Makayla not know that?

Gianna arrived with two large plates of several Italian dishes. She set them on the table along with breadsticks and salad.

"Paige, can you please go seat our other guests?" Gianna asked.

Paige smiled. "Nice to meet you, Aunt Makayla. I hope to see you again soon."

"You, too." Makayla watched Paige walk off and then turned her attention back to the table. Both Mary and Gianna watched her with penetrating stares.

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"This sure looks great." She dug into her spaghetti taking an extra large mouthful so she couldn't answer any of their looming questions.

Chapter Eleven

Mary didn't say another word to her the rest of the trip. As they bounced up the dirt road toward the cabin, Mary finally pulled the car to the shoulder and stopped. She stared straight ahead without saying a word for several minutes.

"When Caleb cares for someone. He cares for them with no restraint. He goes all in."

"I understand."

"No. You don't. When he said he'd take you on, I worried. Worried about who you'd be. Worried whether it would work. Worried that he wouldn't ever come to really care for you. But I see the things he's done for you already in these short weeks, and I already know he's all in." She paused and then finally looked at Makayla. "Caleb has been through a lot. It's not my story to tell, but I'm letting you know, his heart can't handle another break."

Makayla dropped her gaze to her hands. "I've heard that before."

"That ring photo Paige saw on your phone. Is it from the baby's father?"

"Yes."

Mary nodded. "I've said my piece, and now I would just ask one thing of you. If

you're going to leave him, do it now. Don't wait. Don't break him for someone else who really wants to be with him. Because to be honest, the Pacific Northwest is full of Blood Born who'd take him if he'd spare them a one-second glance."

Mary put the truck in drive and continued down the road to the cabin without another word.

* * *

Caleb paced the living room, trying to calm the demons that threatened to overtake him. He'd spent the last hour and a half searching the entire town. No one had seen Makayla. Her stuff was still in her room, and he worried that she'd gone out into the woods and gotten lost. He'd caught her scent out back near the chickens and the garden, but he couldn't track anything beyond that.

Flashes of memory plagued his mind. Memories from his past. A hospital room. Police going in and out. The shattered look on Franny's face.

A vehicle rolled up the drive. He raced to the door and peered into the darkness. The headlights to his mom's truck blinded him. He stepped out onto the porch as the passenger side door opened, and Makayla slid to the ground.

Caleb stormed down the steps.

Makayla smiled. "Hey."

"Where the hell have you been?" His words came out harsher than he'd meant.

Makayla's brows furrowed. "Your mom took me with her to Moscow."

"And you didn't think to let me know?"

Her furrows deepened and the corners of her mouth turned down. "I didn't realize you were my warden."

He stormed over. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. I thought something had happened to you. Maybe you'd gotten lost in the woods."

"Okay, Caleb, that's enough," said his mom.

His anger turned to her. "Dad's been calling you all day."

She shrugged. "I forgot my phone."

"Well, he's worried."

His mother snorted. "The last time your father was worried about me, I was dating a wolf named Ravager." She stared at him hard for a minute. "Caleb. You need to reign it in."

"Reign it in? She's my responsibility, and she's pregnant. She might not care about that, but I do."

"That's enough!" His mother's eyes flashed golden.

Caleb opened his mouth but the growl emanating from his mom's chest made him shut it.

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He clenched his fists several times then turned and stomped back into the cabin. How could his mom take her side?

He stood in the kitchen, his hands splayed on the counter, trying not to break everything in sight. A shift rippled over his skin but he wouldn't shift. Not now.

Makayla entered with several bags in her hands. She watched at him for a moment and then crossed to the kitchen and set the bags on the counter. They stared at each other in silence for several seconds.

She blew her bangs out of her face. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"You should have left a note."

She nodded. " True. And you could have called me."

He blinked several times. "I don't have your cell number. Everyone else on the planet seems to, but you never gave it to me."

"Well, there's no cell signal up here, so I didn't think about it. Maybe if there was a phone..."

"It's my fault for bringing you here." He spread his arms wide. "For making you stay in this tiny cabin instead of some penthouse like Logan lives in."

"I never said that." She crossed her arms.

"No, but that's what you really want, isn't it? Look at all the bags of stuff you got. This is never going to be enough. You're always going to want more."

"For your information. Everything I bought today was out of necessity. Do you think I wanted to buy these?" She yanked a pair of jeans from the bag that looked big enough to sneak food into a movie theater. "Or how about these? Do you think I wanted to buy these?" She pulled out a pair of overalls and tossed them on the counter. "I didn't think I'd ever be caught dead in a pair of those. And these!" She yanked out a pair of white sneakers and slapped them down. "Do you think I want to see my tree trunk cancles smooshed into those things? No way! But my body's shape is no longer in my hands. I'm expanding by the day, and my other clothes don't fit."

Cankles? What the hell were cancles? His gaze drifted to the other bag as his gut twisted and his wolf shook his head in exasperation.

"Oh, that bag? You want to see what I so frivolously went crazy over at the store?" She dumped it onto the counter in front of him. The knife of stupidity twisted deep in Caleb's chest as he caught sight of a green plaid shirt, and then a blue one, and on top of that several thermals, a pack of white t-shirts, as well as socks.

Caleb's heart dropped to his toes, and his wolf growled at him in disgust. I'm an idiot!

Makayla pulled open her purse. "And I didn't go to the doctor today and get this." She pushed a black and white glossy photo on the counter in front of him. He stared at it, not exactly sure what he was looking at, but it was obviously some sort of picture of the baby.

Caleb picked up the photo as Makayla stomped to the couch and plopped onto it. He finally made out a picture of a baby sucking their thumb. He smiled, and his wolf sat up and barked. Warmth spread through him. Her baby. Their baby.

His gaze traveled to the clothing-covered counter then to where she sat on the couch staring ahead. Shit! He rubbed his face, and his wolf tucked his tail between his legs. He crossed to her and sat on the coffee table in front of her.

"Makayla—"

She held up her hand and looked away, the gesture so cliché he wanted to laugh.

"Makayla—"

"Unless you're going to apologize—"

"I'm sorry."

She finally met his gaze.

He touched her knee. "I am. I'm sorry." Memories and emotions piled up inside him, and he fought for words. "When I came home, and you weren't here—"

Silence hung between them for a minute, and her eyes softened with understanding. "You thought I left."

He nodded. "At first, yes. But I saw your designer clothes, and I knew you wouldn't leave them behind."

She gave him a tiny smirk.

"Then I worried you'd gone into the woods and had gotten lost. The thought of something happening to you and the baby..." He couldn't finish the thought. If anything had happened, he would never have forgiven himself.

Her shoulders relaxed, and she laid her hand on top of his. "I'm sorry I didn't leave a note."

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"I'm sorry for freaking out." He sat silent for a moment listening to the sound of the baby's heartbeat and letting the warmth of her fingers seep into his. "So, you and the baby are healthy?"

An expression crossed her face he hadn't seen before. A secret smile with a glimmer in her eyes. "We're just fine."

"Did you find out if the baby is a boy or girl?"

Her cheeks flushed, a beautiful peachy shade. "I didn't want to without you."

He turned his hand over, and she placed her palm in his. Warmth spread up his arm and shot straight to his heart. They sat together in silence, both basking in the connection building between them.

"Are you hungry?" she finally asked. "I brought home some food from Gianna's restaurant."

"You went to Gia's? They have great food."

"That they do. And I met Gia and Paige."

"You've never met them before?"

She shook her head. "Colt never speaks about them, and Paige has never come to Los Angeles."

"Gia's a smart wolf, but protective and a tough nut to crack."

"I kind of got that."

Caleb stood and pulled her to her feet. Their bodies pressed close enough that the warmth of her skin tingled his. He stared down at her beautiful heart-shaped face. It'd changed in the past few weeks. The anger and haughtiness had given way to something softer, more genuine. She'd stopped wearing all the makeup, allowing her natural beauty to shine through. If Caleb had his way, she'd never put on the colorful gunk again.

He brushed her cheek and caught the uptick of her heartbeat. He bent close to her, taking in the scent of her hair. A flowery shampoo covered her natural scent but it still struck him in the gut and made his wolf pay attention. It'd been longer than he could imagine since he'd been with anyone. Living in a small town where everyone in it was a pack member, one-night stands and even casual relationships really weren't in the cards. He'd only ever been with one person. And that had been over five years prior.

He touched his lips to her forehead and brushed them against her skin. He'd been so terrified something bad had happened to her. It'd threatened to drive him mad. Just having her home and in his arms soothed him in a way he'd not thought possible. As if a piece of him had been missing but had finally made its way back to him.

Her hands made their way up his stomach to his chest, her touch burning him through his clothes. He wanted to kiss her so badly. He ran his fingers through the length of her hair allowing the silky golden strands to caress his skin. He pulled on her hair lightly so her face lifted toward his.

His heart stampeded as she splayed one hand on his chest and hooked the other around his neck and pulled him toward her. He breathed her in, his lips inches from

hers. They stared at each other, and she licked her bottom lip. Gods above he wanted her.

He closed the distance between them, and just as their lips touched, tires rolled up the drive and a horn honked repeatedly. His head whipped up, and he spotted Griffin's truck speeding up the drive. His wolf grumbled in irritation. The truck slammed to a stop and Dakota jumped from the driver's side and ran toward the door, clutching her belly.

Chills raced over his skin. Something was wrong.

He rushed to the door. Dakota stopped, breathless at the bottom step, and the look on her face said it all.

"You really need a house phone," she panted.

"Let me get my coat."

She shook her head. "You won't need it."

Caleb looked back at the confused Makayla. "I have to go to Griff's."

She took a step out the door. "Is something wrong? Do you want me to come?"

"No. Stay here. I'll be back soon."

She took a step forward. "Caleb—"

"I'm sorry. I'll be back." He jumped the steps and put his hand on Dakota's shoulder. "I'll drive."

Dakota nodded and waddled to the passenger side. As Caleb backed out of the drive the last thing he saw was Makayla standing in the front window, her face a mask of worry. The sight warmed him.

She cared for him.

* * *

Makayla watched Caleb drive away then walked back to the kitchen and picked up the clothes she'd dumped out. She put them back in the bag, his scent still remaining in the air and the taste of his breath lingering in her mouth. She'd barely felt the brush of his lips across hers and yet for some reason the sensation played over and over in her mind like a dream she wasn't sure she'd experienced.

She crossed to his bedroom and stopped at the door, her hand hovering over the knob. It felt like a betrayal to enter. But he'd been in her room several times. Why should it matter? She'd put clothes in there a few days ago.

She turned the knob and pushed open the door. His scent clung thicker to every surface. The sparse but nicely furnished room held a large, knotty pine bed, a rustic dresser and nightstands. A well loved rocking chair filled out the rest of the space. She smiled at the handmade vintage quilt covering the fluffy bed. It was all so very Caleb. She wondered if it was one of the quilts his mom had replaced with the floral monstrosity on her bed.

She walked to the closet. Inside hung several flannels and jeans. She ran her fingers over them. Flannel. Plaid. A design and texture she never- in the furthest stretches of the imagination- thought she would ever like. Derek would rather walk down Melrose Avenue stark naked and get arrested than to ever let a flannel touch his skin. The two men were so different. The photo of the diamond ring popped into her head. Caleb would never buy her something that flashy. But then again, he would never buy her a ring to try and apologize. He'd do something much more personal, like building her a kitchen and buying her baking supplies.

A diamond ring wasn't going to make Derek suddenly change his ways and become daddy material. And it sure as hell wasn't going to make her go back to the superficial, hiding-her-real-self party girl she'd been before.

She rounded up several hangers and hung the new clothes in Caleb's closet. Then she went to the kitchen and put the food away before finally going to her room with her bags. The trip up the stairs seemed to take twice as long for some reason, and the distance between her room and his twice as far. She didn't like being up there alone without him.

She hung up her new things, then sat on her bed. Fatigue weighed her down in a way she hadn't experienced in a long time. Every muscle in her body weighed more, and every action seemed to take more energy to perform. She laid back on her bed and closed her eyes. She just needed to rest for a moment before Caleb got home. From the state both he and Dakota were in when they left, he would probably need her when he returned. And maybe, if all was well, they would even pick up where they'd left off.

Chapter Twelve

Dim sunlight peeked through the curtains, and Makayla blinked several times. What time was it? The clock read five thirty. Holy crap, she'd fallen asleep in her clothes. She got up from the bed. Her hips ached from sleeping in an awkward position all night as she walked to the window. She held onto the wall and bent forward stretching her back. Man that hurt.

She straightened and caught movement out of the corner of her eye. She peered outside and saw something moving through the wood. She tracked it until it stopped at the edge of the trees. A large russet colored wolf emerged from the wood. Her wolf stood and howled at the sight.

His fur shook, his muscles trembled, then his bones snapped and lengthened as he stood on two legs and leaned heavily on a thick tree. Makayla wanted to turn away, but she couldn't, fascinated by the passive expression on his face despite the violent way his body contorted and strained. Though his shift finished in under thirty seconds, Makayla got a good full view of Caleb's tight round rear and sizable back muscles.

A shift ripple coursed over her.

"Oh, hell no." She turned from the window and grabbed her chest. "Pregnant, remember?" Her wolf yowled in disappointment, but backed down. She supported herself against the wall for a minute, trying to calm her thundering heart.

The door to the laundry room opened and heavy footsteps hit the floor. She gave herself a minute to compose herself, visions of his delectable buttocks still burned into her mind, and then walked out of her room to the landing. He stood in the kitchen in a pair of tight boxer briefs and gulped down the entire carton of orange juice. When he finished, he sucked in a deep breath and turned.

"Hey." He threw the empty carton in the trash.

"Hi."

"Sorry to leave you like that last night."

"Is everything okay with Griffin and Dakota?"

"Yeah." Caleb paused for a moment as if weighing his words. "Griffin has... moments where he's plagued by bad memories."

"I get it." She knew that all too well.

"Let me get some clothes on, and I'll make some breakfast." He headed toward his room.

She took a step down the stairs. "You're leaving?"

He stopped. "I have to work."

She took several steps toward him. "But you've been gone all night."

"Why don't you come with me today? You can go to the library for a bit, and then we can meet for lunch, and I'll bring you home."

Going to the library to return her books and get some new ones might be nice. Surprisingly, she realized she hadn't replied to her friends' texts from the day before. As a matter of fact, she hadn't even wanted to.

Wow. She'd gone almost the entire day with cell signal and not even cared. She'd not checked her social media. She hadn't checked her voicemail. All she'd done was told Derek to stay away.

"You know, I'm good actually. Yesterday kind of tired me out, so I'll just stick around here and get some stuff done."

He chuckled. "Unless you're going to start painting or put in a tub, there isn't much to do besides tending to the chickens."

"Well, they are pretty demanding."

He looked at her for a minute. "Why don't you get ready, and I'll take you into town?"

Strangely, staying put felt more her speed for the day. She wished she could keep him there, too, so she could just talk to him. Make sure he was really okay.

He took a step closer to where she stood on the stairs. "Nothing's wrong is it?"

"No. I just want to be here today."

"How about I try to come back early? Maybe we could... talk later or something."

"I'd like that."

He hesitated another minute before walking into his room.

Makayla descended the stairs and scrounged through the kitchen for something to pack for him to eat. She made a couple pieces of toast that ended up a bit too dark, and cut up some fruit. She set them on a plate just as he exited his room. She smiled to herself to see him in the dark blue Henley she'd bought him the day before. It hugged his arms and torso in just the right way, cutting straight down to his trim waist. Her palms itched, wanting to slide up and down his chest again as they had the night before.

The scent of his cologne wafted over to her, and she held out the plate to him. "It's not much, but I figured it was better than nothing."

He gave her a tired smile. "It's great, thank you."

She nodded wanting to ask him what exactly had happened to Griffin.

"I forgot to tell you. The pack is having its full moon gathering this weekend. We go to the lake, boat, picnic, and then everyone runs together. I know you can't run, but I thought it might be nice for us to go so you can meet everyone."

A nervous skitter crossed her skin. Being in the cabin with Caleb made her feel safe. It gave her time to think and breathe and just... be. She didn't know what would happen if the others in the pack met her and didn't like her. What would Caleb do? They weren't completely mated yet. There was still time for him to change his mind.

"If it's too much we don't have to go. I need to go for the run but—"

"No." She shook her head. "We should go."

He threw her a smile and nodded. "It's a date then."

Makayla felt her cheeks heat. "It's a date."

He stepped toward her and awkwardly gave her a kiss on the cheek. At that moment she wanted nothing more than to feel his arms around her again. His lips on her lips. His body pressed against hers.

"I'll be home in time for dinner."

She nodded and backed away as her entire body flooded with desire. "I'll be here."

