



Warrick

Author: *Liza Bee*

Category: Romance

Description: Will she give him another chance, or will she reject her mate for good?

Aspen

Every chance that I give him, he only shows me that I'm the fool. Fate might have paired us together, but only one of us wants a chance. After coming home from college, I opened my very own bookstore, built a home, and found Chase, the mountain lion shifter. It might be against the rules for us to mate, but they never said we couldn't be in a situationship.

Warrick

After watching Silas claim his mate and tackle the Ghost River Pack dilemma, I decide there isn't any reason that I shouldn't claim what Fate bestowed upon me. If only I hadn't been an idiot before and ruined all my chances. I'll do anything I can to win my mate over, but first I have to get Chase out of the way.

Rocky Mountain Pack is a cozy shifter romance with spice. The series is full of cozy warm feelings and a meddling grandmother. Each book features a new couple that are interconnected to the other books in the series.

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Prologue

Aspen

“TOUCH DOWN, WOLVERINES!”

Hazel nudges my shoulder with hers, “You are so lucky to be his girlfriend.”

A smile spreads across my face as I watch Warrick spike the ball into the end-zone. She isn’t wrong. It’s weird that the star tight end of our high school football team is dating the book nerd. I will never understand why he chose me out of all the girls in our school, especially when there are girls always throwing themselves at him. I’ll still never forget the day that he sat down beside me on the bleachers during gym class. At first I thought it was a mistake, maybe he just needed to rest his legs, or something. Until he looked up at me and said, “Hey Aspen, you free to go to the movies with me this Friday?”

I would like to say that I scoffed or made some great one-liner jab at him, but alas, that isn’t what happened. Instead, I just stared at him before looking around as if he couldn’t possibly be talking to me. He waited until he finally laughed. “You going to answer me or just leave me hanging here?”

“Why me? Surely you have other girls far more beautiful and intriguing to occupy your time than me?” I say as I close my notebook and pack my backpack.

He merely shrugs his shoulders like it was inconsequential. “Meh, none of them hold a candle to you. Why wouldn’t I want to date the girl who doesn’t fall all over me

like a dog in heat, pun intended?” He leans over, snatching my backpack from my hands before flinging it over his shoulder as he stands. “So, what do you say, nerd? Ready to date the hottest guy in town?”

Scoffing, I stand before shaking my head at his audacity. “You are something else, jock.”

“STAND UP AND CHEER ON YOUR TEAM GUYS!” the announcer yells into the PA system pulling me out of my trip down memory lane. The stadium is roaring in celebration as I stand there clapping for Warrick. “The Wolverines are going to the State Championship!” the announcer booms over the speaker.

Yelling over the crowd, I say to Hazel and Willow, “I am going to head down to find him! I’ll meet you guys in the parking lot!” They both nod their heads as they continue to cheer.

Weaving my way through the crowd as people start to leave the bleachers, I push my way into the throng. Normally, I meet him on the field after the game to do the high fives with his teammates and the celebratory kiss. The crowd is pouring onto the field as I continue my way to him. I hate being short because it’s almost impossible to see where anyone is amongst the towering high school boys that are in front of me. I push my way to the side of the flow of people to hopefully get a better look. Once I am free from the crowd, I notice some guys heading towards the locker room.

Warrick isn’t amongst the group, but with a search around the field, I notice I don’t see his shaggy brown hair mussed with sweat. The guy is 6’ 2” and buff for a high school boy—there isn’t a way to really “miss” him.

Since I still haven’t found him, I run up to the player walking off the field and ask, “Hey, have you seen Warrick?”

He shakes his head and keeps walking.

I notice some guys I've seen Warrick hanging out with just a few feet away, huddled together as they celebrate with a few cheerleaders hanging off their arms. Walking over, I tap on the shoulder of the one with his back to me.

"What's up, nerd?"

Sigh. That nickname is the worst. I only tolerate it when Warrick says it in jest. Deciding not to react, I only laugh to myself because it's not the insult they think it is.

"Have any of you seen, Warrick?"

The guys all exchange looks as they start to laugh and clear their throats.

"Warrick? Nah, we haven't. I am sure he will find you when he is ready for it. Why don't you run on home to those books of yours and wait for him like a good little girlfriend?" Jared, the quarterback, says, with a cocky smirk on his face. Even with us dating and the entire school knowing it, it hasn't stopped the girls from still trying.

I try to not let it get to me when the girls at school are talking about how they don't understand how such a sexy man like Warrick could ever choose a girl like me. He always tips my chin up and tells me to not let it bother me. "They are just jealous that it's you and not them. That's all babe." That's his running line anytime I mention one of these girls to him.

All the girls giggle as if what he said wasn't the most demoralizing thing to say to a girl. How they can stand there pretending what he said wasn't rude is beyond me. Without another word, I turn to head to the parking lot. If anything, I might have just missed him when I was in the crowd of people. Maybe he is waiting in the parking lot with Hazel and Willow.

As I am walking away, I hear one guy say, “What an idiot.” Deciding I don’t want to hear anymore of what they have to say, I pick up the pace.

Just as I am about to pass the bleachers, I think I see my boyfriend's shaggy brown hair disappearing around them. I knew it! He just missed me when I was in the crowd.

“Warrick!” I call out to him, hoping to get his attention.

The person keeps walking instead of turning around. Huh, that’s weird.

I follow in the direction that I saw the person go, hoping that I’m not following some random student instead of Warrick. Coming around the corner, I spot him. Warrick is standing under the bleachers. That’s odd; we never go under the bleachers.

I am just about to call out his name when I hear a soft feminine giggle followed quickly by, “Warrick, we can’t do this here! What if we get caught?”

“Don’t worry, babe. Everyone has either left or gone to the locker rooms. Let me make you feel good.” The sound of a zipper being pulled down floats across the air. A soft gasp leaves the girl's mouth as his hand moves down her front. It’s not long before her moans are echoing around us.

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Realizing that I am watching Warrick not only cheat on me, but doing it when he knows I am here somewhere, my heart shatters. “I can’t believe I fell for you,” I gasp.

Warrick lifts his head up and looks over at me. He almost looks guilty to find me standing there, as if the possibility of me being here never crossed his mind. “Aspen,” he whispers before shoving the girl off of him as he fumbles with his zipper.

Before he can say anything else, I run to the parking lot in search of Hazel and Willow, hoping against all hope that they haven’t left yet, thinking I was riding with Warrick. My cell phone tumbles out of my pocket in my haste to find them. Dialing Hazel’s number, it rings only once before she picks up. “What’s up?”

“Please tell me you guys haven’t left yet,” I squeeze out before a sob rips from my throat.

“What’s going on?” I hear Willow say in the background.

“I don’t know, but Aspen is bawling her eyes out. If that jerk did something to her, I will put Nair in his shampoo,” Hazel says back to Willow.

“Where...are...you...guys...at?” I ask, in between sniffles as the tears stream down my face.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay. We left, but we haven’t made it very far. Willow is turning around and we are coming! Don’t worry! We got you! Can you go to where we parked earlier?”

Nodding my head, I say, “Yeah, hopefully, he stays with her and doesn’t bother chasing me down.”

“Oh, that motherfucker is dead. What did he do?” I hear Willow yell from the driver's seat.

In a gentle tone, Hazel asks, “Do you want to talk about it, or do you want to forget about it? You tell me what you want, Aspen, and that’s what we will do.”

“I’ll tell you guys what happened, but then I want to forget about all things Warrick—at least until I have to face him Monday morning in class again. I am going to be the laughingstock of the school. They already thought it was stupid we were dating.” My chest is heaving as the pain lances through me. “I was such an idiot, Hazel. I knew it. A guy like Warrick couldn’t really be into a girl like me. What was I even thinking of agreeing to this?”

“Aspen, sweetie, you got to take some calming breaths for me. I know it hurts, but we are almost there.”

Deciding my legs can’t hold my weight any longer, I plop down onto the parking curb as I wait for the girls to get here. Willow’s cussing up a storm in the background, threatening to do all sorts of bodily harm to him. I can’t help the hiccuping laugh that bubbles out of me. I am sure, if given the chance, she would go through with it.

It’s not long before Willow’s Altima is flying into the parking lot and coming to a screeching halt in front of me. Before I can even stand, she is barreling out of the driver’s side door and storming towards me. “Where the fuck is he?”

Leaning back away from her, I look up at my fuming best friend. She is quite terrifying when she is in her protective mode. I don’t know that I would actually tell

her where he was, even if I knew.

“Don’t you defend him, Aspen. He deserves what I am going to do to him.”

Meekly, I say to her, “I haven’t even told you what he has done. How do you know he deserves it?”

“You see those tears streaming down your face? The panic in your voice when you called? Whatever it is he has done, he deserves what I will do to him. Now, do you know where he is or not?” Willow barks out.

I know her anger isn’t directed at me, but I still bow my head down and shake it slightly.

Hazel kneels down beside me as she puts her arm around me. “Do you just want to go home?”

I nod my head without looking up.

“Let’s just take her home, Willow. You can plot your revenge from there, but for right now, our best friend needs us more,” Hazel pleads.

Looking between the two of us, her anger is still pouring off of her in waves when she says, “Fine, but he will not get away with this.” With that, she turns and storms back to her car, ripping the driver’s side door open and slamming herself down into the seat.

The boom of her door shutting makes me jump before Hazel gently says in my ear, “Come on, Aspen, let’s go cuddle on the couch together.”

Nodding my head, I allow her to pull me up to my feet. When we rounded Willow’s

car, I thought Hazel would take the front seat. Instead, she slides into the backseat with me, pulling me into her embrace.

“It’s going to be okay. I know it doesn’t seem like it right now, but high school boys come and go. Learn from this and decide what you won’t tolerate in guys. Just know you are beautiful, smart, caring, and loved. It’s his loss if he can’t see that.”

We rode in silence to my house. My parents’ log cabin is dark besides the lights glowing in the living room. They knew I was at the football game with the girls to watch Warrick play. Our wolf pack encourages us to build these friendship bonds and closeness, even from a young age.

Willow, Hazel, and I were all born in the same year, only a few months apart. The pack quickly introduces new pups to other pups born around the same time, fostering friendship. We believe that, like our fated mates, there are friendship bonds that are gifted to us by the goddess. They become your twin flame, who you just immediately click with them. I was lucky to have bonded with these two, even though they say they are the lucky ones.

As Hazel holds me close, I glance up and realize I would be lost without these two. She glances down at me as I look at her, her hand gently sweeping the hair that is sticking to my tear streaks. I feel so loved and cared for here in her embrace. There were glimpses of moments where I felt seen with Warrick, where I thought he understood me like Willow and Hazel, but I felt as though he wasn’t ever truly with me when we were together. As if his mind was somewhere else or I guess on someone else. I would spend hours talking to him and only get ‘yeahs’ and ‘uh huhs’ from him.

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Willow puts the car in park in her designated spot in my parents' driveway. We don't normally drive cars in Jasper, since almost everything is within walking distance, but our parents prefer we drive if it's nighttime or it will be late when we get back. Too bad our douchebag leader, Orion, doesn't understand the meaning of fair and just treatment of pack members. They don't feel as though Orion would protect us, especially because we are females in the pack. They aren't wrong—we all know that he looks down on the females of the pack, specifically the younger ones like us. How he looks at us sometimes, well, it literally makes my skin crawl. It's disturbing. You can almost hear the thoughts running through his mind.

My heart clenches when I think about telling my parents. All the nights of Warrick coming over on the weekends to watch football with my dad. My parents even have shirts with his number on it they wear to every home game. My mom would gush every time Warrick would wrap his arm around my shoulders. To say that he had my parents wrapped around his finger would be an understatement. My mother would swear by the goddess that on our eighteenth birthday we would find out we were mates. She talked about it so much my dad would complain about it and I would roll my eyes when she would start up again.

Shaking those thoughts from my mind, I climb out of the car. "I don't want to tell my parents yet that Warrick and I aren't together anymore. I think they thought we were destined to be mates or something. Let's just go with telling them you guys wanted to stay the night. I'll tell my parents tomorrow."

They both nod their heads in understanding. Pushing the door open, I follow the sound of the news playing in the living room to find both my parents sitting in their recliners. Mom is working on some crochet project, while Dad is working on a

crossword puzzle. They both glance up when we enter the living room.

“You’re home early,” my mother’s comments when she realizes it’s us.

“Hey, Mr. S and Mrs. Mae!” Willow smiles warmly at both of my parents.

“How many times do I have to ask you to just call me Mae, Willow?” My mom smiles fondly at her.

No matter how many times my mom asks, Willow never calls her by her name without the formal title. Even my dad has asked that she call him by his name, but she refuses. I think, at this point, they’ve become her nicknames for them.

“Hello, Liam and Maeve! The game ended, and we decided we wanted to do a slumber party, which is why we are here so early. We weren’t feeling the celebratory party tonight. Is it okay that we stay with you guys tonight?” Hazel asks them sweetly.

“Of course, dear, you girls are always welcome to stay here. Should I be expecting you all weekend, then?” my mom asks.

“Not sure on that one, Mrs. Mae, but I would say you could probably bet that bottom dollar of yours on it,” Willow winks at her.

Dad finally finishes the last word in his puzzle and looks up at me. “I saw Warrick scored the winning touchdown tonight. That boy will get lots of scholarship offers, if he hasn’t already.”

My dad has always loved football and has been a fan of a pro team for as long as I can remember. He has always supported our local high school team, but this year, with Warrick and our QB’s matchup, our team is going to the State Championships

for the first time in its history. He has already bought us new shirts that match and has Warrick's number and last name across the back. The hotel room is booked for the night, dinner reservations with Warrick's parents, and the whole shebang for it. All Mom and I heard about is how he just knew this would be the year we win it all. Preaching hours upon hours about the draft stock and Warrick's numbers. Leaving both Mom and I ready to pull our hair out.

“Yeah, I'm sure that he will. Let's hope that he can score a few more during the postseason to secure an even better position in the rankings. Not that he will need it. He is already a 5 star recruit going into the final game of the season,” I say to him with a fake smile plastered on my face.

Don't get me wrong. I am mad at Warrick, but I could never wish ill will upon his career. He has what it takes to go all the way to the pro league. What he does within his relationships off the field should have no real bearing on that, even if I'm the one who has to bear the consequences of it.

Hazel, noticing the turn in my mood, changes the subject and says, “Well, Liam and Maeve, if you don't mind, I have some juicy gossip that I heard at the game that I want to dissect with the girls. Goodnight.”