Caleb stepped into his boots and headed out the door. He waved as he got into his truck, and she watched him pull out of sight.

Makayla rubbed her belly. "Well, it's just you and me again kid," she said. "What should we do today?"

Makayla spent the day trying out recipes. She'd gone out to an old shack behind the cabin which she soon realized had been the place Caleb lived while building the cabin. Out there she found half a dozen beautiful, old, hand sewn quilts. She picked out one for her bed and another to use in her room as a throw blanket. Then she spotted an old radio and brought it inside too. She quickly learned that it only played cassette tapes and one radio station. A country station with songs she'd never heard before. Never had wanted to hear before. Far removed from the music played at the club scene, she actually found it enjoyable. The music seemed to fit with living alone in the woods. So she'd cranked it up and set to work.

By the time Caleb returned home she'd made a half a dozen pies, two cakes, and three kinds of muffins. He set down his tool belt and held up a brown paper bag.

"I brought some fried chicken from the diner for me, and a salad for you. Looks like you've got dessert covered."

Makayla smiled, and her stomach growled at the thought of fried chicken.

"Are we having a party?" His eyebrows raised as he looked over her creations.

"You said there was a picnic in a couple days, so I thought I'd try out some recipes and see what you think. I didn't know what you like, so I made a bit of everything."

He nodded. "I can see that." He set the bag on the counter, and she pulled out two paper plates and some plastic utensils. "I didn't realize you liked country music."

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She chuckled. "I do now, since it's the only station you have out here."

"I have some cassettes at my parents' house. I'll grab them the next time I'm over there."

"You have cassettes?"

"What?" he asked.

She suppressed a laugh. "Make sure you bring me a pencil too. Just in case the ribbon gets chewed up, Neanderthal man."

She tossed him a muffin, and he caught it. "Ha ha. Very funny."

She laughed.

He took the wrapper off the muffin and picked off a piece. "I was thinking maybe since the kitchen is finished you should go out and get some real dishes. Maybe silverware and towels, and you know, other stuff you might like. Make this place feel like your place too."

His eyes held a hopeful nervousness. Part of her wanted to run out and go right then. To buy a bunch of stuff for the cabin and fix it up like a real home. She'd never been allowed to decorate her room back at her mother's house. Sure, she had some personal things here and there, but her mother had always picked out the décor.

Makayla's cautious nature overcame her. She couldn't do it unless she was one-

hundred-percent sure she was staying.

"We could go together," she suggested. "Pick out stuff both of us like."

"All right. Let's do that on Sunday, then."

"Our second date."

His eyes crinkled in the corners as he smiled. The sight made her smile in return.

As they sat on the couch, Caleb pulled the containers out of the paper bags and set them on the coffee table.

"I never thanked you for the new shirts," he said. "I got a lot of compliments on this one today."

She bet he did. She had never been the jealous or possessive kind before, but just thinking about other women checking him out got her wolf all riled up and ready for a fight.

Caleb packed his plate with food, and Makayla stared at the salad.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No. No. I just... I was... I wondered if I might have a piece of your chicken?"

Caleb's eyebrows drew together. "I thought you were vegetarian."

"I am. But I get the feeling this baby isn't; and right now, I am craving fried chicken something fierce."

Caleb looked down at his plate then held it out to her. "Go for it."

She snatched up a chicken breast and bit into it. The skin crispy and crunchy, the meat juicy and tender. She closed her eyes and let the flavors linger on her tongue.

"Oh my gosh, this is so good."

She opened her eyes, and noticed Caleb suppressing a smile.

"What?"

He chuckled and shook his head but didn't say anything. They ate the chicken in silence, and when she'd finished her piece, he offered her a second one. She took it without even thinking.

He studied her for a long minute. "You and your mom must really not get along for you to give up fried chicken."

"What do you mean?"

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“Just that, if another man had brought you as much pleasure as that chicken just did, I’d have to kick his ass.”

Makayla licked her fingers and put the bones down. "My dad used to say we were like the mongoose and the viper. He never knew which one was going to kill the other."

"I don't know what that's like. My family has always been close."

Makayla's chest tightened. "My dad and I used to be really close, before he died."

"He died in a car wreck, right?"

A lump rose in her throat. She wasn't ready to talk about him yet. "Yeah."

He grabbed her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay. Do you want some dessert?" She gathered their plates and threw them in the trash.

"Sure." He followed her into the kitchen. "What have we got?"

"Well, I made a Dutch apple pie, and a peach cobbler. Cherry, blackberry, and brown butter pecan muffins. Then I made a blackout fudge cake and a carrot cake."

"Where did you learn to bake all this stuff?"

She shrugged. "It's just something I've always loved to do. And making a mess in the kitchen for the maid to clean up infuriated my mom. So it was a double win."

Caleb chuckled and sat on a stool. "Well, how about you start serving them to me one at a time, and when I burst, I'll stop."

"Okay." She pulled out a knife and cut a slice of the peach cobbler. "Let's start with the peach."

* * *

For an hour Caleb sat at the counter trying all of Makayla's desserts and loving each one more than the last. The woman couldn't cook, but damn she could bake.

"So which ones for the picnic," she finally asked.

Caleb felt his stomach close to bursting as he popped the last of a muffin in his mouth.

"The peach, definitely. And the apple. The berry was great too, same with the cherry and the pecan."

She snorted. "Well that's all of them so..."

He smiled. "Honestly, with baking like that, you could take everything on the counter and smoosh them together, and they would still be better than any other desserts in this town."

Her cheeks tinged with pink. "You're just saying that."

"No. I'm not. I bet if you opened a bakery you'd be sold out every day by noon."

She smiled and looked down at the counter. She swirled her finger in the glaze from the apple pie and then sucked on it. Caleb's pants grew tight as he imagined pulling her finger into his mouth and licking all the sugary goodness off of it for himself.

He imagined dripping it down onto her throat and licking from her breast up to her earlobe. She looked up at him, and he dropped his gaze and coughed.

"Yeah, so make anything you want. Seriously, it will be amazing."

"Well, what's your favorite?" she asked.

"I really like Dutch apple myself. But the peach cobbler is right up there with it."

She nodded, and they stared at each other for a long minute. He'd not seen her that happy or relaxed since she'd arrived, and he wondered if she was finally beginning to feel like this was a place she could stay long-term.

"So, I was thinking maybe I'd go to town with you tomorrow and go to the library, and then we could have lunch at the diner, since we didn't get a chance today," she said.

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"We could do that. Tomorrow I could take you around the church we're renovating, if you want. Show you what I've been working on."

She nodded. "I'd like that."

Caleb couldn't help but let happiness bloom inside him at the thought that she was taking an interest in what he was working on.

"I'm just going to clean up."

Caleb stood. "Let me help you."

Together they cleaned the kitchen and packed up the pies and cakes, cutting everything into pieces and putting them in baggies to take to Caleb's crew in the morning.

Finally, she headed up to her bedroom around nine. Caleb's wolf whined wanting to go upstairs. Caleb wanted to go up too. He'd not been able to get their too short kiss from the night before out of his mind. It had been important to go to Griff. He'd been worse than Caleb had ever seen him, but all-night Caleb's mind had been on Makayla. And now that he was alone with her, all he wanted was to feel her lips again.

Caleb headed to his room and glanced at the adjoining room he hadn't shown Makayla yet. He walked to it and pushed open the door. Inside waited an old wooden cradle with a blue quilt hanging over the edge. In the corner of the room sat an antique crib with faded white paint that he'd picked up at a thrift store six weeks prior, and the antique rocking horse that Makayla's mom had shipped up the week

before she'd arrived, along with an entire box of Makayla's toys from her childhood. Knowing what he did about Makayla's trouble with her mom, it made him wonder what would happen when she saw what her mom had sent.

Slowly he closed the door. He'd seen her come to life over the past weeks. Seen her façade fade away, revealing the woman he'd hoped was inside. The carefree girl with the unbreakable spirit he'd once known. She'd always been the first to jump off Sandy Pointe into the lake. The first to challenge Logan. The last to back down from a fight. And even though it had been almost a decade, he knew that girl was still in there.

Caleb reached into his pocket and pulled out the sonogram photo. He rubbed it with his thumb. He hoped the baby was a girl.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning Caleb woke up and found Makayla ready to go. Standing at the front door, she looked so different in her leggings, maternity shirt, and sneakers. Sweet. Refreshed. Natural. The look suited her though she would never agree. Pregnancy looked good on her. And his attraction to her only continued to grow the more herself she became.

"I found this old milk crate out back. Is it okay that I put the goodies in it?" She pointed to the box at her feet.

"Take whatever you want. What's mine is yours."

She picked up the crate but he took it from her, and they headed out. Caleb opened the truck door for her and put the crate on the back seat. She managed to hop into the truck on her own. He closed the door after her then jogged to the driver's side and slid in.

"Do you always leave the keys in the truck?" she asked.

He shrugged. "No one really steals here in Wolf River. And if they did, I'd assume they only did it because they really needed it. Plus, Wolf River isn't that big. I'd find it pretty quick."

She smiled and shook her head.

"What?" He turned on the truck.

"How is it possible you are this nice?"

"I don't really consider it being nice. I'm just not that attached to material things."

They headed down the dirt road, and Caleb reminded himself he needed to get the road graded at the very least. He couldn't help but chuckle when she started singing along with country music on the radio. If you could call it singing. When she hit a particularly high note, he winced.

"What? You don't think I can sing?"

Caleb glanced over at her wide eyes, unsure of how to answer.

She burst out laughing. "Oh man, you should see your face. Am I really that bad?"

Again, he wasn't sure what to say. "Well... I mean you're not that bad, it's just..."

"My mom says I sound like a barn owl killing a field mouse."

"Well, you're better than that for sure."

She turned up the radio. "I don't care if I am or not. I like to sing." She chimed back in with the song, staring at him the whole time.

Caleb couldn't help but smile. There she was. The plucky little girl from the lake.

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When they reached the end of the road and headed to town, her phone buzzed. Makayla looked down at her purse but didn't open it. It buzzed again. Then again. And again.

"Wow. I don't think I've gotten that many texts in my entire life combined."

She gave a nervous chuckle but still didn't open her purse.

Caleb couldn't tell if this was a good sign or a bad one. Either way, it left his wolf with an uneasy feeling.

Caleb turned left at the stop sign and headed for the library. They went a block before Makayla pointed out the window. "What's that?"

He looked to the right. "Oh, that was supposed to be a strip mall. Some developers from Seattle came in a few years back and grabbed the land when my grandfather died and tried to build here."

"In Wolf River?"

"Yeah. They thought our remote mountain town would be an ideal place for a big fancy lodge and resort shopping. Unfortunately for them, they didn't realize whom they were dealing with. My dad made it abundantly clear they would never have a strip mall in Wolf River. Then he made them an offer they didn't dare refuse, and a week later the land went to my dad."

"I didn't realize Jeremiah was that powerful."

Caleb looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Did she not realize how much pull both their dads had in Idaho?

"Too bad," she finally said. "Looks like Wolf River could use some more commerce."

"We aren't looking to turn into a tourist town."

"No," she said. "I didn't mean like that. I just meant for the people of Wolf River. To make their lives better."

Caleb pulled up to the library. "And what would you put in a strip mall in Wolf River?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe an antique store or a thrift store. A hair salon or a bakery."

Caleb looked over at her. Those were all good ideas. Question was, who could they get to run them?

Makayla opened the truck door and slid out.

"I'll be back for you about eleven thirty."

She nodded and closed the door before waving. Caleb's chest squeezed watching her walk to the library. He could get used to this. Driving her into town. Meeting her for lunch. Taking her home. Spending his evenings with her. Somehow with Makayla it all felt right.

* * *

Makayla let the door to the library close before she pulled her phone from her purse

and headed to the nearest computer station. She sat heavily in a stiff chair and unlocked the screen. She had close to fifty messages from her friends asking the same things they always did. She scanned them without really reading, wondering if they missed her, her money, or her mother's house. Then she read a text from her brother, and finally she looked at the texts from Derek. The first two she skimmed as he cussed her out for not understanding how he felt. The next ones were more pleading as he begged her to talk to him. Promised to change. To be better. To get a job and take care of her. She shook her head, and set her phone down.

She remembered meeting Derek in the clubs. They'd seen each other there for weeks, dancing, talking, drinking. She'd known he was a Bitten rogue from the first time she'd met him, but she hadn't cared. Colt had tried to keep them apart, even threatening to tell their mom if she didn't stay away. But Makayla had known her brother would never turn her in. No matter how much he wanted to keep her away from Derek, he also tried to protect her from their mom as well. In the end, she'd wished she'd listened to him. All it had taken was one night of too many drinks and not caring about anything anymore for her to give in and spend the night in Derek's dingy little apartment in the valley. Six weeks later, she discovered he hadn't used a condom. By then, it was too late for the morning-after pill, and she just couldn't bring herself to have an abortion, no matter what having a child meant to her life moving forward.

Derek had made it abundantly clear he didn't want anything to do with her. As a matter of fact, he hadn't wanted anything to do with her when he saw her in the clubs after their night together. Always with a different girl, but she hadn't cared a bit. His new desire to be involved with her and the baby had her both confused and unnerved. It was possible he'd learned of her mother's money. Or possibly he thought he could get something out of the pregnancy.

And now she lived in Wolf River, Idaho with a great guy. A stable guy. A sexy as hell guy with a pack and a plan and a life... Yes, she could see building a future with

him. Her wolf sat up and howled at the thought, and for the first time in a long time, Makayla let her wolf bask in the light of hope. Instead of pushing her away, Makayla allowed her wolf the moment of happiness and contentment. Allowed her to explore the budding affection Makayla had allowed to blossom inside her, not only for her baby but for Caleb as well. She looked down at her phone and smiled. She knew what she needed to do.

She texted her friends one sentence.

Not coming back. Love you forever. M-

Makayla spent an hour browsing the books and picking out several new ones. Then she went on the computer and searched in the extended library system for some more baking books and asked to have them transferred in. By the time Caleb picked her up, she had begun to formulate an idea. She just needed to figure out how to make it work.

"You ready?"

Makayla nodded and followed him out the door. Every fiber inside her was bursting to tell him what she wanted to do, but now was not the time. She needed to be totally sure...

He drove to edge of town and stopped in front of the old white church. Men milled about carrying lumber and tools. They collected the crate from the truck and entered the front door of the church.

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Makayla blinked up at the bright sky. The entire roof had been removed.

"As you can see, there was a lot of fire damage to the interior. We're reinforcing the beams and rebuilding the roof. Then we need to redo all the wiring since it was all original, then new plumbing, and finally, new paint."

"Seems almost like you should have just torn it down and started from scratch."

"We thought about it, but the church has a lot of significance to the pack. My parents were married here. Your parents. A lot of the older couples as well. A formality really, but they had to do it for the state records."

"I never realized my parents were married here." She calculated all the work still to be done. "How long will it take?"

"With good weather, the roof will be done next week. The wiring and plumbing done by the end of the month. Then it's all cosmetic from there. I'm hoping to finish before the baby is born." His gaze fell on her and her stomach fluttered at the words he didn't vocalize.

He hoped it was where they would marry civilly.

She smiled. He shifted the crate to his left arm and led her around the structure to meet his men. One by one Caleb introduced her and every man bowed in respect and gratefully accepted a piece of pie or cake. Some took two to her delight.

They exited the back door, and someone called Caleb from inside. "I'll be right back."

She stood on the top step of the rear stairs and craned her neck to see where the men were laying beams. In the sky she spotted a large bird. A smile spread across her face as she recognized it.

"Oh my gosh! Is that a bald eagle?" Makayla took a step back to get a better look, and her foot slipped. She screamed and reached out in vain to grab the railing, but missed and tumbled down the steps to the grass below.

She hit the ground with a bump and lay dazed, her body aching.

"Makayla!" Caleb tore out the back door and jumped the steps, landing at her side.

She clutched her abdomen as a pain shot through her.

"Oh shit, babe, are you okay?"

Pain cramped her abdomen again, and she moaned. The baby. Their baby...

Suddenly she was surrounded by men, as Caleb lifted her into his strong arms. She slipped her arms around his neck hanging on tighter than necessary. Needing to feel his strength as pain cramped her abdomen again and tears squeezed from her eyes.

"Take her to doc," said one man.

"No, the emergency room," said another.

"That's forty minutes away," said a third.

Caleb rushed with her to his truck as she continued to hang on his neck and breath in his soothing scent. Caleb's expression remained panic-stricken. She wanted to reassure him but she couldn't even reassure herself. What if the baby was injured? Or

died? How could they live with that. Especially Caleb. He would blame himself forever.

One of the men opened the door, and Caleb slipped her inside and buckled her in.

She grabbed his shirt trying to keep from completely losing it.

He wrapped her in his arms and kissed her forehead. "It's going to be okay."

He released her and shut the door, running around the front and ignoring all of his men as they continued to volley suggestions at him. Like a man with laser beam sight, he hopped behind the wheel and started the truck.

They tore off down the road, and Makayla's stomach clenched. She rubbed it and whimpered.

"Something's wrong," she whispered. "Something's wrong, I know it." Tears coursed down her cheeks, and her wolf trembled.

Caleb grabbed her hand tight. "You're going to be okay. Both of you."

Minutes later the truck stopped, and Caleb didn't even bother turning it off before lifting her out of the vehicle. He rushed to the front door of a small office building and kicked the door.

"Doc! Doc! Open up!"

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A moment passed, and then an old man with leathered skin and white hair peered out at them.

"She fell," said Caleb.

Doc opened the door and motioned them inside. "In the back."

Caleb carried her to the exam room and laid her on a paper-wrapped table. The old man followed them in and pulled out a penlight, looking in Makayla's eyes.

"I didn't hit my head," she said. "It's my belly."

He nodded and put the light away. "What happened?"

"I... it was stupid. I saw an eagle and stepped back to get a better look at it and slipped and fell down the stairs at the church."

"Front steps or back?"

A pain coursed through her belly again. "What?"

"Front steps are concrete. Back steps are wood down to grass. Front or back steps?"

"Back steps. I found her on the grass." Caleb grabbed her hand, the look of fear on his face mimicking her own. Doc rolled up her shirt and pulled her leggings down under her belly. He palpitated her abdomen, and Makayla winced.

"It hurts?"

She nodded, her chin quivering.

He laid his hands on either side of her abdomen and waited until the tightening in her muscles relaxed. Then he brought over the ultrasound machine and spread gel on her belly.

Please let the baby be okay. Please, God. Please let the baby be okay. Please. I'll do everything right. Anything you want. Just please, please, let my baby be okay.

More tears leaked from the corner of her eyes, and Caleb bent over and kissed them away. She squeezed his hand as he spoke softly into her ear. She didn't hear a word he said over the thundering of her own heartbeat, but his soothing tone and just having him near brought her comfort.

Minutes ticked by as Doc studied the baby, with Makayla's anxiety ratcheting up every minute. It was close to five minutes of Doc poking and prodding and looking at the ultrasound screen.

"Doc, please," Caleb begged. "You're killing us here. Is the baby okay?"

Doc peered at Makayla and Caleb from behind his telescopically thick glasses, his face a mask. "The baby is fine," he finally said.

Makayla let out a hiccupped sob, and Caleb hugged her tight. She sobbed into his flannel shirt, letting his strength and his scent soothe both her and her wolf. Finally, he let go, and she wiped her eyes.

"And what about Makayla? She's okay too?"

Doc nodded. "She's fine. I don't see or feel any tears. I recommend you stay off your feet for a few days. You might feel some Braxton-Hicks contractions like the ones you've been feeling today. If they get stronger or closer together, you need to call me immediately."

She nodded.

"And no sex for a few days."

Caleb's gaze stayed fixed on Doc. He nodded, but she noticed the pink flush working its way up his throat to his ears. Makayla smiled. She'd never seen Caleb's ears go red before.

Makayla bit her lip and laughed.

"Are you taking prenatal vitamins?" asked Doc.

"Uh..."

Doc smacked her hand. "You need to be taking those everyday, young lady."

"I'll go right over to the pharmacy and get some today," said Caleb.

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"No ibuprofen, only Tylenol for the pain. And I want to see you back here in one week."

"Absolutely," said Caleb.

Doc looked at him, amused, and then back to Makayla. "And try to get nervous daddy over here to calm down. Maybe get him a beer, or twelve."

Makayla couldn't hold back a chuckle.

"Very funny," said Caleb. "I can take her home now?"

Doc nodded. "Unless she can't take your hovering, then she is welcome to stay with me."

Caleb growled, and Doc snorted. "Please, you think I'm intimidated by you, Caleb Reed? I did your circumcision."

Caleb coughed, and Makayla fought to keep from laughing as she pulled her shirt down. She slid to her feet, and Caleb grabbed her.

"I should carry you."

"I think I can make it, but if it would make you feel better..."

"It would." He lifted her gently, and again she wrapped her arms around his neck.

She had to admit, she liked the feel of being in his arms. With Caleb, she felt safe in a way she'd never experienced before. A safety she never wanted to be without again.

He entered the waiting room and to her surprise the room was full. Mary, Jeremiah, Griffin, Dakota, and even a couple she didn't recognize sat waiting for them.

"Wow, hey," said Makayla.

Jeremiah moved to her side. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Clumsy, but fine."

Everyone's expressions held concern as they moved closer to her, laying their hands on her. Never before had she had so many people, especially people she didn't know very well, so concerned about her. She'd heard about the way some packs touched and held and hugged each other, lending strength and support to those they loved, but she'd never experienced it before. The idea that Caleb's family cared about her that much made her throat squeeze shut.

"And the baby?" asked Mary.

"The baby is fine too," Caleb told the group before she could reply. "But I need to get Makayla home and rest."

"I'll bring over some dinner," said Dakota.

"She needs to stay off her feet for a few days," said Caleb.

Mary nodded to Dakota. "We'll make sure she does."

A knot in Makayla's throat just about choked her at the concern and love sent her

direction. The connection of everyone touching her soothed her wolf. If it had been anyone else, in any other circumstances she wasn't sure she would like it. But with these people it felt right. Felt like... family.

Chapter Fourteen

Caleb got Makayla home and up to her bed. He made sure she was settled then straightened her things, unable to get his wolf to calm down. He'd only been this close to losing control to his wolf twice before in his life, and sitting around or going back to work wasn't going to help keep his other half in check.

"You don't have to do that," said Makayla. "I'll clean up tomorrow."

"I don't mind." He hung her shirts up in her closet.

"Please," she said. "Just come sit down."

His wolf propelled him toward the bed wanting to touch her, feel her, make sure she was indeed all right. Caleb sat on the edge of the bed, and she took his hand.

"Doc said I'm going to be okay, and the baby is too."

Caleb nodded. "I know."

He could tell she was trying, but he'd seen the terror on her face at the thought that something might be wrong with the baby. Despite what he'd seen of her in the past, she was now completely in tune with the baby, and she—like him—already loved it.

"Who was that couple in the waiting room? I've never seen them before," she asked.

"Oh, that's my godbrother Stix and his mate Satia."

"They live in Wolf River?"

"Yeah, Stix owns a bar outside of town, but he and Satia and his son Andre live in town. His mother and mine were best friends growing up. My parents are his godparents."

"But... he's not a wolf."

"Nope, he's an Ursa. His mate Satia is a saber."

Her eyebrows scrunched together. "Like a tiger?"

"Yeah. She's a Blood Born, so is Stix, but she's from Siberia. Relocated here about nine months ago. There's a whole clan of them a couple hours north. They have a lodge where most of them live. Except their Alpha and his mate. They live part-time in Seattle, part-time at Saber Mountain Lodge."

"That's so different than what my mom told me it was like here. She said Wolf River Blood Born don't mingle with other species or outsiders."

Caleb nodded. "Usually, we keep to ourselves. But that doesn't mean we turn away from those in need. The sabers needed help. The Night Shift asked us to help them. We did."

"Night Shift?"

"The emergency relocation service for shifters and Blood Born."

"I've never heard of it."

He wondered suddenly just what her parents had taught her about their life in Wolf River. It sounded very much like they hadn't told her anything.

"Griffin knows them from the military. Great guys. They help shifters and Blood Born all over the world. They helped my cousin Natasha when her parents were kidnapped about a year and a half ago."

"Is she okay?"

"Yeah. She and her mate Liam live in Malibu. She's finishing up school, and then I think they'll come back here to settle down. Might even bring her friends Cara and Noah with them. They're Bitten, but Noah is a friend of Griff's from Afghanistan. Neither one really have a pack or family support, so they're welcome here."

Makayla shook her head. "You know, I think my dad would have liked coming back here. His biggest complaint about Wolf River was the narrow-mindedness of everyone."

Caleb shrugged. "Things change. Times change. We needed to change with it."

Makayla yawned.

"I should let you rest." He stood to leave but she grabbed his hand.

"Would you... stay for a bit? We don't have to talk or anything. I just like being near you. It makes me feel safe."

The words struck Caleb like a lightning bolt to the chest. He never thought it was possible he could feel more for someone than he had for Franny, but somehow, he did. What he felt for Makayla and the baby far surpassed anything he'd ever thought he'd felt for Franny. Yes, he'd loved Franny. Loved her with everything he had, but... his wolf had never loved her, never accepted her because... Franny wasn't meant to be his bonded mate.

"Of course." Caleb walked around the bed and removed his boots. He scooted up on the bed, and Makayla moved closer to him and rested her head on his chest. He leaned back into the pillows and wrapped his arm around her, letting his body melt into hers.

They lay that way for a long time. Neither speaking, him listening to the sounds of her breathing.

"If the baby is a boy," Makayla said, voice soft. "I think I want to name him after my dad. I want to name him Simon."

Caleb nodded. "Simon is a good name. What about if the baby is a girl?"

She stayed silent for a long minute. "I don't know. Your mom said there haven't been girls in your family for a long time."

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"My cousin Natasha is the first in generations. We aren't sure why."

Silence fell between them again.

"Do you have any girl names you like?" she asked.

Caleb's mind whirled. She was asking him what he thought? "Uh... I kind of like the name Madeline."

She nodded. "Maddie. I like that. Or maybe Olivia."

"Olivia's great."

Caleb could hardly believe he was in bed with Makayla. After Franny's death he never thought he'd find someone to share his bed, let alone his heart.

She tucked in closer to him and began to snore lightly. Caleb kissed her on the head and closed his eyes. He'd found his mate. He only hoped when the time came for them to complete the ritual, she felt the same.

* * *

Makayla spent three days with Caleb entertaining her, every moment he was home until they fell asleep in her bed. Then either Mary or Dakota would distract her all day while Caleb was at work. The downstairs was full of small gifts and bouquets of flowers from the pack of Wolf River and friends and business associates of Caleb and Jeremiah's, wishing her and the baby well. By Friday, Makayla couldn't take one

more day in bed. The moment Caleb left for work, she shot out of bed and headed down to the kitchen. In less than thirty minutes, Dakota walked in the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked Makayla, like a scolding parent.

"Trying to not go insane."

"You're supposed to be in bed."

"No. Doc said I was supposed to rest for a few days. Well, a few days are up, and if I don't get out of bed, I'm going to lose my ever-loving mind. So, I'm baking."

Dakota waddled over and set her bag on the counter. Makayla could see she wanted to argue, so Makayla grabbed her cookbooks, then pulled out the ingredients she needed from the cabinets and fridge.

"All right," Dakota finally said. "What are we doing?"

They spent the entire morning cooking and baking food for the picnic the following day. Together they chatted and cooked and listened to old country music and hung out as if they'd always been friends. It was the most natural thing Makayla had ever done with another woman.

"So, do you work?" Makayla asked, as she prepped another pie crust.

Dakota grabbed an onion to chop for her potato salad. "Not right now. I worked before we moved back to Wolf River."

"What did you do?"

"I was a self-defense instructor at a Brazilian Ju Jitsu studio."

Makayla looked over at Dakota. "I could see that."

Dakota laughed. "Really?"

"Sure. How long have you and Griffin been mated?"

"Since I was eighteen. He was getting ready to leave for the navy, and we mated before he left. We've been together since I was a sophomore in high school."

"Wow. Did he do any tours overseas?"

Dakota nodded. "Three."

"That must have been lonely. I can't imagine what that would be like."

Dakota stayed silent for a long minute. "It was tough... on both of us."

"But you're both here now and having a baby. That must be good, right?"

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"It is. It has its rough moments. Like the other night, but for the most part, we're better than we've ever been."

Makayla didn't want to pry, but she had to admit that she was curious. "The other night, did it have to do with something that happened overseas?"

When Dakota didn't answer Makayla looked over. Dakota's hand shook as it hovered over the onion she was chopping.

"I'm sorry," said Makayla. "I didn't mean to snoop."

Dakota's smiled but it didn't meet her eyes. "It's okay. It's just... I've never really had someone to talk to about it before. Griffin and Caleb... did something about eight months ago, and it hit Griff pretty hard. He's a good man and a great mate, but he has days where what he did is almost beyond what he can deal with. Even though he knows in his heart he was justified."

Makayla's heart thumped. A million questions swirled in her mind, and she wanted to ask what had happened. What had he and Caleb done... but it wasn't her place.

"So anyway," said Dakota. "What about you? Are you going to get a job? Not that there is much to do here in Wolf River."

Makayla went back to her piecrust. "Well, I kind of had an idea of something I might like to do, but I'm still working it out."

"I'd be surprised if Caleb didn't let you do just about anything, if it made you happy."

"Why do you say that?"

Dakota shrugged. "He's so taken with you that I think if you told him you wanted to be an astronaut, he'd try and figure out a way to make it happen."

Makayla smiled. "I think he's pretty great too."

Dakota grinned back. "Do you? When I met you, I wasn't sure you'd make it out here."

Makayla nodded. "It was tough. Like being in a completely different world. But I'm finding that I like it more than I ever thought I would. The simplicity of it all. The quiet. The peace. It's given me a lot of time to think and reflect. Geez, I sound like I've been at a yoga retreat."

They both laughed.

"Wolf River is definitely different than the big city. I think it helps people gain perspective. When you cut out all that other stuff—social media, shopping, partying—it helps you to see clearly what you want out of life and who you want it with. Honestly, the first time I saw you I thought Caleb was doomed. But now... Now I think the two of you really have a chance."

The idea made Makayla's wolf howl. Her and Caleb. She wanted to see that happen.

The front door opened, and Caleb stepped in and frowned. "What are you doing?"

"All right," said Dakota. "Back off, mountain man. The girl was going insane up there. You can only play so many rounds of cards before your eyes start to bleed. Maybe if you got a television hooked up in here somewhere..."

Caleb set down his bag and glared at Dakota while walking to Makayla. "How are you feeling?"

"Better now that I'm baking."

A worried crease furrowed his brow. Makayla rubbed at it with her thumbs and the lines faded away.

"See. All it took was a little flour to rub away your worry."

Caleb wiped his forehead. "Great. I'm supposed to go back to work with flour on my forehead?"

Dakota snickered.

"Sure. It'll match the flour on your nose." Makayla grabbed a handful of flour and threw it in his face.

Dakota howled with laughter as Caleb spit flour on the counter. He opened his eyes. Flour clung to his eyelashes and beard. Makayla giggled.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to throw that much."

"Didn't you?" He cocked a white eyebrow.

"I mean it. I'm sorry." She wiped at his face trying to get the flour off while stifling a laugh. "It's everywhere. I'm really sorry."

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He nodded. "Yeah, well at least it's not in my hair."

Before she could move, Caleb dumped a handful of flour in her hair, and Makayla shrieked.

Dakota threw up her hands and moved around the counter and out of the kitchen. "Nope. Nope. This pregnant woman is out."

"Traitor," Makayla called. "I thought us pregnant chicks were supposed to stick together."

Caleb chuckled and moved closer to her. "I'm sorry. That was mean. I shouldn't have done that."

She smacked his chest. "Yes, it was. I'll be trying to get it out of my hair for a week."

Makayla's skin flushed at the thought of showering with Caleb.

He brushed her hair, and she picked flour from his beard. His body pressed against hers, and she warmed inside. Her wolf sat up and paid attention to his nearness. He ran a hand down her bare arm, his skin rough and calloused from working. He stopped at her belly and placed his palm on top of it. Makayla held her breath. She'd put on a few pounds in the last weeks finally being able to keep food down. Her hips no longer fit in her jeans, and her belly made everything look like she was hiding a basketball in her pants. They stood together for a moment, neither speaking. A flutter moved in her belly.

Caleb looked up at her and smiled. "Was that...?"

"Yup. It doesn't feel like much now, but soon I think I'm going to feel like a soccer ball in the Super Bowl, I'll be kicked so much."

Caleb chuckled. "You mean the World Cup."

"What?"

"The Super Bowl is football. The World Cup is for soccer."

"Oh. Well, I never really was into sports."

He kissed her forehead and then brushed flour from her hair again. "You're gonna need a shower to get this out."

"Maybe you could help me." The words came out before she realized she'd spoken them. His gaze intensified, and a heady spicy smell wafted off him. He leaned in even closer, and Makayla's heart thundered like a stampede of elephants.

Dakota cleared her throat from the couch. "Okay, I think that's my cue to leave."