As we leave the living room, both my parents say “Goodnight” in unison. Sometimes, the whole fated mates being in sync thing is freaky and scary. I can't imagine someone being so in tune with me as we speak at the same time or know what the other is thinking without them saying. I can't even imagine someone hearing all the thoughts running through my mind. There are things I fantasize about, dream about, and often think about that I would never want someone else to know. It's the invasion of privacy that comes with it, like nothing of you is on your own anymore, even your darkest secrets are revealed to your mate. Don't get me wrong, the theory that you would know your mate at a completely different intimate level is thrilling, but terrifying.

Some mates are blessed with the ability to talk to each other in their minds, but it's rare. Nobody knows how the blessing is bestowed, but some say it depends on the bonding process and how the goddess chooses to bless it.

My bedroom is exactly how I left it this morning. My wall of bookshelves full of all the books I have read over the years, since as far back as I can remember. My mom jokes that when she was reading bedtime stories to me as a baby, she didn't know that it would one day take up a whole wall in my room. My parents gifted my first bookshelf to me when I turned 10. By that time, I had stacks and stacks of books strewn all over my room. My dad decided that it was time that I had a proper place to store them. Now seven years later, I have four bookshelves and seven stacks around the room.

Falling onto my bed, I bury my face into my pillows. "I could just turtle here, right? Cover myself with the blankets and refuse to come out? Can I just stay here until graduation?" I mumble into the pillow.

Giggling, Willow smacks my butt. "No, I am pretty sure Mr. Williams would notice his star pupil not in attendance and send out the search party for the girl who never misses a second of school."

"It's just not fair. Why does everyone else get to skip school but I can't?" I continue to mumble into the pillow.

Feeling the bed dip on my right side, the gentle brushing of my hair comes before Hazel softly says, "You ready to tell us what happened?"

"No," I whisper.

She continues to stroke my hair as she says, "You will feel better once you let it out. That way we can all move on."

“Fine,” I say, pushing myself up to the sitting position. Pulling my feet under my thighs, I drape my fuzzy knitted blanket into my lap. My fingers begin to pick at each other and I try to pull at a hangnail instead of looking at them.

“After I left you guys, I was caught up in the crowd streaming onto the field. I couldn’t see past the towering teen boys in front of me, so I decided to get out of the crowd so I would have an easier time finding Warrick.”

I let out a shuddering breath, “I couldn’t see him, which I thought was odd since we always meet on the field after a game – specifically a win. I stopped the first player I saw heading to the locker room to see if he had seen Warrick. He shook his head and walked off. I noticed the group of guys he normally hangs out with and a group of cheerleaders hanging off of them. I thought maybe they would know. But when I asked, they all just looked at each other and laughed.”

Heaving out a heavy sigh, I continue. “Then Jared said some horrible stuff about how I should run home to my books where I should be waiting for him. How Warrick will come to me when he wants me.”

“That mother fucker is getting kicked in the dick on Monday morning. I don’t care if I get suspended from school. What kind of misogynistic shit is that?” Willow is winding herself up again.

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I'm just watching her as she paces back and forth in my room. Caged beast is an accurate assessment of her right now. If I had to guess, her wolf is riding her pretty hard right now.

Hazel nudges my knee with her hand, urging me to continue.

“Anyways, I decided to head to the parking lot, thinking he might have gone there looking for me. That's when I saw his mop of shaggy brown hair. I thought it was him, but when I called out his name, the person kept walking. I thought, ‘Maybe he didn't hear me?’ So I followed the person as they ducked under the bleachers.”

Hazel let out a gasp, “Oh no.”

I just nod my head. “Turns out it was, in fact, Warrick, but as I came closer to tell him I was right here, I heard the giggle of another girl. She was telling him they couldn't do it right there because they could get caught. He ensured her that nobody would catch them, not even realizing they both had been caught already. I heard him pull her zipper down and watched as he put his hands down her pants. She started moaning, and that's when I realized that I didn't want to see anymore.”

Hazel has her hand over her mouth, with a look of utter shock written across her face. Willow has stopped pacing and is staring at me with unfiltered hatred flowing off her like tidal waves.

The tears start to fall again as I choke out the next part. “I said to him, ‘I can't believe I fell for you,’ and turned to run to the parking lot. I heard him call out my name several times as I ran away, but I refused to hear what he had to say.”

“I’m going to kill him. That is the most despicable thing he could do. What was he thinking?” Willow resumes her pacing across the floor. I don’t know what I should be more concerned about right now: her wearing a hole into my floor or her beast ripping free of her skin.

“Willow, will you come hold me?” I ask gently.

Her head whips to the side as she looks at me. Seeing the tears falling down my face and the look of pain I’m sure is there, she sighs while dropping her shoulders. Allowing my body to fall onto the bed, I scoot my way up to the pillows. Hazel scoots in beside me with her back to the wall as she wraps her right arm across my stomach. Willow kicks off her boots and unbuttons her pants, dropping them to the floor.

She pulls back the blanket as she slides in on my left side. As she cuddles up to me, I feel her hand pull my face to hers. We are a breath apart as she stares into my eyes, “Don’t ever let a man make you feel as though you aren’t worth something. Just because he can’t see your worth, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Diamonds only form under intense pressure. I love you, Aspen, and one day, a guy is going to show you what you are worth.”

I nod my head as tears fall from my swollen eyes.

We all lay there in silence as the day washes over me. It may have been the worst day of my life, but at least I’m cocooned in love, with two girls who have never hurt me.

“You know what hurts the most?” I whisper into the silence. “I will never understand why he would do that, knowing I was there and looking for him. What does she have that I don’t?”

“Nothing. She has nothing you don’t.” Willow’s words whisper across the skin of my

neck. “Let’s get some sleep and we can plot tomorrow how to make his life miserable.”

With that, we cuddle into each other. Before I finally fall asleep, a thought floats across my mind. Goddess, please give me a mate that appreciates me and loves me for me.

Chapter 1

Warrick

Four years later

Sucking in a breath, I open the door to her bookstore. She calls from the back of the store, saying, “I’ll be right with you.”

Today is going to be the day. I know I fucked up when we were pups, but surely she can’t still hold that against me. I was young, dumb, and horny. Can she really fault me for that?

I hear her gentle footsteps as she walks toward me, the smell of rose and sandalwood with a soft note of vanilla fills my nostrils as she comes closer. I don’t really have a plan, other than to see if she will talk to me.

My ears pick up on her intake of air and the small, almost too quiet, sigh she lets out. So she is affected by my scent, like I am hers. Good to know.

“Warrick, why are you here?” she asks, as she breezes past me with a stack of books in her arms.

The soft thump of the books as she sets them on the table by the front door is the only

sound in the building. “I was hoping for a chance to talk to you about us.”

She lifts her eyebrow at me. “What about us? Last time I checked, there isn’t an us.”

My hand runs down my face as I sigh. “Come on, you know we are mates. I know I made mistakes when we were teenagers, but you can’t tell me you aren’t ready to settle down. It’s been four years since we found out we were mates. Four years of us ignoring fate. You didn’t even wait around when we found out on your eighteenth birthday. Instead, you ran away and right into the arms of these boys who can’t mate you,” I say.

A laugh bursts from her chest, shocking both of us. She holds her hand up. “You, of all people, have no room to discuss who I am seeing or not seeing.” She goes back to stacking the books that she carried in.

“Well, I am done with it, and so are you. It’s time for us to settle down and build the life the goddess wants,” I say, with a stern tone in my voice.

Her eyebrows bunch together, “Let me get this straight. You’re done fucking every woman who spreads her legs for you and now I need to get on board, too? Did I get that right?”

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Stepping into her space, I watch as she sucks in a breath. Watch as her eyes dilate. “I’m your mate, am I not?”

Scoffing, she takes a step back from me. “Mate or not, I will not give in just because you want me to. You didn’t care when we realized we were mates, and you sure haven’t cared since I’ve been back from college. So why now, hmm? Gone through all the girls in town and now you’re bored?”

“That’s not it at all...” Before I can finish what I was saying, the bell above the door chimes again. Both of our heads whip in that direction, mine to see who interrupted us and hers to see what customer is saving her from me. Gail gives us a warm smile as she walks over to us. Known to most of the wolf pack as our Matriarchal grandmother, she has a tendency to also meddle in relationships. If she gives you an idea, you should probably listen, since she is rarely wrong about things. No one is sure when she came into the pack or really much about her story. All we know is each generation we grow up with Gail watching over us, guiding us, and loving each of us with the same intensity. Around town, though, she is just known as a meddling old lady who knows all the gossip.

“Oh, lovely, just the two I wanted to see,” Gail says, as she walks over to us.

What does she mean, just the two she wanted to see? How did she even know that I was going to be here?

Aspen recovers more quickly than I do. “Good morning, Gail. What brings you into the bookstore?”

“You know, I have been reading some really cute romance books lately, but I found I really love second chance romances.” She winks at me before continuing, “Do you have any recommendations?”

Aspen’s eyebrows bunch together in confusion. “Uh, I do have a few of those that you might like. I didn’t know you read books. Have I ever even seen a book in your hands?” She walks away to grab the books she is thinking of. I hear a faint, “What is this woman up to now?” as she moves toward the back of the store.

Gail turns toward me and whispers conspiratorially. “She will come around, but you have a lot of work ahead of you. The things that you have made your mate feel over the years are obstacles between you and your goal. If you want it badly enough, you will need to figure out the right way to her heart.” How does she always know things? Does she have a sort of sixth sense, a power from the Goddess? I do want my mate, duh, why else would I be here? Clearly, it won’t be as easy as I thought it would be. Surely Aspen wants her mate, too?

“How do you ...” I snap my jaw shut as Aspen comes walking from the back. She glances between the two of us before turning to Gail.

“I don’t know for sure that you will love these, but I have read all three of them and they are good places to start with for that trope,” she says, handing the books to Gail.

She looks through the stack before deciding on one that has a football player with a beautiful girl on the cover. “I would like to buy this one. Seems to be the exact book I was searching for.” She gives me a knowing look before following Aspen to the register.

While Aspen is ringing up Gail’s book, I hear Gail tell her, “You should give him another chance. He’s made mistakes, but we all have, dear. You both are missing out on the love and peace that being with your mate brings.”

Aspen sighs before she says, “I can’t just forgive him for cheating on me and then flaunting all his flings in front of me every time I come around. Just because he has decided he is done with the bachelor life doesn’t mean I have to give into him.”

Gail hums before saying, “The mistakes of one’s past should have no bearing on their future. The fact he is standing here asking for a chance is a testament to his commitment already.”

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t give into someone who hurt me so easily and showed no remorse for it.”

Growling in anger, I turn to storm out of the bookstore when the bell chimes again. When I look up, I find Chase standing there with a look of shock across his face. His dirty blonde hair is pulled back into a bun on the back of his head. Does this man ever shave or, for fuck’s sake, at least trim the damn thing?

He snaps out of his shock. “What are you doing here, Warrick?” A low, deep growl rumbles out of Chase.

Chase better watch himself. He might be the one warming her bed right now, but it won’t be long before she gives into me, her mate. Shoulder checking him as I pass by, I stomp out the door.

I don’t know why I even bother. When I first found out that he was dating Aspen, I tried to intimidate him into leaving her alone. He simply laughed and patted my shoulder before leaving. Patted my shoulder! He might be a mountain lion shifter, but even he has to know that I would win that fight. Still, he walked away like I wasn’t more than a fly to shoo away.

Four months ago...

There's a bonfire tonight, and it's about time that we can do something fun. Orion, our pack Alpha, has been running us around like we don't need rest or even a food break. I don't understand why he has us running the perimeters so much. There aren't any threats. There never have been. But fuck if we can do anything about it.

"You ready to head over to the bonfire?" Silas asks, as he finishes putting on his boots. I'm so lucky to have my best friend running laps with me each day. At least we make a game out of it. Otherwise, I would have lost hope before now.

Watching him as he finishes getting ready, I wish he could see the Alpha that he is becoming. He takes better care of us in our unit than anyone else has, especially Orion.

"Yeah, hopefully, Orion stays wherever he is and we can actually have a peaceful night without his constant bragging and degrading of our pack females. It would be nice to drink a few cold ones with you and find some girl willing to come back with me," I say to him as I finish rubbing oil into my beard.

Silas is silent as he watches me.

Looking over my shoulder, I say, "What?"

"Why don't you stop bringing home random women and finally claim your mate?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I tell him, "Aspen will never give into the mating, so might as well find someone to warm my bed instead of being alone the rest of my life."

"It's none of my business, but don't you think that continuing to bring girls home instead of your mate might just be the reason Aspen won't forgive you?"

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My shoulders drop as I let out a sigh and turn to him. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. It is what it is. Aspen won’t forgive me, and the Goddess just got it wrong this time. We aren’t a perfect match for each other and will never be mated to each other. Now, if you don’t mind, I want to enjoy tonight.” My coat is hanging by the front door and I walk over to slip it on.

He lets out a heavy sigh as he turns to follow me out the door. “Besides,” I say as I clap him on the back. “I would much rather talk about how you’re going to challenge Orion for the Alpha position.”

“Shhh, keep your voice down. You never know who is listening. I never said I would,” he says, as his eyes sweep from side to side, checking to see if anyone is around.

“I’m just saying you should. You can’t say that you are okay with how things are going around here.”

His head drops. “No, but you know the only way this works is a fight to the death. It’s not just that I challenge him and win the fight. I have to kill him. That is an enormous risk to take. We both know he is a dirty wolf, and I wouldn’t put it past him to do something shady to win.”

“He can’t though. He can be dirty all he wants, but the rules are firm. If he uses some sort of outside help to win, he automatically loses his position.”

Shaking his head, he replies, “That may be true, but I don’t think I’m the right person. Anyway, you don’t want to talk about why you are avoiding Aspen, and I don’t want

to talk about challenging Orion.”

The sounds of laughter grow louder as we come closer to the bonfire. The glow of red and orange shifts the shadows around us as the flames dance. All the unmated pack members are scattered around the fire in a misshapen circle. Soft moans are already whispering from the trees.

“Seems that some people started early,” I say as I hook my thumb in the direction the moans are coming from.

Silas shakes his head. “Some people’s children, I swear.”

Spotting Samson and Alic, we both head in their direction.

As we get closer, we hear Samson whine, “There aren't that many single females. I am dying here. Can't a guy just get his dick sucked?”

Alic shakes his head. “I know. With the way it's going, we might have to search outside our pack before too long. Who do we have? Willow is scary. Erin is a bit too young. And I am pretty sure that Lyra just left with Eric and is who we are hearing moaning from the woods.”

Samson asks, “What about Hazel? I know she hasn't found her mate yet.”

Alic's eyes widen. “She is too sweet to taint with one-night stands. I am afraid that she will get attached and want more.”

Shrugging, Samson says, “What about Aspen?” His question irritates me—why are they talking about my mate? They shouldn't even be thinking about her, much less mentioning her in this conversation. She is mine, even if I will not claim her.