Caleb backed away, and Makayla's wolf whined in protest. "Sorry, Dakota."

She picked up her purse from the table. "Nope, it's all good. I'll just run home and grab a few things and come back later."

Caleb glanced at his watch. "No need. I have to get back to work, anyway. I just wanted to stop by and make sure you girls were doing all right."

The look he gave Makayla had her as hot and bothered as if he'd stripped her bare

and licked every inch of her. Whatever was going on with them, it was heating her to the point of her restraint almost going up in flames.

"I'll see you tonight?"

She nodded. "I'll be here."

Caleb walked through the front room to the door and stopped. "By the way, a technician will be out in about an hour to install a phone line."

Dakota laughed, and Caleb winked and then headed out the door. After the door closed, Dakota rounded on her.

"You might turn him into a twenty-first century man after all."

Makayla nodded but said nothing. She wasn't sure that she wanted to change Caleb into a twenty-first century man. She liked him just the way he was.

* * *

"I don't know what to do, Griff." Caleb bit into his sandwich and stared out the windshield of his truck. His feelings for Makayla seemed to be mounting more rapidly than he was prepared for.

"I'm pretty sure you know what to do, you're just scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Of being broken." Griffin looked out the side window of the truck. "I've been broken. You know that. You saw what splitting from Dakota did to both of us. And I know that losing Franny had you drowning. You're afraid of that happening again. Only this time, you wouldn't just be losing Makayla. You'd be losing that baby as well."

"I love them both. Love them more than I loved Franny. Difference really is that my wolf loves them as well."

"The same way I love Dakota and our baby. I get it. And once you go all in, it just gets that much more intense. Once you two finish bonding, there's no going back—for either of you."

Caleb's gut tightened. He'd watched Makayla change over the past month. Gone was the Los Angeles city girl. Smiles were more frequent than absent. She hadn't put on 'fake-up,' as he liked to call it, in weeks, and her whole countenance had become as natural as her casual clothes. He liked to think he had a small part to play in that, but at the same time, he wondered just what would happen if he let her go back and visit California. If she left Wolf River, would she be the same person when she returned? He wasn't going to keep her captive no matter what her mom's intentions had been by sending her there, but fear still lingered. If given the choice, would she leave and not look back?

Caleb wasn't able to get away from work until late that night. An unexpected rain shower had his team scrambling to tarp the church to keep what was left of the inside from being ruined. By the time he got home he was beyond exhausted, mentally and physically.

He tiptoed into the quiet house and sat on the couch, taking off his muddy boots. He listened for any sounds that Makayla was awake, but there wasn't any, making him both grateful and sad at the same time. His mind and heart tore at each other like wolf cubs fighting for dominance. He wanted to give in to his feelings for her. Wanted to feel her, taste her, make her his... but fear still kept him from being able to fully open up.

The last two weeks had been great. She'd really started to peel off the layers she'd built around herself over the years. It made him happy. Not just for himself, but for her and for her baby. The only way things between them could ever work was if she was honest with both him and herself. And still, fear lingered inside him. His mom had warned him the baby's father had been contacting her. And Caleb wasn't stupid. He knew the only reason she stayed at the library for hours on end was because it had the best internet access. Even so, for almost a week she hadn't asked to go into town, or even pulled her phone out of her purse when they did go in. So that had to be good, right?

Caleb rubbed his face and told himself to stop. If they were meant to be, they would be. If they weren't... Caleb went to his bedroom and stripped down to his underwear. Who was he trying to kid? She was the one he chose. If she didn't choose him in return, he'd never move on.

The following morning the sounds of the phone ringing, startling Caleb awake. He exited his room and scanned the kitchen for the sound as Makayla headed to the wall and picked up the receiver. That was going to take some getting used to.

"Hello? Hey, Mary." Makayla spotted Caleb. Her eyes widened and they locked gazes. "What? Yeah, he's up. Okay... I'll tell him. Bye."

She hung up the phone. "Uh... your mom says they're gonna start heading up within the hour. If you want to get some more sleep, though, I'm fine waiting. I know you got in late." Her heated gaze scoured him as if he were in a Magic Mike movie.

"Nah. I'm up. We can go whenever you want."

"Okay. Well, I uh..." She returned to the pies she'd made and continued wrapping them in plastic. "I'm ready when you are."

Caleb tried to read her nervousness, unsure if his lack of clothing was unsettling her or something else.

"Do you have a swimsuit?" he asked.

"What? Uh... no. I didn't think of that. With how much I feel like a beach ball right now, I hadn't even considered getting into one."

"You don't look like a beach ball. Maybe like you swallowed one, but that's different."

"Thank you. I think."

"What I mean is, you aren't fat. You aren't round... well, your belly is round but the rest of you is great. Not that your belly isn't great..." He blew out a breath and then chuckled. "You know, I think I'm gonna go get some pants on now."

She suppressed a smile. "Okay."

Caleb practically bolted from the room. He closed his door and leaned back on it. Why was he such an idiot? How in the world was it that, after living in the same house with her for over a month, suddenly talking to her was getting harder not easier?

* * *

They packed the pies and cake into the truck along with blankets and a few other necessities and headed west out of Wolf River, further into the woods. The silence hanging between them wasn't uncomfortable or strange, but peaceful. Like two people who knew each other so well they didn't feel the need to fill the air with frivolous words.

"So, tonight when we go for the run, Dakota can bring you home. We'll probably be out late."

"Okay." She wished for the first time in a long time that she could shift and run with him. Her wolf whined at the thought, wanting that more than anything.

"Where did you run in California?"

"Uh..." She wasn't sure what to say. "I haven't run much since my dad died. Only every six months or so, when I couldn't push off the shift anymore."

He glanced at her. "Really? I'm surprised. If I didn't run at least once a week, my wolf would drive me nuts."

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"I don't shift as fast as you do and pain isn't really my thing."

He looked over at her again then back at the road. "You've seen me shift?"

A chill raced down her legs. "Oh. Yeah. That morning you came back from Griffin's. I just happened to be up and looked out the window... I didn't see anything. Well, I mean I saw you shift but I didn't see... your..."

"Nakedness?"

She laughed. "I wasn't quite sure how to say that. Anyway, I just saw it only took you seconds, really. Me? It takes minutes, sometimes more."

"Probably because you don't do it enough. You fear the pain instead of letting it work for you. Like the Bitten. It can take them up to a half an hour to shift at the full moon. But if you learn how to not fight the pain, but embrace it and make it work for you, it goes faster."

Curiosity bubbled inside her. "How fast can you shift?"

"I've done it instantly before, in times of extreme emotional stress."

"My dad used to be able to do that."

"It comes from years of shifting weekly. We can work on that after the baby is born."

She wasn't sure she wanted to, but she nodded anyway. Memories of running with her

dad and brother down the beach in the dark flooded her. Waves crashing on the sand. The smell of seaweed and salt. She'd hated the shift, but loved the runs. They were the only time she'd ever felt truly free.

Caleb smiled and another memory surfaced. Her dad smiling at her as he drove. She reached over and hugged him tight, kissing his cheek.

"Are you okay? You look like you might be car sick."

Makayla swallowed hard. Rolling down her window she let the wind whip her face, clearing away the painful memories. She fought back the fear and guilt that crept up on her so fast she hadn't even had time to prepare herself. It'd been over a week since she'd had an attack.

"How much farther?"

"About ten minutes. You gonna make it?"

She nodded. "I'll be fine."

They pulled up, and Caleb helped unload everything while Makayla took their blankets, set them on the ground and spread them out. Over fifty people had already overtaken the lake. They ranged from old to very young. She recognized some of them from town, others she'd never seen before. Caleb walked to his parents and hugged them then shook hands with several other people before joining her on the blanket.

"I remember this lake. That peak up there is where you and your brother dared me to jump off."

"We didn't think you'd do it."

"Yeah, well you didn't know me back then."

A grin spread across his face. "And now I do, so I will not be daring you to do anything of the sort anytime soon."

Makayla lay back. The sun fell down on her and made her close her eyes and smile. Being there reminded her of the beach, fun and relaxing, but the smells were completely different.

Suddenly her shoes slipped off her feet, and she looked down.

"You can't truly relax unless you take your shoes off." Caleb began to rub her feet with his powerful fingers.

Her head fell back, and she moaned. "Oh my gosh, that feels amazing. After being on my feet all day baking yesterday, I feel like I've tied ten-pound weights to my ankles."

"You should rest more."

She laughed. "Then the rest of me will blow up to the size of the cabin. You'll have to roll me out the front door to get me to Doc's."

He looked at her quizzically for a moment. "Your weight means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah, I mean, I don't want to turn into a stretched out baby machine."

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His eyebrows smashed together. "You really think that's what you'd look like if you gained some weight during your pregnancy?"

"I've seen photos. Stretch marks and baggy skin. Stomachs you could carry your entire purse in. No, thank you."

He stared at her for a minute without speaking.

"I mean, that would gross you out, right?"

He shook his head. "I think your body is amazing. You're growing a person in there. It's not going to be exactly the same after doing something like that. Sure, you can exercise and diet and try to get back to where you were before, but why? Your body is a testament to the life and love you brought into the world. It isn't something to be ashamed of, it's something to be celebrated. Stretch marks are the tattoos of courage and love women wear on their bodies to show the world they care about something more than just themselves."

Makayla swallowed hard. In that moment she wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him hard. How was it possible a man like him existed?

"You know you're kind of amazing, right?"

He snorted. "I'm just me."

"And nothing like I thought you were."

“Is that a good thing?”

“Yes. That’s a very good thing.” Her wolf agreed. If he’d asked her to finish the mating bond right then, she wouldn’t have hesitated. Caleb was so different than any male she’d met before. He was strong and protective but also so gentle and unaffected by what other people thought of him. Back home it was all about appearances and who had the best, or the most or the biggest. But in Wolf River... people were just content to live and love. Work and play.

"Caleb? Swim?" A younger man called.

Caleb waved then went back to rubbing her feet. "Be there in a minute, Jacob."

"Do you know everyone in the pack?"

Caleb nodded. "It's kind of my job. I keep tabs on everyone. Make sure they stay out of trouble. Make sure they have what they need. Make sure outsiders leave us alone."

Her mind drifted to her discussion with Dakota the day before, and how she'd said Caleb and Griffin had done something that had hurt them mentally.

"And what do you do if someone gets into trouble?"

His expression darkened, and he stared at her. For a moment she thought he wouldn’t answer, but then he said, "I take care of it."

The definitive edge in his voice told her she would never want to be on the receiving end of Caleb’s justice.

"What's the worst thing someone in the pack has ever gotten into that you've had to take care of?"

He licked his lips and rubbed her feet a bit rougher for a minute. "Are you hungry?" he finally asked. "Let me get you a plate of food." He stood, and Makayla sat up.

"Caleb."

He looked down at her, his large form powerful and enticing.

"You can tell me anything," she said.

He nodded and threw her a tight smile before walking to the table. Her gut told her he'd done something, possibly illegal, and it weighed on him like a Mack truck. She wanted to know what it was, but she also knew better than to pry. He wasn't ready to tell her what he'd done, and she wasn't ready to tell him what she'd done, either. She hoped someday in the near future, that would change—for both of them.

Makayla spent the rest of the afternoon on the bank, meeting members of the pack and watching Caleb in the water with the little kids and teens. He towered over them like a playful, protective mountain. It made her smile, giving her a glimpse into what her future might hold. A cabin full of boys, rough and tumble. Football practices, wrestling teams, working for Caleb in the summers, learning his trade in the construction business. Learning how to live off the land. How to catch and hunt for food. How to provide and be good men. Good mates. Fathers. The thought made her smile.

She watched him but her wolf grew agitated. Makayla looked around and noticed an older woman staring at her. She tried to not stare back, but the sad expression on the woman's face wasn't one Makayla could turn away from. Finally, the woman walked over to Makayla, her frail body barely holding up the clothes draped over her.

"Hi," Makayla said, from her spot on the blanket.

"You're her, aren't you?"

Makayla started to rise, but stopped. "I'm sorry?"

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The woman frowned and crossed her scrawny arms. "You're the one who took my Franny's place. Took her Caleb."

A chill raced over Makayla. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"My Franny was supposed to be with Caleb. He was hers. And now you're here, and you stole him away."

A pit grew in Makayla's stomach. "I... I don't know anything about that. No one told me—"

"Caleb belongs with Franny. My Franny!" The woman lunged down at Makayla, and Makayla curled in on herself and gripped her belly, instinctively protecting her baby.

"Alice!" Mary raced over and grabbed the older woman around the shoulders, tugging her away from Makayla.

"He's Franny's! He's Franny's! When she gets home, he'll go back to her. You'll see!"

"Alice," Mary said in a subdued tone. "Alice, come on, honey."

Hannah appeared out of nowhere. "Mom!"

"Franny. Where's Franny?"

Hannah grabbed her mother and took her from Mary. "I'm sorry, Mary. I thought today was going to be a good day. I thought being up here would help."

Mary hugged both of them. "It's okay, honey. It's okay. She needs us. You did the right thing bringing her."

Mary kissed Hannah on the forehead and rubbed her back.

"We should get home," said Hannah, keeping a firm hold on her mother.

Mary nodded. "Come back and run with us tonight. I'll have Dakota sit with her."

Hannah nodded, and she ushered her mother through the trees to the cars.

Mary watched them disappear then turned to Makayla. "You good?"

Adrenaline coursed through Makayla, making her heart race and her body shake. "I'm okay."

Mary nodded.

She could see Caleb in his mother's stoic stature and quiet strength. "Alice has been through a lot. Hannah too. Their good people. It will just take them time to get used to the idea of you with Caleb."

Makayla nodded not knowing what to say. She couldn't imagine losing her child, and her baby hadn't even been born yet. The anguish in the woman's eyes had almost been too much for Makayla to witness, let alone bear.

"Everything going well with the baby?"

"Baby's just fine."

"And what about you? You doing okay? Settling in?"

The immediate change of conversation helped to brush off the remainder of Makayla's shakes. "I am. I've started to really enjoy being in the cabin to be honest. The time away from everything has started to remind me what I love and what truly makes me happy. Caleb has helped me do that too."

Mary folded her arms over her chest and studied Makayla. "That's good. So, you think you'll stay?"

Makayla's cheeks heated. Mary didn't pull any punches. Makayla both liked that and hated that about her. "I'd like to." She looked out at Caleb still playing in the water. If he'll have me.

"Good." Jeremiah walked up behind Mary and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Because I was thinking you and Caleb need to get mated before the baby is born. It'll help solidify the family bond better."

Makayla looked between Jeremiah and Mary and then courage bolstered inside her. "Is that what you want? Really? Do you really want Caleb to mate me?"

"We want what Caleb wants," said Mary.

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It wasn't the answer she'd hoped for, but it was the one she'd expected.

"And what about my baby? Will my baby be accepted as one of your own? Like any of the kids Caleb and I might have?"

Her chest squeezed waiting for the answer.

Jeremiah walked forward and crouched in front of her. "Your father was the best friend I ever had. Even though miles separated us these last years, our hearts were as close as ever. All I ever wanted was for Simon to be my brother by blood. Now that he's gone, it would be an honor for his daughter and his grandchild to be my daughter and my grandchild."

Tears welled in Makayla's eyes. Jeremiah reached out and squeezed her hand.

"Thank you," she whispered. It was as if her father was smiling down at her again. She'd not felt so close to him since losing him, but in that instant, she felt like she might actually have found the thing she missed most since his death—a family.

Caleb appeared behind his dad, shaking water out of his hair. "Everything okay?"

Jeremiah smiled and stood. He clapped his son on the shoulder. "I was just telling Makayla that I think the two of you should be mated before the baby is born."

Caleb's gaze drifted to her. "Is that what you want?"

All eyes were on her. The decision she made now could move them forward or tear

them apart.

A moment passed, and her wolf practically forced the words from her lips. "It is. If it's what you want."

The smile that lit up Caleb face changed his entire demeanor. He walked to her and knelt in front of her.

His cool palm cupped her cheek as his deep, soulful eyes looked into hers. "It is what I want."

She pressed a kiss into his palm, and at the same moment the baby squirmed inside her.

The day passed with Makayla meeting almost every person at the lake. Those who had once greeted her with suspicion now greeted her almost as if she were one of them. Every person who ate her pies or cakes raved about how amazing they were and how hard it was to find great baked goods in Wolf River. The praise both embarrassed and got her that much closer to telling Caleb the idea she had been tossing around.