My shoulders tighten in anger when I hear her name. Alic sighs, “I heard she’s dating that mountain lion shifter. Carson? Cash?” That’s fucking news to me! I can feel my temper rising, thinking of another man running his hands down her curves. Doing all the things I’ve only imagined in my most private moments.

Samson’s eyes widen when he looks up to find me behind them with my chest heaving. “Chase?”

Alic yips when he hears my growl behind him. “Yeah, that’s it, man. Don’t kill me over it. I’m just saying what I heard.”

Grabbing him by the back of his neck, I drag him to standing, with his feet barely touching the ground. “Where did you hear this?”

His throat bobs as he considers his words. “Some of the other guys were talking about it the other day.”

Baring my teeth at him, I growl, “What...were...they...saying?”

He trembles. “Just that they thought it was a waste of her time since it's forbidden to cross breed. They consider her tainted now.”

Pulling him closer to me until we’re almost touching, I growl, “You would do well to keep my mate’s name out of your mouth. Do I make myself clear?”

His head nods vigorously.

I drop him to the ground and his body crumples when it collides with the damp surface. Turning, I storm off in the direction of the housing for the mountain lions.

“Where are you going?” I hear Silas yell as I take off. “Fuck.”

My chest is heaving with uncontrolled anger seeping into my veins. I can't even explain why I'm so mad. It's not like I haven't entertained other women instead of my mate. But this is different. I'm not dating them. We fuck and go our separate ways. What she is doing has feelings and feelings mean attachments.

"No one is allowed to touch our mate. Why have you let it get this far? If it was me, I would have already ripped his throat out," Wraith, my wolf, growls at me in our shared mind space.

"Agreed."

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“Claim her!” he barks at me.

“She isn’t interested in being our mate. I won’t force her to be with us.”

“And whose fault is that?” Wraith seethes.

Ignoring him, I storm into the den of the mountain lions. I'm not even sure what I am doing at this point, but there is no going back now. People lift their heads as I storm into the main area. No one bothers to approach me or even tell me that I’m not supposed to be here. While it’s not really a law, per se, it’s one of those unspoken rules that each of us respects the other's areas.

My fists are bunched at my sides as my arms swing. Glancing around, I know he has to be here somewhere. Aspen isn’t the type to bring a guy home, especially not another type of shifter. At least, I don’t think she would do it. In all this time, even after I fucked it up, I have never seen another man coming or going from her place.

The mountain lions have similar houses to ours, but they chose round tree houses versus the log cabins that we have. It’s fitting though. Spotting a fire burning not far off, I head in that direction, figuring I can at least see if someone has seen Chase. The glow of the fire illuminates everyone as I come closer. Then I see him sitting with a group of friends laughing without a care in the world. As if he isn’t taking the only thing that is mine away from me. Why does he get to have her when I can’t even get her to look at me?

“Chase!” I yell as a growl rips from my throat.

He whips his head around to look at me as his eyebrows climb his forehead. The guy beside him lurches to stand up, but Chase puts his hand on his shoulder. "I got this," he says before standing up. "What can I do for you, Warrick?"

I don't think before I rush him, gripping him by his shirt and lifting him off the ground. "Stay away from my mate," I seethe.

"Your mate? You mean the one that you repeatedly hurt by running around with every woman but her?" He lifts his eyebrow in question.

"What I do and don't do is none of your concern. That is my mate, and you know we aren't allowed to crossbreed." I pull him in closer. "Stay...away...from...my...mate."

"I don't think I will, Warrick. You know you can't attack me, not really. You know that the reason you are mad is that you can't have the one person you are destined to have."

Pulling him in closer until we are almost nose to nose, I growl, "Leave my mate alone! You are to never see her again."

Wraith is pushing to take over, but I can't let him. Chase is right. We can't outright attack each other.

The reason our town can have so many different shifters is because we have rules to keep everyone safe and protected. One of those rules is that we aren't allowed to attack one another without being provoked. Him dating my mate doesn't fall into that category. So, no matter how much it pisses me off, I can't actually beat the shit out of him for this.

"Aspen deserves someone who puts her first. Surely even you could agree with that.

Now, why don't you put me down and take yourself back to your side of town, hmm?" He looks down at the hand gripping his shirt, then back up to me, with his eyes twinkling in mirth. As much as I want to punch his face, I can't. I let him fall to the ground, and he smooths his shirt down. "Go on, Warrick. I'm going to get back to drinking with my friends and you should do the same."

Without another word, he turns back to his group of friends, turning his friend back to the fire. Sighing, I turn around to find Silas standing there with his brows furrowed with concern.

"You good, man?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I push past him. "No, but it's whatever. Let's get drunk."

"Do you want to talk..." he starts before I cut him off. "No, I don't want to talk about it. Let's go."

"You might not like it, but Chase is right. You have treated Aspen like shit for a while now. Between cheating on her, always throwing women in her face, and ignoring your fate, I don't blame her for seeking attention from someone. You can hate it all you want, but until you pull your head out of your ass, you can't expect her to wait around," Silas says as he follows behind me as we walk away from the mountain lion area.

No, I don't fucking like it; I think to myself. I won't give him the satisfaction of telling him he is right. His damn ego is fluffed enough. He might be the most down to Earth guy, but he's cocky enough to know he is right.

Shaking my head, my steps quicken. After that minor altercation and the revelation of what Aspen has been up to, there are only two things on my mind: alcohol and women. Yeah, I know. What a fucking idiot, but fuck it.

Walking down the sidewalk, my mind runs through the last few months. I can't pinpoint when it really changed for me. Maybe it was watching my best friend find his mate and the way his whole life has already changed. Maybe it was watching Aspen laugh with Chase and the happiness he brings her. I can't say for sure, but I know I want my mate. One day, she will be mine. I will just have to show her how perfect I am for her.

Chapter 2

Aspen

"Hey, can you and the girls meet up with me at Flick the Bean? You will not believe what happened yesterday," I say to Hazel over the phone.

"Uh, yeah. Let me send out a group message asking for them to meet us there in 20? You okay?" she asks with a note of concern.

"I'll tell you all about it when we get there. I don't want to repeat this multiple times! See you in 20 minutes."

"Alright, I'll be there," she says before hanging up.

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I'm still in shock over Warrick showing up. It's been four years since we found out that we were mates and not one single time has he ever sought me out. I figured he was content to reject the mating. It's always seemed that way, with all the women he has coming and going. I thought the only reason he hadn't actually rejected me was because he wanted me as an option.

Shaking my head, I finish putting my boots on. I have to head out if I am going to be at the coffee shop at the same time as the girls. It would be weird to ask them to meet me there and then I am the one late.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm opening the door to the coffee shop to find the girls already giving their orders to the barista. Damn them for being such good friends. Even Nova, who should be absorbing all the freshly mated time with Silas, is here to be a friend to me.

When the girls hear the bell above the door chime, they all turn to see who came in.

"Aspen!" They all cheer at the same time. It brings a broad smile to my face. Being with friends can turn any day around.

I come up behind Nova, who is studying the menu as if she will order anything different. I can guarantee you she won't, but it is cute to watch her try. "You know you are going to order the hot chocolate with whip and chocolate shavings."

She glances over at me. "Why does everyone have that memorized already?" she asks, gently shaking her head.

“Uh, because you literally order the same thing every time,” Willow says, as she leans around Hazel.

Nova lets out a huff. “Fine, I’m ordering something different because you don’t know me as well as you think you do.” She stomps her foot like a toddler.

Hazel brings her arm around Nova’s shoulders. “You know, it’s okay that we know you that well. It means we love you and care about you.” She is rarely wrong, even when you want her to be.

Nova drops her shoulders on a sigh. “Yeah, I know, but it’s just not something I am used to. Don’t get me wrong, Nellie can do it, too, but that is the only other person. I’ve known her for years, so it’s expected, I guess? But, with you guys, I’ve only known you two months, so it’s taking some getting used to.”

“Nov, it’s okay. We get it. It’s just part of being a pack member. It’s said that we are all given a soul match, not quite like our mate, but almost. Someone who understands you in a way that no one other than your mate would. We believe that friendship is a key part of a bountiful life. To encourage us to find our soul match, every pup is brought together from a very young age. Once you find them, you are paired together for every training, lesson, and run. Our elders encourage us to build that bond. So, for us, it’s our nature to nurture our soul match by knowing what they like, love, and dislike,” I say with pride.

She looks over at me. “Is that why you said that you felt like I was your long-lost soul sister?”

I nod my head. “I knew you didn’t know about pack life yet, so I didn’t want to scare you away. But I think you are my soul match.”

She leans in and bumps her shoulder with mine. “I feel the same way.”

After we all order our coffees, I watch in humor as Nova tries her new coffee. Flick the Bean is full of quirky coffee drinks, like “The Cum Shot,” which is an Americano. Apparently, she decided to live a little by grabbing the “Forgive Me Father,” which is cold brew with three shots of espresso, caramel, and whipped topping with cinnamon, caramel drizzle, and chocolate shavings. She is trying so hard to convince us she is going to love it. It’s hilarious, really. She takes that first sip, and her face bunches as it hits her taste buds. I giggle behind my hand as I watch her keep sipping it, as if she will suddenly love it.

“How’s the coffee, Nova?” I ask.

Her eyes shoot at me. “Oh, it’s...uh...great.”

We all burst out laughing because it’s so easy to see that she doesn’t like it at all. Knowing already that we aren’t going to let it go, she quickly changes the topic. “So Aspen, what is it you wanted to tell us? As much as I love coffee, we all know that isn’t why you dragged us out this early in the morning.”

Figuring that I might as well rip the bandaid off, I tell them, “Warrick showed up at the bookstore yesterday.”

Hazel and Willow gasp in shock, while Nova looks back and forth between all of us. “Wait, why is that so shocking?”

Willow whips her head to Nova. “That asshole hasn’t bothered to come around in years, and now he wants to show up?” She turns back to me. “What did he say?”

Flipping the napkin corner between my fingers as I stare at it, I shrug. “He wants me to mate with him. Claims that he is done with all the women and all that.”

“Oh my,” Hazel whispers.

“You don’t honestly believe that, do you? After years of him flaunting them in front of you, not caring how it affects you, now suddenly he wants to settle down?”

Continuing to flip the corner of the napkin, I don’t dare bring my eyes up to meet theirs, scared of what they will see. “I don’t know what to believe. You can’t blame me for wanting to give into it. You all know, well except you Nova, that I’ve dreamed of the day that I found my mate and bonded with them. Humans dream of weddings, but female wolves dream of their mating. Every time I inhale his sage, sea salt, and amber scent, it gets a little harder to remember why I can’t give into him. Just because he is my mate doesn’t absolve him of his cheating. Sometimes, though, when it’s close to the full moon, when the heat is closer, it’s really hard to remember through that haze that I don’t want Warrick. At least not until he makes some serious changes. Thankfully, Gail showed up before anything could happen. It was weird, though. She wanted a book recommendation.”

“Wait, I’m lost. Remember, I haven’t been here my whole life,” Nova says with a slight chuckle.

Willow takes a sip of her coffee before setting her cup down. “Warrick is Aspen’s mate, but he has ignored that ever since we found out.”

Nova’s mouth drops open. “Why?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter why he has. Tell me not to give into him.”

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“I know that I haven’t been around, nor do I know the whole backstory here. But, I think you should give your mate a chance. Not necessarily just giving into him. I am all for making him work for it. But he is your mate, who the goddess chose for you,” Nova says encouragingly.

Willow slams her hand down on the table, “Absolutely not! I’m sorry, but after everything he has done, with no care for your feelings.... I won’t see you get hurt again.”

Hazel places her hand over my own that is fidgeting with the napkin. “Aspen, look at me.” I bring my eyes to hers. Concern etched deeply on her face, she says, “I have to agree with Willow. We have been here consoling you after every girl that left his bed. We know you have Chase now. Even though it can’t be long term, at least he cares for you. At least he concerns himself with your happiness. We are here for you, whichever you choose, but know that people don’t just get to wake up and decide to choose their mate.”

Pulling my hand out from under hers, I pick up my coffee, taking a sip. The liquid flows down, warming my soul. I know that we were young when he cheated on me, but that isn’t the only time he has chosen someone other than me. Everyone in our community knows about the constant flow of women in and out of his bed. How can you do that to your mate? He doesn’t care about me. He might have a reason for wanting me now, but that doesn’t take away from all the years he chose someone else.

A few months ago, after many margaritas with the girls, I confessed that I was tired of feeling alone. I cried for hours about all the feelings I had kept bottled up over the

Warrick situation. Hazel mentioned something about a situationship, for which we all looked at her like she had a third eye on her forehead. After a thorough explanation, one I needed again when I was sober, the idea took root in my mind. I could totally do something like that. A person who is meant to be there for companionship, comfort, fun, and what each person needs without the romantic aspect of it. One night, as I was walking home from the bookstore, Chase stopped me to ask if I was walking home alone this late at night. I thought it was odd, but endearing at the same time. Needless to say, he walked me home, and we realized how much we had in common.

After exchanging numbers, we spent hours chatting over the phone that night. We both were drinking glasses of wine, we realized we had the same bottle, which is another reason he is perfect. Three glasses in, I pitched the wild idea of being in a situationship and he agreed. Looking back now, it should have concerned me that he was so agreeable while barely knowing me. But something about Chase put me at ease. Since then Chase has been nothing short of amazing. Outside of dragging me to the mountains for hikes, he is the most supportive, attentive boyfriend.

Warrick might be my mate, but he has always chosen others over me. It's time that I choose someone over him.

Shaking my head to pull myself out of my feelings, I look up at Hazel. "It doesn't matter why he wants to claim me now, because I have Chase. I'm not going to throw away a perfect boyfriend for the one who broke me. It doesn't matter that Chase is a mountain lion. We both know that we can't breed or mate. We both want this for the companionship and fun that it can bring, at least until he finds his mates."

Nova's face scrunches in confusion. "Speaking of, why can't you breed or mate?"

Willow speaks up before I can. "It's part of the treaty that allows all of the species to live in Jasper. Dating casually is acceptable, however, permanent relationships with

other species are forbidden. We all have intended mates, even if we haven't found them, and it goes against our way to choose someone else. We can't genetically breed anyway."

"Huh, the things you learn. Is there anything else I should know?" Nova asks.

"There is quite a lot actually, but, off the top of my head, I would say that we aren't allowed to fight other species without being provoked, which is why we all co-exist so peacefully. Everyone does what they can to keep the tension low between species." Willow shrugs as she picks up her coffee again.

The girls continue to chat and teach Nova more about pack life as I sit and think about why Warrick showed up. Nothing he says makes sense. How did he go from having no issue being with others to finally wanting me? As I watch the girls chat, I can't help but wonder if Nova giving into Silas has anything to do with why he finally changed his mind. The possibility seems plausible with it happening so soon after they mated. Yet, I can't help but worry that his intentions aren't in the right place. Does he want me for me or is it simply because 'fate said so'?. While I might deeply want my mate, like a piece of my soul is missing, I don't want Warrick, at least not yet. The Warrick that walked into my bookstore demanding I give into him isn't the mate for me. I want him to want me for me. I know that fate says we are perfect for each other and that's great and all. But you don't spend a lifetime reading about these epic, world-challenging styles of romances only to settle for someone who doesn't even know you well enough to know that demanding me will never work.

Chapter 3

Aspen

Aspen's 18th Birthday

“I can’t believe that we are finally 18!” Willow says as she finishes applying her lipstick.

We are all just a few months apart and as the baby of the group, tonight it’s finally my turn to celebrate my 18th birthday. Of course, Willow and Hazel are throwing a party.

They know that I am not a huge fan of parties, but they claim that “nobody should go without a huge celebration for becoming an adult”. When I mentioned that I was okay with pizza, ice cream, and the latest show on Netflix, you would have thought I said that I was okay with forgetting all about it. Honestly, if it wasn’t for them, I probably would be.

I watch as Willow finishes tweaking her hair for what has to be the thirtieth time since we started getting ready. She is so beautiful with her long, wavy, dark brown hair that flows down to the middle of her back. Her makeup is soft, with just a hint of blush on her cheeks. Sparkles shimmer on her gold mini dress that hugs her in all the right places. The strappy heels give her just enough height to make her legs look long.

Hazel comes in from the bathroom while finishing fastening the back of her earring. “You guys almost ready?” She looks over at me, where I am sitting on the edge of my bed. “Hey, chin up sister. This is your big day after all.”

Her plum sequin mini dress shows off her curves that I wish I could say I had. Her naturally red hair curls in ringlets down the front of her. She never applies more than foundation, brown eyeliner, and mascara because she says she doesn’t want to take away from her natural beauty. Which is fair, because Hazel is one of those girls that looks beautiful even when she first wakes up. I, on the other hand, do not.

A pop of lips comes from Willow as she finishes her lipstick. “Yeah, we are ready.

Let's get out there and celebrate!" She grabs her clutch purse before heading out the door.

Hazel looks at me with worry etched across her face. I know what she is thinking and it's something I've already considered. Warrick is going to be there and I probably won't like what I'll find when I do see him. But, it's not like I can avoid him forever. Isn't the saying 'fake it till you make it?' So, while it will crush my heart to be near him and not be able to touch him, I'll just have to push through it. He might not want me, but that shouldn't stop me from celebrating.

"I'm fine Hazel. I know there is a chance that he will be there, but I'm going to have to get used to it. It's not like this town is big enough that we are never going to bump into each other. Plus, we are leaving for college soon, so it won't matter for much longer anyway."

Grabbing my own clutch, I take one final glance at myself in my full length mirror. I can't believe that I not only was talked into this party, but I was talked into wearing a black body con dress that is so short that if I move too much, my ass cheek will fall out. With a soft shake of my head, I head out of my bedroom with Hazel right behind me.

"You don't have to stay tonight. If it gets to be too much, especially with Warrick, then you just tell me and we will go. Don't suffer just because Willow loves to party." She wraps her arm around mine. "It's your party, but you don't have to stay."

I whisper a "thank you" before we walk into the living room. My mom is already ready with the camera. You would think this was prom again by the way she is gushing.

"Come on, girls, let me grab a couple photos of you before you head out."

She makes a shooing gesture with her hand to push us together by the fireplace. With Hazel on my right side and Willow on my left, we smile for the camera. The flash pops a few times before we decide to make funny faces instead of the cute poses we had before.

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She gives us the safety talk that she has given us every time we have left the house since becoming teenagers. She acts like we won't be right up the road at the pack house, a place she can easily come to check on us. We also have pack elders that will be around to ensure the safety of the party. Shaking my head, I motion to the girls to head out the door to walk the path toward the pack house. One thing I do love about living in Jasper is that we all live within walking distance of each other. Nobody really drives cars because it would be a waste of time and pollution of our lands.

Arm in arm, the girls and I take the short walk. Already, you can see people pouring in and out of the pack house. The music is thumping loud enough that I can hear it long before we are near the building. Groups of kids are huddled together on each side of the double doors leading in.

As we walk up the steps, we hear someone yell out, "The party has just arrived!"

Looking over, I see Samson and Alic walking over to us. The two of them together always mean trouble. Not in the way that is threatening to someone's health; more like they are always up to no good. In class, they would pull pranks on teachers and staff that would always disrupt the day.

Groaning, I say, "You two better not get up to any of your shit tonight."

They both make the cross their hearts gesture at the same time, which is cute but creepy. "We will be on our best behavior. Plus, we can't wait to celebrate with three of our favorite girls."

Hazel leans forward to look around me, "Don't you say that to all the girls?"

Alic shakes his head in mock innocence. “Never!” He gasps and holds his hand over his mouth. You can’t help but like these two. While some of their pranks have gotten out of hand, they are quite fun to hang out with.

We all shake our heads as we walk into the party. The girls outdid themselves with the streamers, balloons, and decorations everywhere. I look over at both of them, watching them beam with pride. They didn’t need to do all of this, it’s almost too much. I don’t even think 90% of these people are here because of me, but instead as an excuse to party. Why did I agree to this again? This is way more of Willow’s scene than mine. It’s moments like this that I don’t feel seen by my friends. Don’t get me wrong, I know they love me, but if they really saw me then they would know this is the farthest thing from what I would want on my birthday.

“You know we had to go all out for the baby of the group. Happy birthday, Aspen,” Willow says as she leans into me. “Let’s get a drink!”

She cheers as she drags me toward the back, where a table of punch and cups is set up.

We weave through the crowd as people say happy birthday to me. After filling three cups with punch, Willow turns to Hazel and I as she hands us each a cup.

“Here’s to our birthday girl, and many more birthdays and adventures together.” Willow holds out her cup for us to clink ours.

We all say cheers to that and throw back our first cups of punch. The alcohol burns as it goes down and I can’t help but make a sour face.

Hazel coughs a few times, tapping her chest. “I swear it never gets easier. Why is the first cup always the worst?”

Laughing, I fill my cup again.

“It’s because it’s the first hit to your system. I think every cup after that burns, but you are too intoxicated to care.” Willow laughs.

The girls fill their cups as well as we turn to examine the crowd. Samson and Alic find us again through the crowd.

“Ladies, can we interest any of you in a dance?” Samson says, with an eyebrow waggle.

Hazel and Willow both look to me.

“Go ahead. I am going to mingle in the crowd and make my rounds.”

“You sure?” Hazel asks.

“Yeah, totally. You guys go have fun,” I say with a shooing gesture.

The girls head off with them onto the dance floor. The pews that normally line this room are pushed up against the walls and people are scattered all over them. You know as we were growing up, turning eighteen was supposed to be this big moment in our lives. Wolves find their mates, a string of courting style things would happen, and you would settle down with the one fate chose for you. Some wolves dreamed of the moment as if their entire lives revolved around it, while others dreaded the moment as if they were quite literally going to be put on the pyre to roast alive. I definitely fell into the latter.

But, now that I’m here, I feel a bit of trepidation towards it. My only experience in the “love department” was with Warrick and we know how well that worked out. What if I get a mate like him? The unfaithful one? They say that a mated wolf can’t

cheat because the idea of being with someone else should repulse them. What if it doesn't? Or worse, what if I end up with a wolf who abuses me like Orion, who abuses the females of our pack? My anxiousness over the moment is becoming overwhelming. Between the bodies bumping into me, the loud music, and my thoughts running wild, my skin feels tight with tingles running across it.

Scanning the room, I need to find a place to sit, hopefully somewhere with less people. I am just about to go find a place to sit when I feel a tug in my chest. My mouth drops open. I know that we find out who our mates are at eighteen, but I didn't think it would literally happen today. Would it be bad if I just turned and ran away? I'm so worried that I'm cursed with forever being heartbroken. Can't I have just a moment to have fun before fate steps in? What if I just wanted to dance with some random guy tonight? Instead, I'm going to follow this pull in my chest to whom fate has chosen for me.

I scan the room to see which direction it's pulling me in. When I feel it tug the hardest, I head in that direction. Weaving my way through the throng of party goers, the draw is only getting stronger the closer I get to the person. Elation is rushing through me that I won't have to be alone.

I can finally move on from Warrick because I will have my mate to love and care for me.

As the final people clear out of the way, I push my way around the last couple, only to come to an abrupt stop. Directly in front of me at one of the tables with chairs is Warrick. But he isn't alone.

Writhing on top of him is Scarlett, a female pack member that is one year below us. My heart is racing. I don't understand. Looking around them, I check to see if there is someone else that was over here that the bond could have pulled me to. My eyes scan back to Warrick as Scarlett sucks on his neck. His eyes are closed as his hands rest on

her waist. I watch as he moves her forward and backward as she rocks on his lap. I'm just about to turn around when his eyes snap open and he looks right at me.

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Nooooo!The second our eyes meet, I know I will forever be heartbroken. The man that broke my heart is my mate.

“Aspen?” he asks as he shoves at Scarlett to stand up.

I don’t give him a chance to say anything more before I am rushing back through the crowd. Bumping into people in my attempt to get away, I knock someone’s drink out of their hand but I don’t even stop when they yell, “Hey!”

Running down the hallway at the back of the room, I find the bathroom and rush inside. Slamming the door behind me, I fall to the floor in a heap of limbs and fabric. How could the goddess do this to me? Of all the men in the pack, she had to pick the one who has already broken my heart, the one who showed up at my birthday party with another girl in his lap.

I pull my knees to my chest and bury my face in my hands. My body racks with the sobs pouring out of me. What did I do to deserve this? My wolf, Aisling, stirs with the spike of emotion, lumbering her way out of the depths of our shared mind space. Her comforting presence is always welcomed because nobody will ever know me as well as she does. We don’t always agree with each other, but we are pretty close to the same page usually.

“The goddess didn’t get it wrong, Aspen, you will see that one day. I know it hurts, but she is never wrong,” Aisling gently says to me.

“She had to have gotten it wrong. Warrick only cares about himself and what he wants. He shows me that every time he brings a girl around.”

“I know it doesn’t feel like it right now, but I know you will see it one day.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I just do.”

I can’t help but cry harder. Aisling might have some weird confidence that this will all work out, but I can’t see that happening.

There is a knock at the door. Sniffing the air, I know it’s just the girls.

“Come in.”

They both push their way into the bathroom to find me sitting on the floor.

Hazel rushes over and drops down beside me. “What happened?”

“I found my mate.”

They both gasp in shock. Lifting my head I look at both of them. Hazel’s face is marred with worry.

“Who is it Aspen?” she asks.

A sob wracks my body. “It’s..” The tears are pouring out of me. I suck in a breath. “It’s Warrick.”

Hazel and Willow look between each other. A silent conversation is happening between them as I put my head back in my hands.

“There is an option,” Willow says gently.

Lifting my head, I find her looking at me with love.

“You can ask the goddess to break the mate bond between you. You will never have a mate, but at least you won’t have to live with knowing that he is out there choosing someone over you.”

“I didn’t know that we could break our bond.” I look between the two of them with confusion.

Hazel is glaring at Willow when she says, “It’s not talked about because it’s permanent and ensures that you will never be able to bond with another wolf or mate. Something that shouldn’t be taken lightly. The elders keep it from us because they don’t want us to make rash decisions when we are emotional.”

Willow shrugs her shoulders, but I ask anyway, “How do you know?”

“I overheard the elders discussing it one time when I was somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be. Apparently, it’s only happened once in our pack history and Orion is wanting to finally sever his bond with the poor girl who is supposed to be his mate.”

Hazel shakes her head. “I don’t even want to know where you were or why you were there if you heard all of that.”

“Best you don’t ask questions.” Willow looks at her with mischief dancing in her eyes.

“I want to do that. How do I do it?” I look between them.

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Willow hesitantly says, “I probably shouldn’t have mentioned it, but I believe you need to talk to the pack elders. This isn’t something to take lightly.”

“It’s fine. I know that he won’t ever change and, although I will be alone, at least I won’t have to feel my heart crack each time I look at him.”

Hazel scoots in closer to me and pulls me until my head is resting on her shoulder. Her arms circle around me as she pets my hair. “Maybe you should sleep on it for a few days before you make the decision?”

I let out a sigh. “It won’t change my mind, but I’ll do it because you asked.”

We all sit in silence as the weight of the decision washes over us. I know they think that I am making a rash decision, but I can’t live like this. It hurt enough when he was nothing more than a boyfriend, but now that he is my mate... I can’t do it.

“I’m going to head home. I don’t want anyone to see me like this or ask me why I am crying. Plus, nobody will notice that I am gone,” I say as I lift my head up and begin to stand up.

The girls follow suit as we all brush off our dresses and fix ourselves.

“You want us to come with you?” Hazel asks, ever the mother hen.

Shaking my head, I say, “No, you guys go have fun. I am just going to go home, shower, then head to bed.”

“You sure?” Willow asks with her brows drawn together in confusion.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Go party it up for me. Celebrate, drink, dance, and maybe find some boys to kiss.” I lean in and kiss both of them on the cheek. “I love you both.”

“We love you, too, Aspen,” Hazel says as she places her hand on my shoulder and gently squeezes.

Heading out of the bathroom, I follow the edge of the party until I reach the front door. Sneaking out when nobody is paying attention is far easier than I thought it would be, probably because most of them are heavily intoxicated already. The cool breeze winds itself through the tresses of my hair as I walk the path back home. Shivering, I pick up the pace to finish off the last of the steps to get there.

As I am walking up the three steps to my front porch, I see Gail sitting on our front porch swing. “Gail, what are you doing here this late at night?” I wonder if she will wrap me in her arms and tell me how it’s not as bad as I think it is. I could use her healing grandmother touch and soothing words right now. Her weathered hands rest gently in her lap as I make way up the three steps of our porch. I can almost feel the tension falling off of me as I move closer to her.

She pats the seat beside her as she smiles warmly at me. Not needing to be told twice, I sit down beside her. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

I whip my head around and can’t contain my shock. “How do you know? I only found out a few minutes ago.”

Her eyes shimmer with a secret amusement as she says, “I have my ways, dear. You seem troubled by the selection. Why is that?”

My eyes fall to my hands bunched together in my lap. “He isn’t the right choice for

me. How could he be? He cheated on me and showed up at my birthday party with another girl. Is it possible the goddess got it wrong?"

Gail places her hand on mine. "No, dear, the goddess never gets it wrong. It might feel wrong right now, but that is because your journey has just begun. Some have it easy and their mating is a breeze. Some have challenges that they have to overcome so they can be the best mate they can be."