She met Stix and Satia and played with their son Andre. She watched as he toddled between Stix and Caleb, playing ball and then going out in the water with Satia where the woman taught him to swim. All in all the day was like none other. Unlike when she used to go out with her friends and party, there were no fights, no cattiness, no stumbling drunk friends in need of a ride home, and no expectations for her to pay. All of which made her more relaxed than she'd ever been. Watching Caleb and spending time with him at the lake talking and hanging out made her see a side of him she'd had yet to be introduced to. He goofed around and laughed, shedding his reserved demeanor. She vaguely remembered him like that as a boy. Carefree. Funny. But over the years things must have changed, and he'd become more aloof.

She sat on a rock, dipping her feet in the cool lake when Dakota sat next to her.

"Oh man, getting up and down is getting harder and harder now."

Makayla looked at Dakota's enormous belly that poked out underneath her large navy t-shirt. "Not much longer now, right?"

Dakota shook her head. "Three weeks, but I'm hoping to go sooner." She rubbed her belly. "This little guy is definitely ready to be out. He's getting so crowded in there that I think he's constantly using my bladder as a pillow."

Makayla chuckled. "I am not looking forward to that part."

"It'll be here before you know it. Have you started working on the baby room yet?"

"I didn't know there was one."

Dakota shielded her eyes, looking at Makayla. "It's right next to Caleb's room. Haven't you seen it?"

Makayla shook her head.

"That's weird. Caleb has had stuff in there for months. His old cradle and baby blanket. A crib he found at an antique store. I think your mom even sent something up."

"My mom?"

"Yeah. I remember Griffin helping him pick it up."

Makayla's chest squeezed. Why hadn't he told her any of that?

Water splashed at them, and Makayla ducked away.

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Dakota screeched. "Griffin Reed, knock it off."

Griffin laughed. "Come make me, baby lady." He splashed her again.

Dakota kicked water at him. "You know when this boy is born, I'm gonna start training again, and then you're in for a serious world of hurt, right?"

"But until then, you're fair game." He splashed her again, and this time Makayla got the brunt of it.

"Hey!" she yelled. "I'm not part of this."

"Oh yeah?" Caleb came up alongside her and splashed her.

She splashed him back. "No fair. We're up here like beached whales, totally clothed, and you two come along trying to drench us."

"Don't worry, that's what big brothers are for," said a male voice from behind them.

Makayla turned to see Logan strip off his polo shirt and khakis and dive over them into the water, tackling both Griffin and Caleb at the same time.

Dakota laughed and clapped. "Get 'em, Logan."

The three brothers wrestled in the water, every man for himself. Makayla smiled, remembering the three of them being like this when they were young and all together at the very same lake. The lake she would someday watch her own boys play in. She

rubbed her belly. If she and Caleb had boys.

Watching Caleb made her want that more than anything.

Chapter 16

The sun was beginning to go down when Caleb packed their things back into the truck. It'd been a great day, perfect really. A day like he never thought he'd have again.

Makayla hopped up onto the passenger's seat, and he closed the door. She rolled down the window and smiled at him. "When do you think you'll be home?"

Home. Their home. Not just his anymore. "The runs can go pretty late, but I'll try to be home by midnight."

She bit her lip, and he could see questions in her eyes. "Do you want me to wait up?"

He shook his head. "Nah, you should get some rest. It's been a long day."

"Okay." She leaned out the window and pressed her lips to his.

His heartbeat jumped into overdrive at the feel of her soft, warm mouth. It took all of his restraint from grabbing her by the hair and plunging his tongue into her mouth. All thoughts of running with the pack faded, and all he wanted was to go home with her and spend the night in her arms. Caleb's wolf yowled in delight at the smell of her, like sunshine on the sand.

He touched her cheek, and she broke away from him. "Be safe."

He nodded and backed away from the truck. "If you have an emergency, call Doc."

"She'll be fine," Dakota called from the driver's seat.

He caught her hand and didn't release it until Dakota backed the truck out of the spot. He watched it disappear down the dirt road and rubbed his chest. His wolf didn't like the idea of her being so far away, but it was his duty to run with the pack. A droplet hit Caleb's head, and he looked up at the darkening cloudy sky. Maybe he'd get lucky and it would rain, then he'd be able to go home early.

Jeremiah howled, and Caleb headed back toward the lake, stopping at the edge of the clearing where his mom waited for him.

"Mom."

"Hi, son." She fell in step next to him. "Good day?"

He nodded. "It was."

"Good."

They continued toward the lake, but he could tell there was something she wanted to say.

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"Alice was here today with Hannah," she finally said.

Caleb's chest squeezed and looked at her. "I didn't see them."

"You were in the water. They weren't here long."

"Did something happen?"

"Alice saw Makayla and started yelling at her about Franny."

His heartbeat quickened. "Makayla didn't say anything."

"Probably because she didn't understand what she was hearing. Alice said Makayla stole you from Franny, and that Franny was coming back. I thought you said she was getting better."

"I thought she was. It's... been a while since I've visited them."

"Well, I just thought you should know, so you can talk to Makayla. Explain what really happened."

They reached the pack just as everyone began to strip down.

Caleb removed his shirt, and his mom laid her hand on his arm. "You can still back out of this, you know. I know your dad wants to see the two of you mated, but there's no rush. If it's not what you want—"

"It is what I want."

His mom searched his face. "But is it what she wants? Really wants? Or is it just what she thinks she wants? I don't need you to answer that. I just need you to find out for yourself. Once you've mated—"

"I get it."

Mary smiled and touched his face. "I don't want to see you hurt again."

He hugged her tight. "Everyone keeps saying that."

* * *

Thunder awoke Makayla with a start. "Dad!"

She peered around the dark room trying to get her bearings. She was in Wolf River. Her pounding heart subsided as she realized she'd once again been dreaming about the car accident with her dad.

Makayla blew out a harsh breath and lightning cracked outside the window. She walked to it and looked out. Rain poured from the sky, and she wondered if Caleb returned yet. She picked up her cell from her nightstand to see what time it was, but it had died. She couldn't remember how many days it had been since she'd even looked at it.

She set it down and walked into the hallway. "Caleb?"

There was no answer.

She strolled down the stairs and checked the clock on the oven. It was close to eleven

thirty. A bright set of headlights flashed through the front window of the cabin, and she recognized Griffin's Jeep. Caleb jumped out of the passenger side and dashed for the front door. He opened the door and dripped onto the wood floor.

"Wait there." She hurried to the laundry room, grabbed a large towel, and headed back to the front door.

"What are you doing up?" he asked as she handed him the towel.

"The thunder woke me, and my phone was dead so I came down to find out what time it was."

He wiped his face and hair. "Your phone died? That must be a first."

She laughed. "Ha ha. Funny."

He chuckled, a deep rumbling sound that made her smile.

"How was your run?"

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"Wet." He tossed the towel to the ground and peeled off his shirt.

Her gaze moved over his glistening torso. She stepped in close and ran her fingers over the large tribal tattoo on his left arm.

"This is beautiful." She traced his toned bicep and then turned his arm over and inspected the intricate design as it wrapped around to the back.

"Thank you." His voice came out rough as sandpaper, the very sound making her body quiver.

Her eyes connected with his heated gaze. It'd been almost six months since she'd been with Derek, and before that one-night stand, she'd not been with anyone in a very long time. Her body responded to Caleb in a way she didn't know if she was prepared for. Yes, they'd slept in the same bed and shared a kiss or two, but that had been it. Easy, friendly. But nothing about the way he stared at her said he wanted to just be her friend. She sucked in a breath as his hand cupped her neck and the pad of his thumb ran over her cheekbone, sending sparks lighting over her skin like firecrackers.

He dropped his shirt and wrapped his arm around her waist. Their eyes never strayed from each other as she ran her hands over his shoulders and down his muscular chest to his waistband, where she hooked her thumbs through the loops of his jeans.

He drew her into him, and her belly smashed against his. Slowly, as if unsure, he lowered his face to hers. She breathed in the scent of his skin as his mouth lingered an inch from hers. He smelled like wet soil and wood.

Seconds drew out like an exquisite torture. Waiting, wanting, hoping, until finally his lips pressed to hers. Soft and light, the pressure almost infinitesimal. She leaned into him allowing him to lead. She wanted him, but she wasn't going to throw herself on him if he didn't want her like that.

His palms slid up her body and cupped her face as he pressed his mouth against hers harder. She parted her lips, and his tongue slid into her mouth. Her knees almost gave out at the feel. She teased his tongue with hers, wanting to draw him closer. Minutes passed as their kisses deepened. He ran his hands down her bare arms making her skin pebble. She kneaded her fingers into his broad back.

He broke away from her and trailed kisses down her neck. She shivered as he slid the strap of her cami off her shoulder and kissed the spot where it had been. His large hand cupped her breast through the thin fabric, making her nipples harden and a moan escape her. Her body flooded with heat. She wanted him. Right there, on the wood floor, on the couch, hell, on the counter. She didn't care. She just wanted to feel him.

She undid the buckle of his pants and pushed them down. He dropped her cami to her waist. Kneeling in front of her he licked his way from her collarbone to her breasts. She dug her fingers into his hair as he slid his tongue around each nipple making her thighs tingle.

"Caleb." She could barely manage to get his name out.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Her head whipped back and forth. "No."

He took off his boots and ran his hands up her thighs rubbing her through her thin pajama bottoms. She gripped his shoulders hard, digging in her nails and making him

growl. He grabbed her waistband and pulled her pajamas and underwear off in one fluid movement. She stepped out of them, and then he pulled her cami down her body to the floor as well.

A skitter of nervousness trickled over her skin as she stood in front of him completely naked. She wrapped her arms around herself, but he took her hands and threaded her fingers with his as he uncovered her, not allowing her to hide. Still on his knees he planted light kisses across her swollen belly making her muscles quake.

He got to his feet, kissing her once more. He wrapped her in his arms and picked her up. He stepped out of his jeans and headed for his bedroom. His eyes never left hers as he opened the door and then stood her on her feet. He brushed the pillows from the bed and pulled back the covers before taking her in his arms again and kissing her. So gentle and tender. She'd never had a lover so attentive. She laid down on the bed, pulling him with her. She parted her legs, and he rested between them.

To her surprise her belly took up very little room between them, and even so, he didn't seem to mind. He leaned over her, kissing down the length of her body, swirling his tongue over every inch, every fold, every freckle until she thought she might burst if she didn't have him.

"Caleb." She pulled his mouth to hers.

He kissed her again, swirling his tongue against hers.

"Are you sure?"

Hells yes, she was sure!

"I don't want to force you."

She chuckled. "If you leave me this wound up much longer, I'll have to go troll main street to find someone else to ease this ache."

A rumble escaped his chest, and she bit his bottom lip.

"This is what I want," she replied. "You are who I want."

Their eyes locked as he entered her. Her nails dug into his shoulders but their eyes never left each other as he pressed his hips into hers. Her body trembled at the sensation, and her hands moved to his firm buttocks as she gripped him tight.

He stayed put for a moment, and she thought maybe he'd changed his mind when he bent down and kissed her, withdrawing from her and then entering her again. Slowly, he circled his hips against hers as he built up a rhythm.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked.

She shook her head, unable to speak as every particle of her body hummed with energy and need.

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Makayla gripped his rear pulling him into her deeper, over and over, their movements slow and sensual, building the friction between them.

"Makayla."

She could barely make out her name on his lips as his fangs elongated, and his eyes went bright blue. The erotic sight shoved her closer to her own climax. He called her name again, louder.

His mouth fell open and his eyes closed as his head reared back.

She hooked her thumb inside his mouth. "Look at me Caleb."

His eyes opened, and he bit down lightly on her thumb. A tremor coursed through her body.

"Caleb."

Their eyes stayed locked as her muscles wound tight and everything around her faded away. His shoulders bunched, and every muscle in him tensed as his body collided with hers. Her back arched, and nothing else mattered. She came hard, panting and pulling his hips against hers, harder and faster. Utter bliss engulfed her as her wolf howled.

She pulled his mouth to hers and claimed it with her own. Caleb. Her Caleb. She wanted him. She needed him. And she would do whatever it took to keep him.

The waves died down, and she fell back on the pillows. Their tongues swirled against each other, and he lay atop her gently, keeping most of his weight off her belly. Pushing her hair from her face he kissed her cheeks, her lips, her nose, her chin.

He rolled off her and pulled her into his arms, their bodies warm and slick. She draped her arm over his torso and lifted her leg on top of his. Happiness invaded her in a way she'd never experienced. Her wolf stood suddenly and pushed against the restraints holding her back. A shift ripple coursed over Makayla's skin.

She clutched her chest and sucked in a breath pushing her wolf down.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't think so. I think something is right. My wolf wants to be let out."

He chuckled and traced her arm with his fingertips. "I know the feeling."

* * *

Caleb allowed the sensations of peace and contentment to wash over him. He'd wanted so badly to mark her with his scent and bite her, sealing the mating between them further, but he'd held back. Having sex was one thing, going all in was totally another.

"Who is Franny?" Makayla asked, her voice coming out soft.

Caleb's gut squeezed. He knew he'd have to tell her at some point. He just didn't know that it would be so soon.

"I've heard her name mentioned a few times, and a woman named Alice approached me today saying I stole you from Franny."

Caleb swallowed hard. "Franny was my girlfriend. She was my first and my last before you. We were together for about three years." His voice trailed off as Franny's face floated into view. She'd been so different from Makayla. Dark haired and golden skinned with eyes like the night sky. Short and curvy but with an infectious smile.

"Did she go away after you broke up or something?"

Caleb sucked in a deep breath. "She killed herself about six months after being attacked by a guy passing through Wolf River. A rogue." His jaw clenched tight at the memory of having tried to befriend the rogue by giving him a job.

Makayla sat up and looked down at him, her golden hair falling into her face.

"I'm so sorry."

He brushed the hair back over her shoulder. "She didn't deserve what happened to her. Her sister Hannah has been taking care of their mother ever since. But Alice hasn't been able to hold it together since Franny's death."

"I can't imagine the pain that caused you or her family."

Caleb couldn't look her in the eyes. He couldn't tell her that he'd never caught the guy who'd done it. Couldn't tell her that if he had, he would have done the exact same thing to him that he, Griffin, and their dad had done to Lenny. Couldn't tell her that—

"It's not your fault," she said, as if reading his thoughts. "She made her own choice, as poor as it was. You never could have stopped her if it was what she really had wanted to do."

"Maybe. But I should have seen the signs. Maybe I could have gotten her more help."

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Makayla nodded and placed her hand on his chest. "Maybe you could have. But you can't live your life beating yourself up for what you could have done or not done that probably wouldn't have changed the outcome."

The sadness that permeated her told him she was speaking to herself as much as to him.

He pushed her hair behind her ear. "You were in the accident when your dad died, weren't you?"

She stared at him for a moment. "Yeah," she whispered. "And like you, I blame myself for what happened."

"But someone ran a red light and smashed into you."

She swiped at her eyes, and his wolf whined, wanting to nuzzle and comfort her.

"But maybe if I hadn't grabbed him to hug him at that exact moment, he would have seen the car coming, and he could have swerved to miss it, or hit the brakes, or... something."

"You are no more to blame for that driver running a red light than I am for not seeing the signs of what Franny was going through."

She touched his cheek, and his wolf howled wanting to be let out.

"You loved Franny?"

"Yes."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "Was she your mate?"

He opened his mouth, but his wolf stopped him. After everything he and Franny had been through. After how much he'd loved her and thought she was his mate, he knew, and his wolf knew, that Franny was never his mate.

"No. I thought she was but... now I know she wasn't." There it was. He'd put it out there. He hadn't said it in so many words, but he'd let Makayla know to the best of his ability, that he wanted her.

"What about you?" he asked. "Is the baby's father your mate?"

Makayla snorted. "Oh, hell no. He's... a one-night mistake that has permanent consequences."

"Does he know? About the baby?"

She looked away. "Yup."

A niggling feeling settled in Caleb's gut. "And he didn't want you?"

"Not at first. But he contacted me and said he'd take care of me if it's what I wanted."

Caleb's heartbeat quickened. "And is it?"

Her gaze locked on his again. "I don't want a man who is willing to marry me because he thinks it's what I want. I want a man who wants me because it's what he wants. I want a man who would rather die than lose me. A man who sees me. Not my money. Not my good looks. Me."

Caleb reached up and cradled her soft cheek in his palm. "I see you."

He pulled her lips to his, and she kissed him hard. She kissed his chin and licked down his throat. His arousal kicked as she swirled her tongue down his chest to his stomach, kissing and licking every inch of his abdomen. He combed his fingers through her hair. His body and wolf trembled at her touch. She kissed lower down over his hipbones and grasped him in her small, tight fists.

Caleb moaned as she slid her tongue down his length. Every instinct told him to take her. To bite her. Mark her. Make her his. But he was afraid of hurting her. Afraid she wasn't ready. He didn't want there to be any regrets between them.

She took him in her mouth, and he almost exploded. He grabbed the headboard and the wood groaned beneath his palms. Over and over she licked him, sucked him, stroked him until his legs and back burned from the strain of holding back, and his muscles shook with the effort.

Finally, she lifted herself and poised over him. He sucked in a ragged breath as she slid down over him like a soft sheath. He grabbed her neck and pulled her mouth to his as he sat up. Hot and spicy, she kissed him hard and rocked her hips against his. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her body into his. She gripped the headboard and pushed herself down on him.

She moaned into his mouth and then dropped her head on his shoulder.

"Caleb," she panted.

He kissed her neck as their bodies slapped together in a hard almost painful joining.

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"Makayla." He said her name but there was so much more he wanted to say to her. To tell her he wanted her. To beg her to stay with him forever. To tell her... he loved her.

"Caleb..." Her voice came out breathy, and she threw her head back. He watched her as her body pushed against his. Her mouth fell open, and he pulled her to him harder. He wanted to see it. To watch her as he brought her to the edge of ecstasy and to know that he'd done this to her.

Her breathing quickened, and her fangs grew long and then she tensed as every muscle in her body pulled taut. He rocked his hips against hers watching as her face took on the expression of agony mixed with pleasure. A look so completely erotic, he couldn't hold back a moment longer. He exploded as all tension left his body and every muscle became like rubber. He fought to keep a hold of her, rocking them both through their climaxes. His body relaxed, and he fell back as she leaned in and kissed him again. Her soft, warm lips pressed against his, making him never want to do anything else but kiss her.

"Caleb," she whispered. "I think... I think I might like you."

He kissed her again his heart bursting with joy. "I think I might like you too."

Chapter 17

The following morning Makayla awoke to the sounds of people moving around in the house. She sat up to realize that she was still in Caleb's bed, naked. She glanced around for her pajamas only to remember they'd left them by the front door. She walked over to his wardrobe and thumbed through Caleb's clothes before finding a

pair of shorts and a flannel to cover herself with. She wasn't going to win any beauty pageants in the outfit but catching his scent on the fabric and the soft warmth of the shirt made her smile anyway.

If someone had told her a month ago that she'd be wearing a blue flannel shirt, she would have told them she'd rather be dead. Now she couldn't imagine a better piece of clothing.

The door opened, and Caleb entered. He smiled when he saw her then held up her clothes and a cup of tea.

"I figured you wouldn't want my dad and brothers to see you naked."

Her lips twisted into a grin. "I don't know. That could be kinky."

He set the cup down on the nightstand and wrapped her in his large arms. "This body is for no one but me to see."

She dipped her hands into the rear pockets of his jeans. "Oh, really?"

He kissed her soft. "Yes. And I can't tell you how much it turns me on to see you in my shirt."

She chuckled and pulled his hips into hers. "You don't need to tell me, I can already feel it."

He kissed her again, and her stomach fluttered like a giddy schoolgirl's.

"So, what are they all doing here?"

"I told you we were going to get you a tub and a hot water heater."

"I feel so modern. Are you sure I can handle it? A phone, a tub, a washer and dryer, and hot water? I might ask you for a dishwasher if you aren't careful."

"And I might just get you some internet if you're good."

An unease settled in her chest. "Don't do that."

His eyebrows scrunched together. "What? Get you some internet and satellite television?"

"Yeah. Don't do that."

"Okay. I thought you might want them."

She shook her head. "I don't. I'm happy just the way things are. I like being out here, detached... or, no, maybe that isn't it. Maybe I feel more connected. But, maybe we could get a DVD player? I do miss a good action flick."

He stared at her for a long minute, his eyes soft and full of more love than she'd seen aimed her direction. The night before she'd been so overcome by their lovemaking that she'd wanted to tell him she was ready, that she wanted to bite him and seal their mating. She'd wanted to tell him that she loved him, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to say the words.

"So, I just get to sit here on my butt all day while you guys work?"

He snorted. "Nope, sorry. I have something specific for you to do."

He led her by the hand to a door in the corner.

"You want me to go in the closet?"

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"It's not a closet." He opened the door and turned on the light. It was the baby room Dakota had mentioned. She'd completely forgotten. She'd never even taken a second look at the door next to the front door. She'd assumed it was storage or something. But apparently it was a nursery that adjoined his bedroom.

Her gaze traveled over the various items in the room. A small wooden cradle, an antique crib, a blue baby blanket, and several boxes sat in the corner. Next to them stood a small white rocking horse.

"Oh my gosh, is that—"

"Your mom sent it. Along with the boxes. She thought you might want them when the baby was born."

Makayla walked into the room and knelt in front of the horse. The felt hair was patchy and worn and one of the blue painted eyes had almost rubbed off completely. The leather saddle had cracked and dried out, but she ran her fingers over it, anyway.

"This was my dad's when he was little." Tears flooded her eyes.

"We can leave it like it is, or I could help you fix it up."

Makayla jumped to her feet and ran to him. She threw her arms around Caleb's neck and kissed him.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I honestly don't deserve you."

He wiped the tears from her eyes and kissed her again. "Don't thank me, thank your mom. And just so you know, I think we deserve each other just fine."

Makayla spent the morning going through the boxes her mom had sent up. They were full of things from when she and Colt were young. Toys, blankets, some special clothing. She couldn't believe her mom had saved all that stuff. She'd thought her mom had just gotten rid of it. In the last box she opened, she found a note. She thought about tossing it when she saw her mom's distinctive handwriting scrawled across the front. She couldn't remember how many notes her mom had left for her over the years. Notes telling her she was angry. Notes telling her which chores to do. Even the occasional note telling her she loved her, though those were few and far between. Every time she saw a handwritten note from her mom, her gut clenched, and she felt like a twelve-year-old girl about to be scolded again.

Despite her intuition telling her not to open it, she did, anyway. To her surprise the note told her how much her mother cared and how she'd kept all the baby things in hopes that one day, Makayla would cherish them as much as she had. The sentiment that flowed through the letter struck Makayla right in the chest. She wondered if she'd misjudged her mom.

A knock on the door pulled her attention as she picked up an old, ratty teddy bear.

"Hey," said Caleb.

"Hi." She stood, pressing the bear to her belly.

"Dad and Logan took off for some food. We'll finish up with the water heater when they get back." He looked at all the items she'd unpacked. "Looks like a lot of stuff."

"A lot of it was mine from when I was little. I'm surprised she still had it."

He rubbed her arms. "Do you think maybe she cares a bit more than you thought?"

"I'm starting to think maybe. I mean... She kept this stuff and shipped it here and she sent me here."

"And that's a good thing?"

"A very good thing."

He smiled. "So, you're happy?"

"It feels... right." Her wolf chuffed in agreement.

He nodded. "So... you think you might want to stay?"

Her heart quickened, and her throat dried as she asked the question. "Do you want me to stay?"

"I don't want you to leave."

She stared at him for a moment. Words weren't easy for Caleb. He used his lack of words to protect himself.

Makayla set down the teddy bear and walked to Caleb hooking her fingers into his belt loops. "Ask me to stay with you, Caleb."

She watched fear flash through his eyes.

He brushed her hair over her shoulder and cupped her cheek. "Stay with me." His words barely came out above a whisper.

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She touched his cheek. "I'm not going anywhere."

He smiled so broadly his eyes crinkled. He kissed her and then pulled her into a hug. "That's good news, because with all the upgrades I'm putting into this cabin for you... I'd have to send you a bill if you left."

She laughed and hugged him tight. Her wolf yipped in delight. Makayla could hardly believe that for the first time in her life she felt like she truly belonged.

There was a sharp knock on the door and Griffin stood in the doorway.

"I gotta go, Dakota is in labor."

Caleb let go of her and strode to the door. "Do you need me to drive you?"

"I... I..." Griffin was a shaky mess.

"Go," Makayla commanded. "Take him home. Hurry up."

Caleb winked at her, and the two bolted. She rubbed her stomach, realizing in a few short months, that would be her and Caleb.

The hours passed and without knowing anyone's phone numbers, Makayla had no idea who to call. Finally, when she couldn't take being alone any longer, she grabbed Caleb's keys and headed out the door. She opened the door and pulled herself up into the driver's seat. She bounced up and down on the springy bench and put the key in the ignition.

"I can do this. I can do this. Sure, it's a little bigger than my Tesla but that's no big deal. It's still a vehicle, right?"

Makayla turned on the engine and the truck roared to life. She put the truck in gear and slowly rolled backward. See, easy-peasey.

She rolled down the driveway, looking in her rear mirror. She veered too far to the right. She turned the wheel but turned it the wrong way and headed closer to the trees. She screeched and hit the brakes.

"Okay, maybe not so easy." She put the truck in drive and pulled back onto the dirt driveway before straightening out and backing up again.

What usually took Caleb less than a minute took her almost five to get out to the road. When she finally pulled onto it, she let out a nervous laugh.

"See baby, look at your mama now. I am learning how to drive a truck. Aren't you proud?"

Makayla stopped and laid her hand on her belly. She was talking to her baby. She rubbed her belly and then hit the gas, bumping down the road toward town.

It took Makayla all of ten minutes to figure out where Griffin's house was. Riding into town had taken nine of those minutes. She marveled at the idea that everyone knew everyone in Wolf River. In Los Angeles, most people didn't even know their neighbors on either side of them.

She rolled up to the small house just down the road from Jeremiah's and pulled to a stop next to all the other cars and trucks. People sat on the front lawn talking and eating. Some burned herbs and prayed. It wasn't like any hospital birth she'd ever seen on television. She made her way through the people and up on the porch where

she knocked on the door.

Voices floated to her from inside, and the door opened and Mary peered out at her.

"Hi," Makayla said. "I got worried up there, and I didn't have anyone's phone numbers so I came down."

Caleb appeared behind his mom. "Hey babe. How did you get here?"

She held up his keys.

He snorted and opened the door for her. "You drove my truck?"

She shrugged. "It wasn't that hard."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Is it still in one piece?"

"Very funny."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and kissed her head. "You want to go get something to eat? I think we still have a while."

"Sure... but is there somewhere else beside the diner?" She didn't want to sound petty, but she wasn't sure going in there with Caleb was the best idea so soon after being approached by Alice.

"We can go to Stix's roadhouse. The food is limited, but the music is pretty good if Deacon is playing."

"Sounds great."

Makayla waved to Mary who had a strange expression on her face, and Caleb closed the door as Dakota screamed in the background.

Makayla swallowed hard. That was going to be her in a few months.

* * *

Caleb drove out of Wolf River and headed down to the roadhouse. He'd done his best to keep Griffin calm for the past couple of hours, but as the contractions got closer together, he hadn't been able to do a thing to relax Griffin. Makayla showing up had been a blessing as he could hardly stand Dakota's pain himself. He wasn't sure he'd be able to handle Makayla being in that much pain.

They pulled into the roadhouse parking lot and parked. It was a pretty full for a Sunday night. They walked in the door, and Deacon's raspy tenor blared on stage. Caleb scanned the crowd, recognizing every face in the place. Many of them raised their beers to him as he passed, and everyone's eyes scanned Makayla. Caleb forced his wolf down as the beast fought to be let out to dominate every male who gave her a second glance.

They slid into a booth, and Satia approached them smiling brightly.

"Hey. How are you guys?"

"Good. How are you, Satia?"

"Doing the same as when I saw you yesterday. A little sunburnt but good."

Caleb nodded. "Can we get a couple of burgers and fries?"

"Of course. You want them bloody?"

Caleb looked at Makayla. He'd totally forgotten she was a vegetarian. "Oh. Do you not want the burger? I totally forgot."

Makayla smiled. "I want mine rare, please. Extra pickles."

"You got it." Satia smiled and walked away.

"So, we're completely done with the vegetarian thing, then?"

"You wanted me to be a mountain woman." She reached across and took his hand.

"I want you to be you," he said. "Even if that means I have to eat the bacon off your veggie burgers for you."

"I'd settle for you clearing more space for a bigger garden."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I've never had a garden before. The squash you grow is great, but some variety would be nice. Tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet peas, herbs, stuff like that."

Caleb smiled. "I'll get you together with my mom. She's really good at that stuff."

"Do you think we could plant fruit trees?"

"I don't see why not, but they won't have fruit for years. Berries will produce faster. Blueberries do really well up here. As well as raspberries and huckleberries."

Her eyes softened, and she squeezed his hand. "I have years to wait. But berries sound good in the meantime. I want to try using organic ones I grow for pies and stuff."

"I should take you to the farmers market in Moscow next weekend. You'd love their fruit."

"Our next date."

He liked the idea of them having a date. Something in the future that they would do together.

"Hey guys." Stix approached the table with two cokes, but Caleb could feel the anxiety wafting off him.

"Hey man, what's up?"

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Stix glanced at Makayla and smiled, and then looked to Caleb. "I'm having trouble moving a file cabinet in my office. I wondered if you might help me for a minute."

"Sure." He winked at Makayla. "Don't let anyone hit on you while I'm gone."

She snorted and rubbed her protruding belly. "Fat chance of that."

Caleb kissed the back of her hand and followed Stix past the bar and down the hallway to his office. When Stix closed the door Caleb crossed his arms.

"What's up?"

Stix sat at his desk and opened his laptop. He searched for a minute then turned the screen around showing Caleb a surveillance video of the bar. A young guy in a cutoff t-shirt stood at the bar talking to the bartender.

"Who is he?" asked Caleb.

"You don't know him?"

Caleb looked at the guy again and shook his head. "No."

Stix pushed play on the video, and Caleb watched the guy as he pulled out a phone and showed it to the bartender. The bartender shook his head, and then the guy asked something else. The bartender stopped wiping the bar, said something, then walked away.

"Okay..."

"He was here last night. Looking for Makayla."

Caleb looked at the screen again. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"Said he was a friend of hers from Los Angeles. He was looking for Wolf River. Apparently, he's been riding all over Idaho asking about it."

Caleb's wolf paced and growled.

"You know me, man. I am not about to give her up. Neither is anyone who comes in here. But this guy seems pretty serious about finding her. It's only a matter of time before he stumbles into town. He may have found it already."

Caleb continued to stare at the man's face.

"Is he the baby's father?" Stix asked.

Caleb's gaze connected with Stix's. "Probably."

This wasn't good. If the guy was looking for her, it meant he was serious about marrying her. The thought of losing Makayla almost brought Caleb to his knees.

"I didn't mean to upset you, but I thought you needed to know."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

Stix looked at Caleb. "Are you going to tell her?"

Caleb stared at the computer screen. "I honestly don't know."

Chapter 18

Caleb tried to keep the mood light through dinner, but he couldn't help the dread seeping into him at the thought that Derek could show up at any minute looking for her. He scarfed down his burger, and when she questioned him about what was going on, he said he was just nervous for Dakota and Griffin.

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "You two are really close, aren't you?"

"He's my little brother. I'd do anything for him."

"What about Logan?"

"Logan's been all about business since he left college. He's dedicated to Wolf River and the pack, just in a different way than I am or Griffin. But even so, I wouldn't want to cross Logan. He would rather work through a problem than fight through one the way I would. But at the end of the day, if Logan has to step up and take care of a problem, he takes care of it."

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"So how does that work? Logan is Alpha in waiting, but you're Alpha in waiting too right?"

"Yeah. In the event that Logan decides not to take over."

"But he doesn't live in Wolf River, you do."

"He'd move back."

Her eyebrows scrunched together, and she swirled a fry in her bowl of ketchup. "So, he's the business end of the pack, and you're the next in line, so what does that make you? What do you do for the pack?"

Caleb's gut clenched. Memories of what he'd done with his father and Griffin, floated back to him. He couldn't bring himself to tell her what they had done—not yet—but she was to be his bride. She would find out the truth soon enough.

"I... uh... I'm the enforcer."

Her eyebrows smashed together. "The enforcer?"

He picked at a fry. "If there's a problem that needs to be taken care of, I make sure it is."

"You mean like if someone steals someone else's truck?"

Nervousness skittered over his skin. "Among other things."

She smiled. "Okay. Say I... stole a chicken. What would you do?"

"I'd tell you to give it back."

"But what if I didn't want to give it back?"

"I'd make you give it back."

She gave him a wry smile. "You'd make me, huh?"

He stared at her hard. "Yup."

"So, what's the worst thing you've done as an enforcer?"

A vision of the bloodied and crying Lenny popped into his mind. Chasing him through the trees. The feel of his bones as they broke beneath his teeth. The sound of his screams.

"Caleb?" Her eyes rounded with worry.

"Are you done? We should check on Dakota and Griff."

She nodded, but questions loomed all over her face. "Sure."