She is giving me that knowing look. "Yeah, but how do we get past this? He really broke my heart, Gail."

She gives me a reassuring smile. "Just give it time. He will see that if he really wants to find the love, happiness, and family he so desperately seeks, then he will have to change himself." She makes this sound so easy. As if my heart isn't involved or at risk of being permanently broken. Doesn't she know that he already shattered it once? That when I gave it to him, he spat in my face with another girl!

Scoffing, I say, "I doubt he feels any of those things or wants any of those things."

She lifts an eyebrow. "You think you know him that well, do you?"

My shoulders drop. "Gail, what do you know about breaking the mating bond?"

Her eyes narrow. "How did you hear about that?"

I mime zipping my lips and she chuckles.

"Willow needs to be careful with what she shares with you both." My eyes bulge and she chuckles again. "You know that I have my ways. Honestly, at this point, it's more surprising that you are shocked."

She leans over and wraps her arm around me, pulling me into her warmth. “Aspen, I know that your heart is broken and you think that your only option is to sever the bond between you two. I know I am asking a lot when I say this, but give the goddess a chance to show you that you two are meant to be. I understand that you are hurting right now and that is fair. You should be upset with him. What he did isn’t forgivable, at least not until he makes the changes. I want you to do something for me, something that is important. I want you to decide what is important for you in your relationship and what you want from your partner. Just because the goddess gives us a mate, doesn’t mean we have to accept awful behavior. Can you do that for me?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I answer, “I guess. I don’t know why it’s so important to you, but I can do that for you.”

She pats my leg. “That’s my girl. Now, go in there and shower off the pain. I think you should watch *The Notebook* tonight.”

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One eyebrow lifts as I look at her in bewilderment.

“Don’t ask why. Just go. Shoo, shoo.”

I shake my head as I let out a soft laugh. “Whatever you say, Gail.”

Following me to my front door, she gives me a gentle wave as she walks away.

I will never understand how she knows everything, long before it’s even said aloud, but she is always right. Who am I to question it? She might not want me to break the bond, but that doesn’t mean that I have to give into it either. I won’t break it, but I will stay mateless all the same.

Warrick can have his girls, but that means I will find my own type of companionship. We can both have other people. See how he likes it.

I begin to pull open my front door but just as I am about to walk through it, I hear my name called out. Turning, I find Warrick running down the path towards my house.

“Wait, Aspen, hear me out.”

Shaking my head, I turn to walk inside when he bounds up the steps. A hand clamps down on my forearm, preventing me from walking into the house. I whip my head toward him. “Get your hands off me, Warrick.”

He holds his hands up. “Can’t you hear me out?”

Scoffing, I say, “No, Warrick, I won’t hear you out. Stay away from me. You being my mate changes nothing. You are still the same prick who chose to cheat on me, still the same asshole who just had Scarlett grinding on you, and you are still the same asshole who doesn’t care about anyone other than yourself. Why would this change any of that?”

“Because you are MINE!” he shouts at me.

“That’s where you are wrong, Warrick. I’ll never be yours. You lost me the minute I found you under those bleachers with another girl. Now, get off my porch,” I say as I walk into my house.

“This isn’t over, Aspen,” he says before I close the door in his face.

Resting my back on the door, I do what I can to slow my breathing.

That’s where he is wrong. This is over.

Chapter 4

Warrick

“Can I have another?” I ask the bartender as he walks past me.

A single nod is the only answer that I get. The ice swirls around in the amber liquid as I follow it with my eyes. The barstool beside me slides back, and I can feel the presence of someone beside me. Inhaling softly, I recognize the scent as Xavior. A sigh of relief comes out. I needed a friend tonight.

“This better not be you wanting me to act as a wingman tonight. You know I can’t stand hyping you up to some girl you only intend to bed tonight and never speak to

again.” Xavior always hated my self-destructive behavior, especially when it came to women. But young Xavior, the pre-military Xav, he at least would drink with me and hang out. Post military Xav? He is more likely to give me a twenty-minute lecture about all the reasons my behavior is a call for help and how I’ll never have my mate if I keep this up.

The cool touch of the glass against my lips is a calming reprieve from the thoughts rolling around in my head. I don’t feel the sting of the alcohol anymore, probably since I am on my third Old Fashioned of the night. As I set the glass down on the bar top of Pour Me Another, I look at Xavior.

“Don’t worry, Xav, I didn’t invite you here to be my wingman. Actually, I need some advice.”

His eyebrows shoot up.

After serving in the military for a few years, he came home to find Silas only focused on being the best wolf he could be and me drinking my life away while finding any available female to go home with that night. Many nights, he saved me from a drunken fight or face planting into the edge of the bar. I don’t think he’s ever actually been a wingman, more like a babysitter. The Xavior who left here isn’t the same one that came home.

“I know, you weren’t expecting that, but I need someone to talk to that might have the answers I need.”

A look of understanding passes over his face. “What can I help you with?”

“Aspen is my mate.” His eyebrows are back in his hairline. They will probably be there for most of what I am going to say next. My head rolls back on my shoulders as I look up at the ceiling. “Nobody knows. Well, except her and Silas. And all

herfriends. Before you ask anything, I will try to bring you up to the present.”

The bartender, Nix, comes back with my next Old Fashioned. I should probably slow down, but it’s not like I have someone to go home to or plan to bring anyone home with me, either.

“Can I get you something, Xavier?” Nix asks as he wipes down the bar in front of us.

“I’ll take a pint.”

Nix nods his head once before walking away to grab it.

“Not that I mind, but why wouldn’t you talk to Silas about this?”

The ice chinks against the glass as I set it back down. “Silas has Nova, and they are busy with their new bondship. I don’t want to take him away from that or bother him while he enjoys it. Plus, it’s not like anyone can really help me.” I shrug. “You know she is dating a mountain lion shifter named Chase?”

He shakes his head, “No, I can’t say that I did. Then again, I really keep to myself and pay little attention to what others are doing.”

Nix comes back with Xavior’s pint, sliding it across the bar top to him.

“Can I ask why you aren’t with your mate? Why is your mate dating someone else?” he says, with a look of confusion written across his face. Fuck, I forget how much he missed in the years that he was gone. You know the shittiest part about losing your parents? One of your best friends shipping out with the military and finding out your mate is the same girl you broke the heart of. He’s only been home a few months, arriving not long before I convinced Silas to challenge Orion for the Alpha position.

A heavy sigh leaves me with a full body drop. “You ever made a horrible decision, thinking it was such a great one at the time, only to find out that what you did would forever change the course of your life?”

Grabbing the new Old Fashioned, I lift the glass dome off as the smoke billows out from underneath it. The smell of burning applewood fills the surrounding area. I've always loved this smell. It's probably one of the few reasons I really order these drinks.

The look on Xavior's face is one I can only describe as someone pondering his life choices to see if he can relate to mine. It's okay. I don't think most people can say that they have been through the same thing. At least, not as specific as what I did.

He seems to sit in quiet contemplation for a while before shaking his head. "I have done some dumb shit in my life, but I can't say that it's been anything that is life altering. Does joining the military count?"

A laugh bursts out of me. "Was it that bad?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want to talk about it, but, yeah, there are some demons that I will never be able to outrun because of it. Either way, no, I don't think I do. What could you have done that is that awful?"

"Before I knew Aspen was my mate, we were dating. Casual high school dating. The kind that nobody takes that seriously. How was I supposed to know that the goddess brought us together for something more?" I take another sip of my OldFashioned, needing the alcohol-induced courage. I am about to confess something that nobody knows.

He sits silently beside me. Almost as if he is afraid to say anything, or maybe he doesn't know what to say.

Deciding to continue on, I set my glass down on the bar top. "Because I was young and stupid, I thought it was only casual dating and I wasn't only seeing Aspen. She didn't know it. Really, only the girl I was seeing on the side knew about it. We had

just won the final game before the State Championship. My adrenaline was pumping, lust was crowding my mind, and Lily caught me as I was walking off the field to find Aspen. She was begging to suck my dick.”

Xavior sputters out his beer. His fist hits his chest a few times. “Sorry, I wasn’t prepared for that. Continue,” he says as he shakes his head, laughing to himself.

“What was I supposed to do? I mean, I know now that I shouldn’t have encouraged this and, knowing that Aspen was there looking for me, I shouldn’t have gone with Lily. I couldn’t see around the adrenaline and lust to see that I was about to make the biggest mistake. I allowed Lily to pull me under the bleachers. The fucking bleachers that Aspen would have to walk by. Before long, it was hot and heavy. That is where Aspen found us.”

“Oh, fuck man. Alright, I can see where this would be the big fuck up, but surely she isn’t still holding that against you?”

I rub my hand across the back of my neck before another sigh escapes me. “I wish that was the worst of it. Try showing up to her eighteenth birthday with a girl dry humping your dick and sucking on your neck the minute the bond snapped into place.”

He sucks a breath through his teeth. “Please tell me that is the last worst thing you did to your mate.”

“I wish I could say that my dumbassery quit there. She took off to college, and I thought I would never get another chance with my mate. Surely, she would find some guy that would show her the world she deserved and I would never hold a candle to them. I couldn’t blame her. The winter after she left for college, she came home to visit. Of course, Willow and Hazel decided we should have a party to celebrate. I might have shown up with another woman.”

His pint glass slams down on the bar top as his mouth hangs open in shock. “You are a fucking dumbass. I don’t even understand how you are getting all these girls into your bed at this rate.”

“Getting them in my bed isn’t hard. I offer them exactly what they are looking for, say all the right things, and bam! They are putty in my hands. We aren’t talking about a lot of work since there are no strings involved. It’s just sex and they go on their way.”

Xavior is still staring at me.

I swipe my hand across my forehead, nose, and mouth. “Do I have something on my face?”

“No, I just can’t believe the things coming out of your mouth. I’m staring because the way you talk about women is demeaning. Why am I here, Rick?”

I know he is getting agitated, and I don’t blame him. I have been a complete ass, not only to these women, but especially toward Aspen. It’s time to put that all behind me and hopefully win my mate over.

“I know I fucked up in the past. You are here because I need help winning my mate over. How do I get her to forgive me?” I paused before admitting, “I should probably also mention that I showed up yesterday at Find Me Between the Pages, where she works, and demanded she give in to the mating.” I drop my head and close my eyes.

After a few moments of Xavior not saying anything, I finally lift my head to see him glaring at the sign behind Nix. “Say something, Xav.”

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He whips his head to me. “You’re a fucking asshole, Rick. Plain and simple. After everything you did, your brightest idea was todemandthat she give in to it?”

“Look, I know I fucked up.”

Nix snorts from where he is cleaning the glasses. I cut my eyes to him and narrow them. He just shrugs his shoulders and keeps working.

Xavior lets out a deep breath. “In order for this to really work, you are going to have to show her you are serious about being what she needs in a mate. Didn’t you listen when the elders would teach us about the mating process? You know, the courting phase? The one where you are supposed to show your mate what you can provide them?”

He looks at me as I just stare at him. Honestly, I never took those classes seriously. I went because our parents and elders forced us to. I didn’t know other people actually listened.

“Oh, fuck me. You didn’t pay attention during them, did you? I can see it written all across your face. Well, that is the exact reason why your mate hates you and why you are out here floundering like a fish out of water. Step one, show up for her. Not for your benefit, but for hers. You also have your mating gifts to purchase. You know, something to show she will never go without food, so her favorite food. There is something for her home, showing you want to build a home with her. Some kind of jewelry or expensive gift to show off your wealth and what you will provide. The final item is a comfy item, to show that she will always find comfort in her mate.” He looks at me expectantly.

“Yeah, I don’t remember any of that from the classes. Got any suggestions on what to buy her?”

Xavior throws his hands up.

“I’m kidding. Well, kind of, but I will figure those out on my own. I mean, I have something in mind, but I don’t know how she will feel about it.”

He slams back the last of his pint before he slides the glass across the bar to Nix. “He’s paying for that pint.” Standing up from his bar stool, he grabs his jacket from the back of the chair. He shakes his head as he says, “Listen, you got this, but for once think with the head on your shoulders and not the one dangling between your thighs. You know the goddess has her reasons. But I am out. See you around, Rick.”

I watch as he exits out of Pour Me Another just as two blondes come spilling into the bar. One of them sees me looking that way and she gives me this cute little wave. I turn back to the bar to see Nix looking at me with that look. You know the one that says, you’ve got to be kidding me right now.

I shake my head once as I pick up my drink. I have to stay away from other women. No matter how enticing the offer is, I can’t give in to these women, especially since this town is small enough that it will get back to Aspen.

Rapping my knuckles on the bar top, Nix looks up to me as I give him a nod. Not long after, he’s dropping my tab in front of me, and I quickly sign off on it. The bar stool squeaks as I push it back. My navy peacoat is just warm enough in these colder temperatures, especially since it’s not a far walk to my cabin from here. My hand grazes the door when a small hand grabs the crook of my elbow.

“Hey, handsome, where are you off to? Care to have some company?”

I follow the arm up to the woman staring at me with lust and hope swirling in her eyes. I give a gentle shake of my head as I pick her hand up from my arm. “Not tonight. Have a good time.”

Her mouth drops open. I know she is shocked. I have a reputation, after all. It’s not like people, especially women, don’t know that you can come here about an hour or two after me and I will want to take someone home. Without looking back, I step out into the cold, crisp air.

The bar is on the opposite side of town from the pack lands, which is fine tonight, because I need the time to think. There is a small dusting of snow on the sidewalk. I know there is a storm rolling in. You can always tell because we have a light dusting of snow that quickly melts a couple of days before the downpour of snow. My hands tighten in the pockets of my coat. I hate winter. I don’t want to be trapped inside my empty home with nothing but my poor decisions to keep me company.

A soft giggle floats across the wind as a couple walk down the sidewalk on the other side of the street. Her face is tilted toward his as she laughs at something he said. It’s clear even from over here just how much they love each other. I can’t help but be envious of that. I mean, even Aspen has someone to spend time with.

My chest tightens as I come closer to Scoop, There It Is. Aspen must be close. The window illuminates the sidewalk in front of me. Maybe fate is giving me another chance tonight. I shouldn’t, given how much alcohol I’ve consumed, but maybe I can fix what I messed up yesterday. Just as the thought is fully blooming in my mind, I look into the window, only for the bubble to burst right there. Aspen is close, but she is also on a date with Chase. I watch as he touches her arm, and she smiles warmly at him. Watching how she allows him to get so close to her and seeing the adoration shining in her eyes kills me. I want that look. I want to touch her arm and not have her recoil.

I don't know yet what will show her I am serious, but I will start with showing up each day. That has to be something, right?