Caleb pulled a twenty out of his wallet and tossed it on the table.

She deserved to know. To know the kind of man he was. The things he'd done. Who he really was. He needed to tell her.

They pulled up to Griffin's house to find everyone on the lawn down on their knees praying. Fear gripped Caleb.

"Something's wrong." He barely got the truck in park before jumping out and running to the door.

"Griff? Griff?" he called.

Mary and Jeremiah rushed up to him, tears in their eyes. Mary hugged Caleb tight, and his whole body quaked.

"What is it? What's happened?"

Without speaking his mom took his hand and led him down the small hallway to Griffin's bedroom. Dakota lay on the bed, exhausted. Her face blotchy from crying. Griffin stood facing her, his back to the door.

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Caleb's chest squeezed. "Griff?"

Griffin turned, tears streaming from his eyes. No. Gods above, please let the baby be okay.

"Griff," he said again.

Griffin smiled. "It's a girl."

Caleb looked down at the small bundle Griffin held in a light blue blanket and then back at Griffin again.

"What?"

"A girl. Doc said it was a boy but, she's a girl."

Caleb looked between his family members. Tears flooded him as Griffin hugged him hard.

He looked down at the tiny baby sucking on Griffin's finger. Small dark curls sprouted on the top of her head. Her cheeks rosy and pink. She was beautiful.

A girl. They had a girl.

"You're an uncle."

"You better believe it."

"Let him hold her," said Dakota.

Griffin held out the tiny bundle to Caleb, and he took her gently, afraid he might break her.

Griffin kissed him on the cheek and squeezed his shoulder. "Soon we'll be holding your baby as well. A new generation of Reeds in Wolf River." Griffin looked to the door and Caleb turned. Makayla sat next to Dakota and took her hand. She looked at Caleb with a loving smile, and suddenly, he couldn't wait for their baby to be born. And he'd be damned if he'd let some Bitten rogue come between him and his mate.

In that moment he wanted nothing more than to mate Makayla and claim her baby as his own.

* * *

Makayla and Caleb walked into the cabin close to midnight after celebrating the birth of the newest Reed baby girl. Caleb's uncle and aunt had arrived soon after they had, and the entire pack had given thanks for the birth of a new baby.

Caleb had been unusually quiet on the drive home, leaving the air between them hanging with a resounding tension. When he opened the door, he walked straight to the kitchen, and she followed. Opening the fridge, he grabbed a beer and swigged it.

"Is something bothering you?"

He looked at her and set the beer bottle on the counter. "Bothering me?"

"You've been quiet since we left Griffin's, and at the bar you seemed... on edge."

She could see the wheels turning in his mind. She moved to his side and pulled on his

shirt so he faced her. "Is it because I was asking you about being the enforcer? Dakota told me you and Griffin had been forced to do something a while back. Something Griffin was having a hard time with. You don't have to tell me what you did. I don't care. I know you, Caleb. You only do things to protect people. Whatever you did—"

"We killed someone," he blurted.

Makayla's body cooled like someone had doused her in ice cubes.

"A human. He... he raped Dakota. We didn't know until about ten months ago. We were out, and she saw him and she freaked. I chased him down and caught him. I dragged him to the woods and beat the shit out of him. I wanted to kill him, man I wanted to, but it wasn't my choice. Griff and dad showed up about thirty minutes later. Dakota wasn't his first apparently. Griffin lost it. Dad gave the guy a head start but it wouldn't have mattered if he'd given the guy an entire day to get away. We would have found him."

Makayla trembled.

"You need to know. That's who I am, and what I did, I'd do again. I'd do it for Dakota, for any female in the pack, for you. If anyone ever dared to hurt you..."

She cradled his face in her palms. "You did what you had to."

"I did. And I don't regret it. And you need to understand. Whatever my dad tells me to do, I do it. Sometimes it isn't pretty."

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She pushed at the wrinkles that had settled in his brow. "You protect what's yours."

He threaded his fingers into her hair. "I'd do anything for those I love. For my family. For the baby. For you."

Makayla's chest squeezed. "I've never had anyone care about me like that before."

Caleb looked at her seriously. "Once you're my mate, every male will know I will fight to the death to keep you and our baby safe."

Her heart thumped. "Our baby?"

"Our baby. Your baby. My baby." He kissed her hard.

Her wolf howled, and she kissed him back.

He lifted her off the floor and sat her on the counter. He stepped between her thighs and plunged his tongue in her mouth heating her in an instant. Something about his strength made her body yearn to be touched. She wanted him, needed him. She ran her hands under his shirt stripping it off him as he unbuttoned the flannel she still wore and tossed it to the floor. He kissed down her breasts and pulled one nipple into his mouth. She grabbed the cabinet for support as she arched against him.

He shimmied the shorts off her, and then took off his own jeans. He pulled her hips to his and entered her hard and fast. She gasped and fought to hang on as his body slammed against hers.

"Caleb. Make me yours."

A spicy scent wafted off him, and he lifted her hips off the counter and plunged inside her again. A growl rose in his chest, and her fangs descended into her mouth. The need to bite him almost consumed her. She wanted him, needed him. She was his.

"Makayla." Her name came out muffled behind his elongated fangs .

His gaze connected with hers, and she nodded. He lifted her off the counter and carried her into the bedroom where he laid her down and kissed up her stomach.

"I don't want to push you if you aren't ready," he said. "I'll wait for you as long as it takes."

"You'll only have to wait as long as it takes for you to get up here and bite me."

He chuckled deep in his chest and kissed her throat.

He looked deep into her eyes; his gaze icy blue. "Are you sure?"

"Are you?"

"Absolutely."

She brushed his cheek. "So am I."

"What if..." he swallowed hard. "What if the baby's father showed up and offered you everything you ever wanted?"

"It's not possible. Derek can't offer me everything I want. He isn't you. And he isn't

going to be our baby's father, you are."

Caleb swooped down and claimed her mouth. His tongue swirled with hers, and their fangs scraped against each other.

He broke the kiss, and his teeth pierced her shoulder. Her body shuddered as her wolf pushed her forward, and she grabbed onto his neck and bit down. Time stopped as their hearts beat in unison. Suddenly, her wolf could see through her eyes and together they stared at Caleb. Her wolf sniffed his and everything around them came into sharp focus as Caleb's wolf sniffed the baby. Together they lifted their heads to the sky and both wolves howled in unison.

A tear leaked from the corner of Makayla's eye as she focused back on Caleb's face and pulled his mouth to hers again.

He was hers and she was his, and no matter what, that bond could never be severed. And she would never be alone again.

Chapter 19

The next two weeks passed quickly with Caleb's days being filled with work and his nights with his family, and with Makayla in his bed. And with every day that passed, the less he worried about Derek until he'd decided the guy must have given up and moved on. He never thought he could get any happier.

As Makayla's next prenatal appointment approached, they talked more and more about finding out if they were having a boy or girl, though with Doc's recent mishap in predicting Griff and Dakota's baby, they weren't sure they could trust him.

Caleb headed for the front door for work, and Makayla came out dressed to leave the house too.

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"Can you take me into town? I want to do something."

"What?"

She wiggled her eyebrows at him and gave him a sly smile. "Something."

He snorted. "You do realize we're in Wolf River, right? I'll find out about ten minutes after you do whatever it is."

She continued to smile.

He shook his head. "Fine. Keep your very short-lived secret."

Makayla grabbed her purse and headed out with him.

He dropped her off at the library, and she said she'd meet him for lunch in a couple hours. Curious about her objective, he thought about staying and keeping an eye on her, but instead he drove to the church. The wiring was supposed to be finished up so they could begin dry walling. Plus, whatever it was she was up to, he'd find out soon enough.

* * *

"Explain it to me again," said Jeremiah.

Makayla sighed. "Jeremiah, I've explained it three times. You know what I want. You know why I want it. You just need to decide if it's what you want."

She kicked a piece of trash on the dusty floor of the vacant strip mall.

"I think it's a good idea," said Mary.

Makayla looked over at Caleb's mother surprised by her support.

"Do you?" asked Jeremiah, also apparently surprised.

"It'll give both Makayla and Dakota something to do. It could provide jobs for several others in Wolf River. It's not going to pull in outsiders, but it would bring value to those who are already here."

Jeremiah stared at Mary. "True, but you know how I feel about having a strip mall here."

"Then we'll remodel the outside," said Makayla quickly. "You tell Caleb how you want it designed so it fits in with the rest of the town, and he'll make sure it's done."

"You've already talked to him about this?"

Makayla averted her gaze. "Well, no. But I know he'll be okay with it."

"And why is that?" asked Jeremiah.

"Because it will make me happy." As selfish as that sounded, it was true. Just as she would do anything to make him happy, he wanted the same for her.

"Write up a proposal," said Jeremiah. "I'll talk it over with Logan and let you know."

It was the best she could hope for.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked.

"Doesn't your phone have the time?" asked Mary.

"Yeah, but it's at the cabin. I haven't used it lately, so keep forgetting to charge it."

Mary and Jeremiah exchanged a look.

"What?" she asked.

"You really have changed," said Mary. "When you and I went out to lunch a couple of months ago, I was sure you were going to cut and run. But now... You really love him, don't you?"

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Makayla's cheeks heated. "I do."

Mary nodded and walked toward her taking her hands. "I misjudged you. I'm sorry."

Makayla laughed. "No, you didn't misjudge me. You were spot on in your assessment. It's I who misjudged Caleb and Wolf River."

"Well, we're glad you gave them both a chance," said Jeremiah.

"And I'm glad you both gave me a chance, though I didn't deserve it."

Mary hugged her. "When you get a minute, I think you might want to charge that phone and give your mom a call. Hearing you say those things would really ease her heart. She's been calling me every day for updates."

"She has?"

Jeremiah slung his arm around her shoulder. "You don't give your mom enough credit. She's a tough cookie, but she had a tough upbringing, and your dad was no picnic with all he put her through. Don't get me wrong, he loved your mom fiercely, but they definitely had their hard times. And she has never loved anyone more than she loves you and Colt."

Makayla gave him a tight smile. If that was true, she sure wished her mom would tell her that herself.

Makayla walked down main street thinking about Jeremiah's words. He obviously

believed what he said, but she wasn't so sure. She stopped outside the diner and peered through the window. Hannah stood inside taking an order from an older couple in a booth. She'd been avoiding the place for almost a month trying to keep her distance from both Hannah and Alice. She didn't know what to say to them. That she was sorry about Franny sounded so insincere. To tell them Caleb was hers now, and they needed to get over it was even worse. But, as it was the only place to eat, she knew she couldn't avoid it forever—unless she finally learned to cook and not just bake.

She placed her hand on the door to open it when she heard her name.

"Makayla?"

She turned, and her stomach dropped to her toes. Derek. She glanced around wildly for a place to run, but there wasn't anywhere. He advanced on her, a bright smile on his face. Wrapping his arms around her, he hugged her tight. Her wolf's hackles raised, and she growled.

"Makayla, damn, I never thought I'd find you."

She patted his back and then stepped away. "Derek, what are you doing here?"

"You stopped returning my texts, so I came to find you." He looked at her. "Wow. Look how big you are." He touched her stomach.

Makayla's wolf pushed upward wanting to be let loose. She shoved his hand away.

He threw her a smile, but his eyes only showed irritation. "Don't be like that. Come on, I'm your knight in shining armor, here to rescue you from the big bad wolf."

Her throat dried. "You need to go."

"I just got here."

Makayla scanned the street again. Caleb would be there any moment. "You should leave, Derek. I didn't ask you to come here. I didn't ask you to rescue me. I'm doing just fine. Better than fine. I'm happy here."

"Are you serious? You're having my baby. I'm not leaving. Look." He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small ring. "I've been carrying this thing in my pocket for weeks. I came here to tell you I want you. I want our baby."

"My baby," she said. "Not our baby. You told me to get an abortion."

"I explained that. I was freaked out and confused. You just sprung it on me out of the blue. I think all things considered, I reacted like any guy would have."

Her anger spiked. He was so dense. "Actually, not all of them would."

"What? The guy your mom shipped you off to marry?"

"If you must know, yes. His name is Caleb."

"Do you love him?"

Makayla shook her head. "I'm not doing this, Derek. My personal life is mine, not yours."

"Well it's mine too, when it comes to my baby."

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She stepped into his space until her stomach almost touched his. "You ready for diapers and midnight feedings and no sleep and crying and everything that goes along with taking care of a tiny, screaming person?"

"Well, I figured we could get a nanny or something to help out with that stuff."

She snorted. "You suddenly come into some money I don't know about? Because last time I saw you, you were in a dump apartment living off the money you made selling weed."

"Yeah but... you have a trust fund, right?"

So that was it. He'd found out about her money. That was why he was there.

"Go home." Makayla turned to leave, but Derek grabbed her arm and spun her back around.

"This isn't over, Makayla."

"I think it is." Caleb storming toward them. He grabbed Derek's hand and yanked it from Makayla's arm.

"Touch her again, and I'll rip your arm off."

Derek looked Caleb up and down. "Seriously? Is this the guy? Is this Caleb?"

Caleb crossed in front of her. "Yeah, I am."

Derek snorted. "Really? This is who you are shackled up with? This lumberjack?"

"Better a lumberjack than a cowardly Rogue." Caleb spat at Derek's feet.

Makayla side stepped Caleb as anger rippled off him in waves. "Derek, you really should go before you get yourself hurt."

Caleb's arm slid around her waist protectively. She laced the fingers of her hand through his.

Derek licked his lips, one of the habits she hated most about him. "I'm not leaving. I have rights. I'm the father."

"You want to be the father? Great." She held out her palm.

"What?"

"You said you want to be the father. I'm gonna need a thousand dollars for the doctor. I need another grand for the stroller and the cute little baby swing thing that vibrates. For diapers, and oh, I ordered a monitor that has a video camera in it. Then there's the clothes, that's gonna be another grand easy. Bottles, pacifiers, towels, blankets, soap, shampoo, lotion, baby wipes, etc. Let's just say three grand to get started, and then from there, I'll get you a more detailed list."

"You think you're gonna scare me away with that price tag? I know all too well you could pay for all of that out of your trust fund and still have enough money to live off of for the rest of your life."

"Money that you will never see a penny of. But if you want to be part of this baby's life, I'm happy for you to give me your address, so I can make sure I know where to have the child support summons sent."

A smile played over Derek's lips, and he looked at Caleb. "You want her? You want to play house with her and my kid? You go right ahead. But you're gonna pay."

Caleb rushed Derek and grabbed him by the shirt. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"Call it what you want. You pay, I leave."

Caleb pulled him in close. "How about, I beat the shit out of you, and then I let you crawl out of town?"

"You touch me, and I'll take everything you have."

Caleb shoved Derek to the ground.

"Caleb." Makayla grabbed his arm and threaded her fingers through his. His body rippled, close to shifting.

People stepped out of the diner and the hardware store watching the scene.

"You saw that," Derek called. "Everyone here saw him shove me."

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"No one saw anything." Jeremiah jumped from his truck, lumbering over. "This isn't Los Angeles, kid. There are no cellphone cameras recording you and putting it on the internet. I suggest you do what my son told you to and leave before something happens that you'll regret. I am the Alpha of this pack, and if I wanted to jump in my truck and run you over in the middle of main street until your eyes popped out of your ugly skull, there wouldn't be one person here who would say a damn word about it."

Jeremiah loomed over Derek, his eyes blazing Alpha bright. Derek's gaze traveled between all of them as he rose.

"Fifty thousand. You give me that, and you can have the stupid sow."

Caleb lunged at Derek, but Makayla caught him.

"Don't," she said. "He's nothing, and he knows it."

Jeremiah grabbed Derek by his shirt collar and whipped him off his feet. "If I so much as catch a whiff of your shit-stained underwear in my town again, I will hunt you down and rip your throat out. And believe me when I say, I've buried better connected men on my land than your sorry ass, and no one has ever found one of them."

Jeremiah shoved Derek who stumbled backward and laughed. "You have twenty-four hours. Then I get a lawyer. I doubt very highly you would want a bunch of outsiders snooping around this little town. I'm staying at the dump down the road for tonight only. Tomorrow, I have an appointment up north."

Derek walked down the sidewalk past the onlookers.

Makayla's body shook with adrenaline as she wrapped her arms around Caleb's neck and kissed him. Caleb's body continued to shake, but he hugged her tight and nuzzled her neck, a protective musky scent wafting off him.

Jeremiah stepped toward them. "You two okay?"

Makayla nodded.

Jeremiah laid his hand on Caleb's shoulders. "Don't worry about him. He can't do anything."

"He's the baby's father."