Chapter 5

Aspen

Between running the bookstore and Chase's Sentinel responsibilities, we haven't had any time to spend together. Chase's role in his pack is similar to what we call our pack Beta. Second in command to his Prime aka Alpha, as well as being the deputy of our town, he is generally either working for the Sheriff's department or for his leader. Outside of the texts we send to each other throughout the day, we have otherwise been doing our own thing. I love he showed up today at the exact time that Warrick was doing... whatever it was he was doing. I really can't wrap my head around that one. It's been four years, almost five at this rate, that we have known that we were mates. He has never once shown an interest in me or in completing our mating, so why now?

The dating situationship between Chase and I isn't typical since we don't do all the usual date things like him picking me up, paying the tab, or romantic gestures that lead to more. We really are more like friends who spend time together to give each other the attention, compassion, caring, and devotion that you would seek in a relationship. It works rather well for both of us. He knows about Warrick and everything that he has done up to this point. Just like I know, Chase hasn't found his mates yet, even though mating in the mountain lion pack is a bit different from ours. We haven't really gone in depth with it, he always seems so secretive about the whole thing. Almost as if outsiders aren't supposed to know. All he told me is that it's similar to ours in the sense that we have fated mates, but instead of only one person being fated to him, he has two. He also just casually mentioned that it will be two females, as if that is completely normal. Maybe one day I will pull more information from him about it, especially if I'm going to try to help him find these said females.

When Chase came by earlier, it was to ask if I would be available for a date tonight, but since I had new stock that came in, I told him I could do a dessert date. So, here we are going to Scoop, There It Is, our very own version of Cold Stone Creamery. I love you can design your own types of ice cream by blending together different flavors.

The bell above the door chimes as I walk into the 80s retro style ice cream parlor. Sally, the owner, really went all out with the bold colors, geometric shapes on the walls, and the checkerboard floors. You would think it would hurt your eyes to look at, but she successfully achieved a cohesive look without overwhelming the customers. There are round tables littered throughout with metal and black chairs around them. It's such a fun place, especially with the throwback jams coming from the jukebox in the corner.

Sally's head pops up when the door closes behind me. "Aspen! How lovely to see you! Where is that cute mountain lion that always seems to be one step behind you?"

It's not often that people will mention our shifter sides, but Sally is a bighorn sheep shifter. Having a shop down here is great for her. It's rare that we see their species, as they dwell in the caves in the mountains. Literal cave dwellers. I've heard stories that they have their own town deep in the mountains and each family has their own house inside.

"Uh, he should be here any minute. I just finished up at the bookstore, so it didn't take me long to walk over here."

My fingers run across the table tops as I make my way to the ice cream display. She has all the base flavors you could dream of and some funky flavors like "nacho cheese" and "beef." I don't want to ever know what the beef one tastes like, but she said that the lion shifters like it, so who am I to judge?

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“Did you want to start your order while you wait on him?” Sally asks, as I look over the options.

Honestly, I get the same thing each time, so I’m not sure why I bother. But, I do like to see if she has something new to try.

“Do you have anything new?” My finger rests on my chin as I look over her chalkboard menu above her head. “What is ‘The Gray Stuff’?” My nose is scrunched in disgust just at the name of it.

She lets out a laugh. “Do you remember in Beauty and the Beast when Belle is at the dinner with Lumiere and Cogsworth? She is asked to try the gray stuff? Well, everyone has always tried to figure out what exactly it is. So, this is my take on what I think the ‘gray stuff’ is. Do you want to try a sample of it?”

“Uh...I guess,” I say hesitantly. It’s cute and all, but it doesn’t even sound appealing.

She takes a small wooden spoon and scoops out the smooth, gray matter. It has almost a pudding look to it and doesn’t look like anything like ice cream. She holds the spoon out over the top of the display case to where I can grab it. I draw the spoon to my face and take a whiff. It has an almost tropical scent to it, with a hint of coconut and pineapple. I don’t allow myself to think about it for too long and stick the spoon in my mouth. It feels like what I think Hawaii would taste like, exploding in my taste buds. The coconut pairs well with the pineapple, and there is a hint of orange juice.

The bell chimes again as Chase comes inside. “There you are! I thought I would have

to drag you out of the bookstore, so I went there first. Thankfully, I found it all closed up.” He slides in next to me, planting a gentle kiss on my temple. “What you got there?” He looks at the spoon and then at my face.

“Sally has a new flavor inspired by the ‘gray stuff’ in Beauty and the Beast. She encouraged me to try it.”

Chase looks through the display case down to the container of the literal gray stuff sitting there. His nose scrunched just like mine did.

“It tastes like Hawaii, something I doubt the one in the movie did.” I eye Sally suspiciously.

She simply shrugs her shoulders like she knew that but wanted to have fun with it.

Chase holds his hand up to prevent her from even asking. “No, thank you, Sally. I think we’ll both take our usual.”

She gets to work on our order while Chase leads me over to the table.

After we are seated, he looks at me with concern written across his face. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Sighing, I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know why he was there. Outside of him demanding that I give into the mateship, I don’t know what came over him. We have known about this for, going on, five years. It doesn’t make sense to suddenly decide that he wants to do this. And then to have the audacity to show up and demand I do it? I just don’t get it.”

Chase runs his hand across the tabletop to grab my fidgeting hands. “I know that you are thrown off by him showing up, but I don’t think it was a rash decision. We both

know that he doesn't have a shortage of women to entertain him. Maybe, just maybe, he realized that he wants something more than just a fling. Something clearly changed in his way of thinking if he showed up for the first time in the bookstore."

I glare at him, and he laughs at my expression.

"I didn't say he did it the right way, because clearly we both know that wasn't the way to do it. I'm just saying maybe it's time you both gave into the mateship. Would it be that bad?"

My head drops and hangs. "It's not just giving in to the mateship, Chase. He's been cheating on me and rubbing women in my face ever since then. How am I supposed to move past that?"

His face softens with understanding. "I'm not saying that you should let him off easy and jump right into his arms. But I know how much you want children and a home. You and I both know there is only one way that will happen. Make him work for it. If he is truly that serious about giving this a shot, then make him earn it."

"Yeah ... I could do that. I'm not sure what I could do to make him work for it. But, I am sure that I can think of something."

He squeezes my hand. "You don't have to do anything. Just keep being yourself and he will show you if he is truly ready."

I smile at him. We might not be truly dating or sexually involved with each other, but this man gets me. He is more than just a friend; he is like my best friend. We let the world believe that we are dating and, in some way we are; but really we are just friends giving each other what they need.

We sit in companionable silence as we eat our ice cream. Only chatting here and

there about different things. He tells me about the latest run they went on as a pack, since mountain lions have to run at least once a week or their beasts will become restless and more likely to take over. It's fascinating to compare the ways of pack life between the two species.

I feel a tug at my chest, which means that Warrick is near. I rarely deal with it because it's unusual that we are around each other. Pack meetings have really become the only time that I am near him. It's almost as if we agreed to town being my area and pack lands being his.

"Do I get cuddles tonight or is that off the table because of the whole Warrick thing?" Chase says with a hint of mischief.

A smile spreads across my face as I feel the pull in my chest tug so hard that I know he has to be right outside. Without looking, I tell him, "I am 100% on board to cuddle. If you are done, I say we head out now."

His eyebrow raises in a question. "Uh, yeah I'm done."

He gathers up our trash, taking it to the trash can. Scooting back in my chair, I grab my jacket and wave to Sally as I follow behind Chase. The tug is only getting stronger as I move toward the door, which can only mean that he is right outside. Let's see how much he likes it when I rub a man in his face, like he has all those women. Pulling my jacket on, I smile at Chase as he holds the door open for me.

"After you, my dear."

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He is such a gentleman. Whichever lucky ladies ends up with him should really cherish this creature. With all his caring, compassion, and love, he is surely going to make his mates happy. He pulls me under his arm when that first gust of cold air breezes through our coats. Nestled under his arm, I allow his warmth to seep into my soul.

“You okay, Aspen?”

Looking up at him, I see the warm glow of his amber eyes shine with love. “Yes, always. Especially when I’m with you.”

It doesn’t take us long to reach the edge of the pack territory. It never does and, sometimes, I wish it would. Chase spins me around to face him. His fingers trail down the side of my face as he sweeps my hair back.

“You are so beautiful, Aspen. You deserve a love like the ones you see in the books you read. If he doesn’t give you that, then he doesn’t deserve you. Chase after that love, and never settle for less.” He leans in and places a soft kiss on my forehead.

A quiet whimper leaves my throat. “Come home with me tonight. I don’t want to be alone.”

He shakes his head gently. “I would if I could, but you know I’m not allowed on pack lands, especially now that your mate's best friend is the pack leader.”

“Silas isn’t...”

He puts one finger across my lips.

“I know Silas isn’t that type of leader, but if he found another man, especially a different species, around his best friend's mate, he would choose Warrick over me. And that’s okay. I would expect him to do that.”

I let out a heavy sigh, the weight of loneliness seeping in. “Fine. I just wish for once that I didn’t have to be alone at night.”

Pulling me into a hug, he wraps me tightly in his arms. “I know you don’t and hopefully you won’t be alone for much longer.”

My head rests on his chest as I listen to the steady beat of his heart. Maybe I will give Warrick a chance, but I want to talk to Nova first. She could give me some advice about making him work for it. I just wish we wouldn’t have had to go through all of this. Why couldn’t I have a normal mateship?

“If you want a love like those in your story books, then you already know that love is never easy, quick, or without challenge,” Aisling pipes in.

“I just want to be loved, Aisling. I want to have a mate to come home to, someone to make a home with. Some days, I wish Chase wasn’t a mountain lion,” I say back to her.

“I know, Aspen. He is a great guy. He smells awful, but he is super caring and sweet. Alas, it wasn’t in the cards for us. Warrick will come around. Give him a chance.”

With that, she leaves to go back to the subconscious part of my mind.

“It’s time for you to get to your cabin. I know you are a wolf and all that, but I don’t think these temperatures support long-term standing in them. Especially in our human

forms.”

“I know. I just was soaking up as much contact as I could before you left me in my big empty cabin,” I say while pushing my lower lip out in a pout.

He pinches it between his fingers gently. “Quit being so dramatic. We both know that you will put on a murder mystery show and crash out before the first ten minutes of the episode airs.”

I glare at him as I stomp my foot like a toddler. “That’s not true at all.”

He laughs before he turns to head to the mountain lion territory. “Of course not. You would never do that at all.” His laugh rings out around us. “Good night, Aspen.”

I watch for a few seconds as he walks away. The tugging in my chest never lightens up. How I wish I could follow the sensation and have my mate wrap me in his arms.

I might not be able to have my mate, but maybe I can help Chase find his mates. They obviously aren’t here, but how hard can it be to find them? Surely there aren’t that many mountain lion shifters that we can’t find her.

Chapter 6

Warrick

After tossing and turning all night long, I finally gave up around 5 A.M. I considered several ideas on how to win over my mate, but I finally landed on showing up each day at her shop. She can’t refuse me if I am a paying customer, right?

On my way down to the bookstore, I pause outside the window of Flick the Bean. Does Aspen like coffee? How would I even know what coffee to get

her?Sighing, I'm just about to give up on the idea when I hear someone clearing their throat beside me. Gail. I don't even need to look because one small inhale has already told me everything I need to know.

"Good morning, Gail," I say without looking at her.

Hazel is busily getting the shop ready for the morning. That is another problem: Hazel. How am I going to get past her without the third degree? Would she even willingly tell me what Aspen likes for a coffee, or would she intentionally tell me the wrong drink?

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“It’s so lovely to see you out so early in the morning and in front of Hazel’s coffee shop. Could you be here for a certain mate and hoping to win her over with coffee?”

Sighing again, I rub a hand down my face. “Can you help me? I was going to ask Hazel, but I’m afraid that she is going to purposefully sabotage me.”

“Get her a cappuccino with a sprinkle of cinnamon. She likes it warm, not hot. So on the walk over to the bookstore, take the lid off to help cool it down.” She winks at me before heading down the sidewalk.

Shaking my head, I open the door to Flick the Bean. How does she always know when and where to be? I haven’t told anyone that I am trying to win over Aspen, so how did she know?

As soon as the bell chimes above my head, Hazel looks up with her welcome dying in her throat before she even says it. “Why are you here, Warrick?”

Shrugging, I say, “Can’t a man have a nice cup of coffee in the morning?”

She pops her hip, placing a fisted hand on it. “Not a man who has never drank a cup of coffee in the entire lifetime I have known him. What are you really up to?”

“Listen, I know you don’t like me, and I know I’ve never given you a reason to like me. But I also know that I’ve fucked up when it comes to Aspen. I can’t take any of it back and I can’t take away the pain I caused her. All I can do is try to be the mate she deserves.” It feels good to release all these thoughts that have been tormenting me, even if it’s to someone who can’t stand me. But of all of Aspen’s friends, Hazel is the

most understanding.

“You think a coffee is going to change her feelings toward you?” Her eyes soften with understanding.

“I know it won’t make her leap into my arms and declare to the world we are mates. It’s just ... look, I was up all night tossing and turning. I saw her with Chase last night. I’ve never been on the receiving end of feeling that kind of pain. Despite all the times she saw me with other women and felt hurt, she has never done the same to me. To make it worse, I know she did it on purpose. She sensed me outside and chose to walk arm in arm with him all the way back to the pack land.”

Her face softens even more than it already had. “You didn’t like it, did you?”

I sigh. “No, I didn’t like it. But I deserve it. Anyway, can I get a cappuccino with cinnamon on top, please?”

Her mouth drops open before she closes it and shakes her head. “Gail?”

I nod my head, because how else would I have her order? It doesn’t take her long to fill my order, and she shows me the cinnamon heart she created on the top of her coffee.

A concerned look crosses her face before she says, “I’m a little worried about this. I’m sure you mean well, but you really broke her heart when you cheated on her. If you are serious about this, then I better never hear about another woman anywhere near you. You don’t want to know what Willow wanted to do to you that night, and every time you rubbed a girl in Aspen’s face.”

I nod my head as I grab her coffee and turn to head out the door. “Don’t worry, Hazel. I won’t be with anyone else. I only want my mate.”

She nods her head as she goes back to whatever she is doing on her phone.

Carefully, I walk down to the bookstore, ensuring I follow Gail's instruction of leaving the lid off the coffee to help cool it down. Before I make it to her shop, I pop the lid back on the coffee to keep from spilling it. Right as I elbow the door open, Aspen is already glaring at me. My eyebrows shoot up. How is she already mad at me? I literally just got here.

"Why are you here, Warrick?" If she was a teapot, she would have steam coming out of her ears.

"Seems to be the going question of the day. I thought I would bring you a coffee and hang out with you while you work."

Shock flits across her face. "You can't just hang out here, Warrick. This is a business and not a hangout spot."

I look at the cozy, overstuffed chairs sitting in front of her massive picture window, then back to her.

"Those are for paying customers, not asshole mates," she says, clearly reading my thoughts.

"Fair enough, will you at least take the coffee I got for you?" I ask, while holding it out in front of me. It feels more like I'm trying to coax a wild animal to trust me than my mate. I know I deserve her hesitation, but does she have to act like I'm going to poison her? Maybe I have more work to do than I've considered, if she won't even take a coffee from me.

"If I take it, will you leave?"

I nod my head, and she walks over and practically snatches it from my hands. Thank the goddess that I secured the lid, otherwise, she would have spilled coffee all over herself.

“There, I took your coffee. Now go!” She takes a couple of steps back from me, ensuring there is enough distance between us.

Holding both my hands up in surrender, I turn and walk back out the door I had only managed a handful of steps inside of.

I walk down the sidewalk back toward the pack land before I come to a stop. A deep, soul aching sigh leaves me as I turn my face toward the sky. The snow is slowly coming down, and each flake drops on my face and melts. Alright, that plan didn’t work, not that I really expected one coffee to work. I’ll just have to keep showing up each day until she lets me in. I won’t let anything or anyone get in the way of what I want most—which is, her. Hopefully, she will see how serious I am and that I’m willing to make the changes needed to be her mate.

An hour later, as I’m looking over the notes from the scouts, I feel an ache in my legs from sitting too long at my desk. Stretching out my legs, Wraith, my wolf, whines.

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“Can’t we go for a walk around the perimeter? I’m tired of sitting here watching you look over boring paperwork.” I can feel his restlessness like a nervous energy buzzing through my body.

“Yeah, I guess we can go for a walk. I don’t see why not,” I respond back to him as I push myself up from my desk chair.

“Thank the goddess. I thought I was going to die of boredom before you finally stopped,” Wraith grumbles.

“Bit dramatic, don’t you think?” I ask, with a note of humor in my voice.

“No,” is all he says back to me. And he says I’m the dramatic one.

The cool air breezes past me as I swing open the door to step outside. The scent of wildflowers is strong as they break their way through the cold soil. It doesn’t take me long to find my normal path around the pack lands as I walk at a leisurely pace, with no real purpose in mind other than spending time in the wild.

I’m lost in my thoughts when the smell of juniper berry, cedarwood, and musk floats across the air to me. What’s Selene doing out here?

She is squatting down with her phone held out in front of her, clicking away as she snaps photos. Meandering over to her, I observe what she is taking photos of—the Silvery Lupines that must have recently bloomed.

Clearing my throat, I say, “What are you doing?”

A startled gasp rips from her as she whips around to face me, almost falling to the ground in her movements. “Goddess Warrick, you scared the shit out of me.”

I flick my eyebrow up, giving her a questioning look. “Well, I wasn’t exactly expecting to find you out here on my walking path around the land. So needless to say, you surprised me too. So what are you doing exactly?”

She points down to the bunch of flowers nestled at the bottom of the huge aspen tree. “I knew it wouldn’t be too much longer before the Silvery Lupines would bloom and I was hoping to catch them in their first blooms. I have a bit of an obsession with them since they are kind of named after the Lupines.”

My gaze doesn’t move as I consider what she said. Clearly worried that she has upset me, she rushes out to say, “You do know that Lupine means wolf, right?” she asks nervously.

“I didn’t. I didn’t focus in high school unless it had to do with football or food. Anything else was quickly forgotten.”

She laughs as she says, “I get that. School sucks. I’m glad it’s almost over, to say the least. So I don’t blame you for not paying attention.”

My shoulders shrug. “Yeah, I probably should have taken it more seriously, but oh well. So you’re out here taking photos of flowers all by yourself?”

Her cheeks blush as she tucks her phone behind her back. “Yeah, it’s just something I do for fun. It’s just a little hobby.”

I hold out my hand. “Do you want to show me?”

Her mouth opens and closes as she processes what I said. “Uh...do you really want to

see them? I'm not that good."

My head nods as I continue to hold my hand out.

She swipes her finger across the screen, unlocking her phone. I watch as she flicks through apps until she lands on the album of the photos she must have taken over the course of several of these walks. I can't believe I've never bumped into her before this. Her hand shakes as she hands over the device, her eyes immediately dropping to the ground after it's safely in my hand.

I look between her and the device. Clicking the first photo, I scan through each one, noting her attention to detail. She is really freaking good at this. "Not that good," my ass. She even has photos of deer as they graze in the morning sun. How she was able to get that close without spooking them is an amazing feat in itself.

"Selene, these are awesome. What do you mean, you aren't 'that good'?" I ask as I continue to flip through the photos.

My eyes flick up at her when I see her shrug her shoulders. "I don't know. I just do it for fun with my phone. Nothing to really celebrate. Sometimes I just want to get away from everyone and capture the beauty I see."

I turn off the phone and hold it out to her. When her eyes meet mine, I hope that mine are full of reassurance. "Selene, you have a talent, that is for sure. Don't downplay it just because you're afraid of what others will say. Have you thought about buying a camera and exploring this as more than a hobby?"

She twists her foot from side to side, a nervous tic, I'm sure. "Not really. You're the only person who's seen them besides me. I've never even mentioned it to Mom and Dad."

“Isn’t your birthday coming up?”

She looks at me with confusion. “Yeah, why?”

“I think you should ask for a camera for your birthday and really pursue this.”

“Yeah...maybe. You really think they are that good?” she asks sheepishly.

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“I don’t think it, I know it. You have genuine talent and with a little bit of training, you could really do this as a career.”

Her foot is back to shifting from side to side. “Well...I’m going to head back, I guess.”

“Wait,” I rush out. “Would you like to walk with me? My wolf is restless, and I planned to take a casual walk around. Could use some company and you can tell me more about these Silvery Lupines.”

“Yeah, I would like that.”

We take off together as she tells me all about these flowers that I’ve never taken a single moment to acknowledge. It’s amazing the things I’ve missed in all the times I’ve walked this trail. When she has run through all the back history of the Silvery Lupines, she moves on to other flowers and plants scattered around the land I’ve spent years walking.

This kid just made me realize that I’ve been blindly walking this path, maybe life, this whole time. It took stumbling upon her to realize I’ve been just moving through life without seeing it. How much else have I missed in my complacency?

For once in my life, I’m listening to hear what the person is saying and not just to know when to respond. Something I’m sure Aspen will love to learn, since I remember all the times I was only partially listening when she talked about her books.

Chapter 7

Aspen

“My freaking back is killing me. You know what they don’t tell you in the books? Oh, that you are going to feel bloated, you are going to hurt everywhere, and that no matter which way you sit, you won’t be comfortable,” Nova whines as she walks with me to the ice cream parlor.

“You aren’t even that far along. Surely, it can’t be that bad already?” I say, as I loop my arm with hers.

Sighing, she chuckles. “Okay, I might be overreacting, but no one told me that wolves grow at a more rapid pace than a human. So, yeah, I might be only four months along, but I am more like six months in wolf growth.”

“I’ll allow it,” I say with a chuckle.

The bell chimes as we walk into Scoop, There It Is! and Sally glances up at us from behind the display. “Ladies, so lovely to see you. I didn’t expect to see you again so soon, Aspen,” she says with a sly smile on her face.

Nova looks from Sally to me with a questioning look on her face.

I shake my head. “Chase and I were here last night for a late night date. That’s all.”

Nova smiles warmly at that. “Well, isn’t that sweet? Although, that does confuse me on why I’m here then.”

“Yeah, about that. I’ll explain once we have our ice cream and are sitting down.” My head bows to hide my embarrassment.

It is weird to ask someone for advice about your mate while dating someone else. I haven't really had a chance to explain to Nova that Chase isn't that kind of boyfriend. I'm sure that she thinks that I have a real boyfriend and I want to chat with her about Warrick. Could be pretty confusing without all the details.

With our ice creams in hand, we both head to one of the silver top tables and sit across from each other. We each take a spoonful of our ice cream and chuckle as we both make humming noises when the ice cream hits our tongues. We found out that we love the same type of ice cream, too, which only further confirms that we were meant to be soul matches.

"Alright, you have held this off long enough. Cough it up. Why am I here?" Nova asks with a quirk of her eyebrow.

"So, obviously you have heard, and know, that I am dating Chase. But what you don't know is that we are more in a situationship. As I'm sure you remember, we can't mate with anyone outside of our fated mate, and definitely not outside of our species. Chase and I decided that we didn't want to be alone anymore, so we decided to give each other that. We don't have sex or anything like that. Just someone to hang out with, someone to cuddle with, etcetera. It's been nice, but he is too perfect to waste all his time on me instead of looking for his mate."

"Wait, I'm confused, I thought you wanted to talk to me about Warrick?" Her eyebrows are scrunched in confusion.

"We are getting there. I asked you here because, while Silas didn't do the same things to you that Warrick did to me, I know that you made him work for your relationship. I don't know what to do."

She lets out a soft giggle. "Yeah, I made him work for it alright, but I don't know how I would have felt if he had done the same things as Warrick. Although, if you are

serious about it, and it's really something that you want, then for sure I would make him work really hard for it. You want him to prove to you that he won't choose another girl over you again."

My hand slaps down on the table. "Yes, exactly."

She gently lays her hand on top of mine. "I know you are wondering what he will need to do or how he will prove it to you. Only you have that answer. I can't even tell you really what it was that clicked for me, but there just was a point where I no longer held the bond against him."

Nodding my head, I say, "That's what I was worried about." I sigh again. "I want to move forward. I've always dreamed of being a mother and sharing my favorite stories with my pups. Reading to them while they fall asleep. Those kinds of things. The only way to achieve that dream is to give Warrick a chance to show me he can do that for me."

"I get it and I'm here for you, even if it's ice cream dates. These days, I'm always down for ice cream dates." Her smile lights up her eyes.

"Speaking of, how are you and the babies doing?"

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I watch as she rubs a hand slowly across her belly. “They recently started kicking and it feels a lot like they are seeing who can kick me in the ribs the hardest. Rude! Oh! Last night, Baby A had hiccups and Baby B did NOT like that at all. They kept pushing on Baby A. It was the wildest thing to watch. I can already tell these two are going to be a handful.”

“That sounds like a wild experience. When do you find out what the genders are?” I can’t help but ask so many questions. I’m envious of her, but not in a bad way. I just want what she has, a caring mate with babies on the way.

“Well, the doctor said that since they are wolves, we should be able to find out in a few weeks, instead of twenty weeks like most human babies. I have already asked Silas if we can do a gender reveal party because, hello! I am pregnant with twins.” She giggles into her hand.

“Oh, I didn’t know that we were going to do all these things! How exciting! Well, I can’t wait for that. Gives me something to look forward to in the coming weeks!”

“Oh, Aspen, I’m sure that you will have more things to look forward to than that. He will come around. I’m sure of it.”

I nod my head once as I take another spoonful of ice cream into my mouth. I hope that he does. While I won’t make it easy for him, I also want my mate.

I really like the idea of him having to plan and put in the effort to prove he is serious about being my mate, but it won't be easy letting go of the past and trusting him again. There were so many times that I needed him, but he was with another woman.

Nights of depression over missing my father, wishing I could call him to hear him tell me how proud he was of me. Wishing to hear his words of encouragement instead of the hole of his absence. The one person in my life who should understand it, but I can't talk to because he is too busy for his mate. How many nights I've been laying in bed wishing my mate was there to hold me when the inner demons and negative thoughts grew so loud that I was drowning in them, but instead he was with someone else? When I officially opened my bookstore, I should have been celebrating that big moment with my mate.

"I don't know that he will jump through the hoops, but if you think that he will, then we shall see. I did want to mention something, though. Aside from my mate having to earn his place back, I want to help Chase find his mates. I might not be able to find my happily ever after, but maybe we can help Chase find his."

She lifts her eyebrow in question. "I'm at a loss here. I barely understand how this works for wolves and now you want me to help a completely different species find his mates?"

I can't help but laugh. "I forget how little you know about the shifter world. The mountain lion shifters don't mate with just one person. I don't know much about it yet. At least not more than what he has told me. All I know is that it's like how we are fated to someone, but they have two mates instead of just one. Weird, right? He casually dropped that it would be two women, but didn't really elaborate more on that. I'm not sure why he was so secretive about it, given that we aren't really more than friends. Maybe one day I can coax it out of him."

Her mouth is hanging open. "Now, that is something I want to learn all about. Would it be invasive if I just bombard him with all kinds of questions?"

The laugh that bursts out of me is so loud that even Sally looks up from what she is doing with a questioning look on her face.

“Shh,” Nova says with a finger on her lips, while the blush blooms across her face.

I am still laughing when I say, “Yeah, Chase probably would answer all of your questions. He is such a sweetheart that he probably would just to make you happy.”

We spend the rest of our time chatting and catching up while finishing our ice cream. I can’t wait to tell Chase all the questions that Nova wants to ask him now. He will be so embarrassed, but it will be so cute to watch. Also, I want to tell him about wanting to give Warrick a chance to earn his place back.

I wonder if I can get Chase to play along and give Warrick a taste of his own medicine. Wonder how he will like it to watch me kiss another man or sit in another man’s lap. Let him see how it feels—and if he’s willing to prove that he’s going to put in the work to win my heart over.

Chapter 8

Wraith

Gag, how does she even put up with his smell? I suck in a breath as I try to move away from it. He hasn’t marked our mate, but I can tell that they’ve seen each other today. His smell is all over her. I know he is sweet to her, but fuck, he smells awful.

Every time that I smell him on her, I have the urge to pin her down, rutting her till the only smell on her and around her is mine. But Warrick had to ruin that for me with those smelly women he brings around. Listen, they don’t smell gross in the way you would think. More like a sour smell because they aren’t our mate.

The idea is that you are supposed to be repulsed by the smell and not sleep with them. I don’t know how he does it, but it pisses me off every time he lays with someone other than Aspen. I’ve been bitching at him for years to suck it the fuck up and claim

our mate. But now he finally wants to listen.

I shake my head from side to side as I make my rounds around Aspen's cabin. She doesn't know that every single night I check to make sure she is safely back home, and that nobody is lurking around. Not sure how she hasn't figured it out, since my scent is still here in the morning when she leaves.

I lean back on my haunches and put my front paws on the lip of the window to Aspen's room. She comes walking out of her bathroom with a silk tank top and a short set on that is hugging her curves perfectly. When she gets to her vanity, I watch in rapt attention as she puts her leg on the stool and those silk shorts ride up. Her cheek is peeking out of the shorts. She bends over to lather her leg with lotion and I can see the indentation of the one place I want to bury myself in.

My tongue runs across my lips as lust courses through my veins.

"It's your fault that we aren't inside this cabin and inside our mate," I growl into my mind.