"No." Makayla turned Caleb's face to hers. "No. You are the baby's father. He's just the guy who knocked me up. He proved that today. And every single day since I told him I was pregnant. You heard him. He doesn't want the baby. He wants money."

"Then we'll give him money and get him gone," said Jeremiah.

"I won't give him one dime," Caleb spat.

"I will," said Makayla. "Call my mom. Tell her what's going on. She will happily release the money in my trust to pay him off and get him out of my life."

"And what's to stop him coming back for more?" demanded Caleb. "We can't take the chance of him telling people about Wolf River. We can't have people nosing around in our business."

"We'll take care of it," said Jeremiah.

Caleb scowled. "How?"

Jeremiah leveled his gaze at Caleb. "I wasn't kidding when I said I'd rip out his throat."

The look between the two men gave Makayla a chill. Would they handle Derek the way they'd handled the guy who'd hurt Dakota? Derek was a dick, but he didn't deserve to die.

"Let me call my mom," said Makayla. "I'll get the money. Jeremiah, call Logan. Have him draft up a contract or something forcing him to give up his rights. I'll go there tonight and make him sign it, and then it will be finished."

"No," said Caleb. "Call your mom. Get the money. I'll go and make sure he signs it."

She could tell by his expression there was no arguing with him. It was his job as her mate to protect her. She knew nothing she said would change his mind. Just as no one would keep her from protecting him, or their baby.

Chapter 20

Caleb deposited Makayla back at the cabin against her protests and headed to his dad's house. His father assured him they would get Derek out of Wolf River and that the bastard would never bother them again.

Around ten that evening Logan arrived with the paperwork in hand for Derek to give up any rights to the baby, and his dad went into his safe and pulled out cash for Caleb.

"Are you sure this is the way you want it?" asked Griffin. "Dad and I can go handle this for you."

"No." Caleb shook his head. "Makayla made me promise I wouldn't kill him. He's an asshole, but he's still the one who fathered our baby, and for that at least I have to be grateful, because if he hadn't, I never would have found my mate."

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Logan snorted. "Is Caleb turning over the passivist leaf?"

Caleb laughed at his older brother. "Hell, no. If this guy doesn't sign the papers and disappear, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to keep that promise to Makayla."

"I should go with you," said Griffin.

Caleb hugged his little brother. "You need to be with your mate and new baby girl. Have you gotten that child a name yet?"

Griffin shook his head. "We can't agree. We never even discussed having a girl, so we've been searching for names on baby name sites. But so far, nothing."

"I still say Logana is a great name for a girl," said Logan.

Griffin snorted. "Yeah, no."

Jeremiah's phone rang, and he walked to the desk in his study and answered it. He held it out to Caleb.

Caleb sighed and took the phone. "Hey, babe."

"Are you going over there?"

"I'm heading over in a few minutes."

Silence permeated the line for a moment. "Are you going alone?"

He looked over at his brother. "Logan is going with me."

"That's good... I think. Caleb, maybe you should send Logan to deal with him alone."

Caleb paused. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes. Of course. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"I won't."

He heard her suck in a sharp breath. "You better not. Because I'm telling you, if you don't come back, I'm painting this whole cabin in pink glitter and burning all your flannels."

Caleb chuckled and rubbed his forehead. "Noted. I'll be home soon."

"Caleb?"

"Yeah."

"I think I really, really like you."

He smiled. "I think I really, really like you too." He hung up the phone and looked at Logan. "Let's do this."

Caleb pulled up to the only motel within thirty miles of Wolf River and stopped his truck near the office. He stared at the run-down façade.

"I can go," said Logan.

"No. I need to do it. She's my mate."

Logan nodded. "All right then."

They both got out, and it struck Caleb how funny it looked to see Logan hop out of his truck in an expensive suit and tie. Logan walked into the office of the motel as Caleb stayed outside and tried to stretch his tension away, unsuccessfully.

Logan exited the office. "He's in seven."

They walked down the sidewalk and stopped in front of a door. Logan knocked, and the television inside switched off.

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"If you're gonna lose it, make sure it's after he signs the papers, please," said Logan.

The door opened, and Derek peered out at them. A cocky smile slid past his lips, making Caleb want to reach out and smash it off his face.

Derek opened the door, and Logan and Caleb walked into the small, sparsely furnished room. He closed the door behind them, and Logan set the contract on the small linoleum table.

Caleb tossed the small leather bag with the money onto the bed. Derek hurried over and opened it. The smirk slid right off his face.

"This isn't fifty grand."

"Nope," said Logan. "It's fifteen." He removed a pen from his jacket pocket.

"That's not what we agreed on." Derek looked at Caleb.

Caleb leaned back against the door and crossed his arms over his chest, trying to keep his wolf from taking over. If anything was going to happen, he would be the one who did it, not his wolf.

"This is what's going to happen." Logan's amicable tone made him sound like an old friend rather than the fierce wolf he was. But that's how Logan liked it. He never used violence unless he had to. "You're going to sign these papers relinquishing all rights to Makayla and Caleb's baby, then you are going to take that fifteen grand, and you're going to leave Idaho and never come back."

Derek snorted. "Oh, you think so, do you?"

"Yes." Logan held out the pen.

"Yeah, see, that's not going to happen, so why don't you jackholes get out of my room? And tell Makayla I'll be back with a lawyer."

"You really don't get who you're screwing with, do you?" asked Logan.

"A couple of Blood Born jackasses who think they are better than me because they were born werewolves, and I wasn't."

Logan straightened his cufflinks. "Well, that's true, but it isn't what I meant. What I meant was, our father is the Alpha of Wolf River. That makes Caleb and me the Alphas in waiting."

"So, you're the tough guys?"

"No. I'm the smart guy. Caleb's the tough guy."

"Is that a threat?"

Logan smiled. "Sign the papers. Leave. Everyone wins."

"Screw you." Derek reached into the back of his waistband and grabbed a gun, pointing it at Logan.

Caleb lunged forward, his wolf roaring to life. Derek swung the pistol and pointed it at Caleb.

"Seems to me, Blood Born or Bitten doesn't matter. A bullet is still a bullet."

Logan motioned for Caleb not to move, his eyes had gone icy Alpha blue.

"Don't be stupid," said Logan. "Take the money, sign the papers, and we'll let this slide. This. One. Time."

Derek licked his lips. "I'm done talking. Get out."

Logan's muscles bunched, and a visible ripple ran over him. "Sign the papers."

Derek swung the gun at Logan. "Get the hell out!"

Caleb's wolf lurched forward. Derek turned toward him at the last second, and a blast rang through Caleb's ears. Fire shot through his shoulder. He fell backward against the door as warmth spread down his arm. A roar shook the walls, and Logan leapt on Derek.

Logan punched Derek in the face and wrenched the man's gun hand behind his back then yanked the arm upward. The bastard shrieked as his shoulder dislocated. Logan slammed his elbow down on Derek's, breaking the jerk's arm. He cried out again, but Logan slammed his hand over Derek's mouth and turned him to the table smashing his face into it. Blood gushed from his nose as he whimpered.

Logan took a deep breath and looked at Caleb. "You good?"

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Caleb grabbed his shoulder. Blood seeped through his fingers. "I'll heal."

Derek tried to say something, and Logan banged his face into the table again.

"I don't think we need to hear from you again. You sign. You take the money now, ten grand, and disappear. If you don't agree, I'm gonna break your other arm and offer you five. And if you still don't agree, then I'm going to take off my suit coat, and you really are not going to want me to do that, because if I take off my two thousand dollar suit jacket so I don't stain it with your worthless water-thin blood, then I'm going to kill you. Then I'll take the money home, hand it back to my father, and forget you ever existed."

"You can't kill me. People will come looking for me," Derek mumbled.

"No, Caleb can't kill you because he promised Makayla. I, on the other hand, can and I will kill you. And we both know, there isn't a soul out there who will miss you for more than ten seconds." Logan grabbed the pen and shoved it in Derek's hand. "Sign it."

Derek took the pen shakily and scrawled his name on the first page. Logan turned the pages one by one indicating where he needed to sign.

When he finished signing, Logan tossed him on the floor, put the pen back in his pocket, and then walked to the leather bag, removing five grand and throwing the rest at Derek.

"You have until dawn to be out of here. And if you ever try to contact Makayla or

Caleb again, you will have all of Wolf River after you. And I guarantee our father won't be as lenient as I have been."

Logan grabbed the paperwork and handed it to Caleb. "Let's get you back to your family."

* * *

Makayla paced the cabin's front room, rubbing her belly and staring at the phone. She wanted to call Jeremiah yet again and ask if Caleb had shown up, but she'd called three times already.

Screw it. She stormed over to the phone just as headlights flashed in the front window. She ran to the door and threw it open, racing down the stairs as Logan stopped Caleb's truck and Caleb got out the passenger side.

Makayla ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck. He gave her a one-armed hug. She kissed his cheek as tears streamed down her face.

"I thought you were dead," she cried. "I thought you were dead. I didn't want to go on."

"It's okay. I'm okay."

She backed up and smacked his arm. "Don't ever leave me here like that again."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I mean it. I can't—" The scent of blood tickled her nose. She looked him over and noticed him holding his left arm at an odd angle. "You're bleeding? What happened?"

"He's fine," said Logan. "He needs to have his shoulder cleaned, but he'll be healed in a couple of days."

Makayla pulled Caleb into the cabin and sat him on the couch. A tear marred his flannel shirt.

"Dammit. I just bought you this shirt. I really liked it on you."

Caleb chuckled. "You can get another one."

She stripped the shirt off him and looked at his shoulder. "Shot? You were shot? I'm gonna freaking kill him with my bare hands!"

Caleb pulled her to him. "Calm down. It's okay. I'm okay. It went right through. It will heal. And best of all, he's gone."

Her breath caught. "Dead?"

"No," said Logan. "But he knows he will be if he ever contacts you again."

Caleb handed her a bundle of papers. "You're free."

She looked down at them, and a couple drops of blood mixed with the signatures on every page of the papers.

"It's binding," said Logan. "He can't ever take the baby."

She looked up at Logan with fresh tears flooding her eyes. "Thank you." She looked to Caleb. "Thank you both."

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Logan walked over and kissed Makayla on the head. "It's what families are for." He gripped Caleb's forearm, and they nodded to each other.

Logan called Jeremiah to pick him up as Makayla got some alcohol from the bathroom and poured it onto Caleb's shoulder before bandaging it.

"It's already healing," she said looking at the entrance and exit wounds. "It's going to leave a nasty scar, though."

"Just makes me all the more rugged."

"It will forever remind me how much you love me." She cupped his cheek. "I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you. You get me up here. Get me to love the mountains and this cabin and meat, only to leave me? I'd never forgive you."

Caleb threaded his fingers into her hair and pulled her close. "I'm not going anywhere."

She smiled and crawled onto his lap. "Neither am I."

He kissed her hard. She ran her hands up his chest and returned his kisses.

"Caleb," she said between kisses. "I think I might be in love with you."

He smiled and kissed her slow and hard, until her toes curled, and she moaned for more.

“Good. Because I might be in love with you.”

Makayla stripped off her shirt and tossed her bra to the floor before kissing him again.

She was home. Finally, home.

Chapter 21

Makayla held their baby anxiously next to Caleb in Jeremiah and Mary's front room, as the cars began arriving. First to arrive was Caleb's Uncle Ethan and his wife Sariah. Their daughter Natasha and her mate Liam pulled up in a truck driven by their friends Noah and Cara from Seattle. Behind them came Logan and several of the Wolf River elders. Finally, behind all of them arrived a black town car. Makayla swallowed hard as the door opened and out stepped her mother and her brother Colt.

Her mom headed toward the house, and Makayla's skin broke out in a cold sweat. Caleb slid behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist.

"It's going to be fine."

"You don't know my mom."

He kissed the back of her head. "No. But I know you."

She blew out a harsh breath as the front door opened and the parties entered.

She stood with Caleb on one side and Dakota and Griffin on the other. One by one, the guests entered and greeted Jeremiah and Mary before proceeding to meet Caleb, Makayla, Dakota and Griffin. When her mom entered, Makayla held her breath.

"Breathe, babe." Caleb kissed her head again.

She could do this. She could do it.

Her mom hugged Jeremiah and then Mary. For a moment, they exchanged smiles and pleasantries until she spotted Makayla and walked toward her. Makayla felt like a kindergartener again about to show her mom an art project she'd worked on for months.

"Mom."

"Makayla." Her mom reached over and gave her an awkward one-armed hug and then looked to Caleb. "Caleb. You've sure turned into a fine young man."

He gave her a smile. "I owe some of that to your daughter." He winked at Makayla, making her relax a fraction. He took the small bundle from her arms and held it out to her mom. "Mrs. Devamar. May I present your granddaughter. Madeline Olivia."

Her mom looked from Makayla to Caleb and then back to the baby. Makayla nodded, and her mom reached out and took the small baby from Caleb and pulled her in close. For several minutes, she didn't say anything as she stared down at the baby. When she finally looked up, her eyes were filled with tears.

"She looks just like you," she said. "Absolutely beautiful. You did good, Makayla. You did good."

Makayla's restraint broke, and she threw her arms around her mom's neck, careful not to smoosh her daughter. Her mom hugged her back in a way she'd never hugged Makayla before. The years and anger melted away as Makayla finally saw her mom for who she truly was. Now a mother herself, she knew the love her mother had for her. Even if she couldn't express it, it was there. And from then on, their relationship

would never be the same.

Epilogue

Six Months Later

Makayla bent behind the glass case and pulled a blueberry pie out and set it in a pink box. She tied it with a string and brought it up to the register.

"That will be ten fifty-three."

Mrs. Johnson pulled a ten from her wallet and then shook it looking for change.

"Don't worry about it," said Makayla.

Mrs. Johnson smiled. "How about I bring you a carton of blackberries the next time I come in?"

Makayla nodded. "I'll never turn down that deal."

She handed Mrs. Johnson the pie and put the money in the register. She smiled at the next customer as the bell over the door rang and a dozen sweaty students walked in.

Dakota's BJJ class must have just ended next door. The last student walked to the counter, and Caleb ducked through the door. After almost six months together, her skin still warmed every time she saw him.

"Molly can you help the customers?" she called over her shoulder.

A young girl walked out of the back and smiled at the customers as Caleb rounded the counter and kissed her.

"Hi." He put his hands in her back pockets.

"Have you eaten lunch?"

"Nope. I came to see if you and Maddie wanted to eat with me."

"How about you come in my office? I want you to try something."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "That sounds interesting."

She took his hand and led him back to her office. She closed the door as he walked over to the playpen in the corner and looked at their daughter.

"Don't wake her," she whispered.

He stroked the baby's bald head then covered her with her blanket before sitting on the edge of Makayla's desk. She walked around the desk and pulled a pot pie out of a box, then cut a piece and put it on a plate for him.

He shoved a forkful in his mouth. Caleb's eyes closed, and he moaned as he chewed and then swallowed.

"Is that a good moan?"

He took a second bite and then a third.

"I'll take that as a yes."

"That is amazing. You really are good at this baking thing."

She shrugged. "I have to be good at something."

His eyebrows furrowed, and he set down the plate, grabbing a bottle of water and chugging it before he pulled her to him.

"You're good at a lot of things."

"A few. Others I'm still working on. Like laundry and ironing." She motioned to his wrinkled flannel.

He pulled her close and wrapped her in his bulky arms. "I'd take a woman who can bake over a woman who could iron any day."

"Really?"

He kissed her. "Yeah. Besides I can think of several other things you're good at."

"Is that so?"

He kissed her neck and then licked down to her collarbone, swirling his tongue at the base of her throat. Makayla moved her hand to the front of his jeans to find him hard.

"Well, I can think of a few things you aren't so bad at yourself," she said.

He reached under her t-shirt and unclasped her bra before sliding both to the floor.

"You think so?" He licked over her breast then picked her up, carried her to the couch in the corner, and laid her on it.

She pulled off his flannel and flung it away. He kissed her breasts again as her fingers played across the scar on his shoulder where he'd been shot.

Yes, he was good at many things, but most of all at giving her unconditional support. When she'd told Caleb of her plans to buy the strip mall from his dad and turn it into local businesses, he simply asked what he could do to help. And when she'd asked him to help her paint, overhaul, and furnish the bakery, he just smiled and told her he'd do whatever she wanted. Everything she asked for he obliged her, more than happy to help.

In return, she helped him finish the cabin and start a raised bed garden. She'd even let

him take her fishing and hunting.

In the last six months, she'd learned just how lucky she was to have the gods smile down on her and give her a mate like Caleb.

"Caleb." Makayla raked her nails through his hair. "You know I do really, really love you."

He slid his hand down the front of her leggings, teasing her with his strong fingers and making her whine with need.

"I really, really love you too, babe."