"I know I fucked up, okay? You also know that I have been trying to get her to forgive me. I just don't think she will, though." He sounds so defeated.

"Chin up, Warrick. Aisling has told me that she is on board with the mating and she will do what she can to help convince Aspen, too."

"Really?" The excitement bleeds through our joined mind space. I can feel it building inside of us.

"Yes, really. But you have to keep your fucking dick out of anyone that isn't our mate. Surely you can manage that, right?" I bark at him.

I can sense his embarrassment. “Yeah, I can do that. I haven’t even brought anyone around in several months, you know that.”

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“Keep it that way.”

An acidic scent comes across the breeze. Looking back through the window, I find Aspen is looking at a photo of her with Warrick after a football game. I can sense the unease within her. Even though we aren't mated, we can still get a vague sense of feelings from our mate.

I want to go in there and ease her by inspiring a different sense of feelings in her. I want to watch our mate whimper and plead underneath us as we wring out every ounce of pleasure from her body.

She clambers into her bed and turns off her bedside light. She cuddles down into her comforter and I'm just about to turn away, until I see her hand whip out from under the comforter and open the drawer next to her bed. Leaning closer to the window, I see her pull out something neon pink. What is she doing?

That's when I hear a click and the hum of vibrations start to come from under the comforter. Her soft whimpers and moans ring out through the air. Oh, fuck. I have to go before I do something.

Jumping down from the edge of the window, her moans pick up and the struggle to leave is harder than I thought. The smell of her slick is perfuming the air and trying to pull me back to her. I release a whimper of my own as I push myself away. Before I leave, I mark my territory to try to calm my urge to break down the door and mark her myself.

With one last look over my shoulder, I look at her cabin and my mate, who is busy

pleasuring herself. “One day, Aspen, you will be mine, and you won’t need to do this by yourself anymore.”

Chapter 9

Aspen

Fumbling with my key ring to find the door key to the bookstore, I don’t realize that someone is standing there until I almost bump into them. Their feet come into my view as I let out a sigh. Not again.

“What are you doing here, Warrick?” My eyes pan up from his booted feet to his dimpled smile as he holds another coffee up for me to take.

“Well, you said that I can only be here if I’m a paying customer. So, I’m here to buy a book.” He says it like it makes the most logical sense.

I stare at him. “Showing up before I even open the doors with a coffee in hand...” I let the sentence hang.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Had to make sure my favorite girl had the energy to tackle her day. Plus, it never hurts to get a jump start.”

I just shake my head. Clearly, he isn’t going to go away. Pushing the door open, I flip on the lights and they pulse on. The first moments inside the shop when I watch it come alive are always the best. I enjoy the quiet and the serenity that comes with it. The office lights hum as I put my belongings down on my desk. Not sure where Warrick has gone, I come back out to find him slowly walking down one of the bookshelves, reading the spines of the books.

I walk up silently to have an opportunity to watch him without his guard up. His

finger runs along the spines until he pulls a book out and flips it over to read the synopsis. He lets out a quiet 'humph' before placing it back on the shelf. When I clear my throat, he spins around.

"I have a new delivery of books that just came in that need to be put away. So, if you are going to be here, then you need to be over there in the lounge area," I say as I point in the direction of the two chairs with a small table between them by the front windows.

He looks over to where I'm pointing and then back at me. "Do you want some help with the delivery?" He lifts his eyebrow in question.

A mischievous thought crosses my mind. He wants to help, does he? "You really want to help?"

"I'm here. Put me to use."

"Alright, you asked for this. I don't want to hear any bitching then," I say as I turn toward the backroom where I have the boxes of books that were delivered yesterday.

I don't want to tell him, but having someone help me do this is such a relief. He follows behind me as we walk into the backroom. I have shelves of back stock in here with a work table for sorting the books and scanning them into the system.

"Okay, so these ten boxes were delivered yesterday. I have to scan them into the system and then we have to put them out on the floor. A lot of them are extra inventory, so we will also have boxes that will only be set on these back stock shelves," I say as I walk, pointing at the shelves. He silently follows behind me.

One glance over my shoulder and I realize that he is taking in everything I'm saying. Let's see how long he can keep up this ruse. Walking over to the table, I point

to the first box. “Will you grab that one and bring it over here to the table?”

Without hesitation, he grabs the box and, with ease, brings it over to the table.

I set out all the books from the box and, while the beep of the handheld registers each barcode into the computer, I glance up to find Warrick quietly standing there. “You know, you don’t have to do this.”

“I know, but I want to be here. If being here means that I grab boxes for you and cart books to the shelves throughout the store, then so be it.” He shrugs like it's not a big deal, but to me it’s the first step in the right direction.

“It seems our mate just wants to be near us, however that may be,” Aisling pipes up.

“It would seem that way. I just don’t know that I can trust it just yet,” I say skeptically back to her.

“Give him a chance to be here for you. I know he hasn’t in the past, but we can’t live in the past, can we?” she quips back.

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We spend the rest of the day working our way through the stack of books. I have to say I am enjoying the one-on-one attention he is giving me. He hasn't complained one time, not even when he grabbed two full boxes to carry up front for me.

He carries the last box in and I watch as the muscles in his back flex through his t-shirt. His biceps are glistening with a fine layer of sweat after carrying so many books for me. I can feel my face flush at the sight of him. What those muscles could do to me? My hand fans my face to hopefully cool down those inner thoughts. I bet he could hold me with ease against the... Warrick clears his throat with a comical look on his face. He busted me staring at him with lust flushing my face.

"You okay over there?" he asks.

"I, uh ..." I'm saved from answering when the bell above the door chimes.

My head whips to see who it is as I take a quick step back from Warrick.

Chase looks between the both of us with confusion.

"Oh, hey, Chase," I say quickly.

He holds up the takeout bag from You're Bacon Me Crazy. "I brought your lunch over. I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he says, his tone questioning.

I shake off the lustful thoughts and smile brightly at Chase. "Not at all. Warrick was just bringing the last box of books up front from the shipment I told you I got last night." My eyes encourage him to play along.

“Yeah, I was planning to help you with it after lunch. I knew you would work so hard on putting it away that you likely wouldn’t stop to eat. I brought your favorite: chicken, bacon, ranch wrap with waffle fries.” He comes over and plants a kiss on my cheek. “I also made sure to grab you a cherry coke with a splash of vanilla,” he says, with a shake of the styrofoam cup.

There is a snort that comes from beside us, and I look over to see Warrick shaking his head. He sets the stack of books down that he was lifting from the box while we were talking. I look back to Chase and he shrugs his shoulders. We already discussed ways to make Warrick jealous. We already agreed on the lengths we would go and, of course, the things we won’t be doing.

Chase leans in and runs his hand down my side, pulling me in close to him. He wraps his arm around my lower back. His other hand cups my face as I lean into it. “Tell me you will be free tonight for dinner?” Chase asks in a sensual whisper.

“Fuck this shit.” Warrick doesn’t even look at either of us as he storms out of the store.

We both watch as he disappears down the sidewalk, heading back towards the pack land. We burst out laughing. My side starts to cramp from laughing so hard.

“His face ...” I can’t even form a sentence. “Did you see the way he was glaring?” I wheeze out when I finally get the laughing under control.

“Yeah, that man was not only jealous, butmadthat he was jealous. That was great,” Chase says.

A secret smile between the two of us is the only indication that we plotted this. Granted, I didn’t expect him to blow up quite that much. I figured he would get mad, maybe make some stupid comments. I even thought he would give Chase crap. What

I didn't expect was him to fly off the handle and storm out of here.

Chase helps me with the final box of books before we close up the store for the night. Like any night that he is with me when I close, he walks me to the edge of our territory, kisses me on the temple, and I watch as he walks away.

Later, as I am finishing my night time routine, I smell Wraith again. I know that every night; he sits outside my house watching over me until I go to sleep. I always pretend that I don't know he is there because part of me worries that if I acknowledge it, then he will stop doing it. As I lay my head down on the pillow and reach over to my lamp to turn it off, I tell Wraith goodnight. He might not hear me, but I love knowing he is out there for me. That some part of Warrick at least always chooses me.

Chapter 10

Warrick

Although my morning routine has changed, I actually am enjoying the quiet of the early mornings. I have taken to jogging around the perimeter to listen to the forest as it wakes up. There is something peaceful in those moments that I've never experienced before. After a quick shower and getting dressed, I check the time to see that Aspen should get up to start her day, which gives me roughly thirty minutes to finish getting myself ready.

Thankfully, after we paid off the debt to the Ghost River Pack last week, things have been rather quiet around the pack lands. I didn't realize just how bad things had gotten with Orion as our pack Alpha until I watched it start to rebuild itself. We haven't seen or heard from the Ghost River pack since then, leaving only the opportunity to go up from here.

By far, my favorite part is seeing all the businesses really take off again, with fresh

coats of paint, fresh signs going up, and the overall happiness you can feel from our members. With Orion spending all of our money on the illegal activities with the Ghost River pack, it left the businesses struggling to make ends meet, let alone keep their store in tiptop condition. Now that everything has settled down, it sure has made it where I can have the time to spend with my mate, something I am grateful for.

Baring my teeth to the mirror after brushing them, I do one last inspection to make sure I look the best for Aspen. Shrugging on my jacket, I stuff my socked feet into my boots before grabbing my keys off the key hook. The cold, sharp wind hits my face when I open the door. Goddess, I can't wait for the spring weather to get here. Although I'm a wolf and I should like the cold, I really don't. I like the cool, fresh mornings of spring when the dew on the flowers enhances the smells as the sun warms the earth in the morning.

The path from my cabin into the central part of the pack is littered by clumps of snow along the edges, with a light dusting covering the pathway. One quick glance at the sky tells me everything I need to know. It won't be long before we are hit with our second snowstorm of the season. The muted gray clouds thickly cover the sky to where the sun will never be able to penetrate it today. I'll need to make sure that Aspen has everything that she needs: food, lumber, blankets, and salt for her sidewalk.

Mentally tallying a list of things that I need to grab from the store occupies my mind until I've almost made it to the coffee shop. Gail is standing outside of the coffee shop with a book in her hand and a warm smile on her face. What is this meddlesome woman up to today?

"Warrick, I was hoping to catch you this morning." The woman knew she would bump into me here. She always plays it off like it was a coincidence.

"Were you now?" I say, with a teasing tone to my voice.

“Yes, well, I wanted to tell you all about this book that Aspen recommended. You remember? When I happened to come into the shop while you were there asking for your mate to be yours?” The twinkle in her eyes doesn’t go unnoticed.

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My eyebrows drop and smash together in anger. “Yeah, I remember alright.”

Her hand gently taps on my shoulder before she says, “Now, dear, no need to get angry. We both know that approach wasn’t working and wouldn’t have led to anything productive. I merely stopped it from becoming another reason she wouldn’t take you back. Now, like I was saying about this book.” She lifts the book up between the both of us, pushing it towards my chest.

I grab the paperback from her and flip it around to face the correct way for me. It’s an illustrated couple on the cover with the guy clearly angry at the girl and the girl clearly happy as she can be. The title reads, “The Second Chance Makeup.” I look from the cover to Gail, who is staring at me like she expects some type of reaction.

The cover is cute and all, but I don’t get it. Flipping it over, I read through the blurb of the book to see that it’s about two people who dated in high school only to break up when the guy makes a dumb decision. Later, bumping into each other again as adults, the two decide to give it one more shot in hopes that maybe this time around would be better. Alright, I get it.

It doesn’t take much to figure out what she is trying to say here. The book that Aspen recommended looks suspiciously like our own story.

“I think you should read it, Warrick,” she says.

My hands drop to my side, pulling the book out of sight. “Gail, I don’t read books. I never could understand how people could spend hours reading them in the first place.”

She places her hand on my cheek. “Warrick, you have messed this up, and we all know that. But Aspen is a reader and, at heart, a hopeless romantic. If you want to understand her and how to win her over, maybe read a book she recommends.”

Sighing, I nod my head.

She continues, “Read this one first because I think you will see that there is hope for you both yet. It can happen and should happen.” The look on her face brooks no room for an argument. “She also recommended this one to me.” Gail pulls another book out of her purse, and it’s another illustrated cover, but this time the couple is wrapped together, and even I can see the love flowing between them. “I think if you really want to understand the kind of love that she is wanting, these two books would show you how to achieve that. Now, off you go. I kept you long enough. Poor girl is going to think you won’t be coming today with her coffee. And after that stunt she pulled yesterday, you are really going to have to show her that you are here for the long run this time.”

My mouth drops open. How does she know about that? Literally, the only three people who know about it are the ones who were there. Surely, they didn’t run off to tell people about it. I watch Gail as she walks down the path toward You’re Bacon Me Crazy. I don’t get how she knows so much stuff. Shaking my head, I walk into the coffee shop to grab our morning coffees. I decided yesterday that since I am going to make a daily trip to the coffee shop, I would take up drinking one myself.

Hazel shakes her head at me as I walk in.

“What?” I ask her.

“I really didn’t think you would keep this up this long already, but I support it. Don’t tell Aspen that I want you to succeed. Girl code and all that. But she deserves to have her dreams come true.”

“Dreams come true?” I ask, out of curiosity.

She shoos me with her hand. “Forget that I said anything.” She quickly turns around to make our coffees. At this point, she doesn’t even ask me what I’m ordering, since it will be the same answer each day.

I move along the countertop, following her as she makes the coffee. “You can’t start something like that without finishing it. If you know something that could help me, you have to tell me.”

Sighing, her shoulders drop as she turns around with the coffees. “Do you know how mad she will be with me if she finds out I told you anything to win her over?”

I mime zipping my lips. “My lips are sealed. She won’t hear it from me.” My hands are held up in front of me as I shrug my shoulders slightly.

After setting the coffees down on the countertop between us, she points her finger at me not far from my chest. “Warrick, so help the goddess if I find out that you told her I helped you, I will make your life a living hell.”

“Not a single word.”

“Fine. She has always dreamed that her mate would do some kind of grand gesture for their courting. You know how the male is supposed to show his mate what he can provide?” I nod my head, so she continues. “She wanted hers to be some kind of over the top gesture. She never really elaborated or gave examples, just that she wanted the kind of love that she reads about in all those books.”

I slap down the two books that Gail handed me. “Love like these?” I ask as I point to the books.

Hazel shrugs her shoulders. “Beats me, Warrick. I don’t read those kinds of books. I am more into thrillers and murder mysteries. Not much romance happening in that.”

The stack of books and coffees sits between us on the counter. My finger traces along the couple in love on the cover. “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but I want this,” I say while tapping my finger on the cover.

Hazel places her hand on top of mine. “You can have it, too.” She smiles warmly at me.

With a curt nod, I grab the books and coffee to head over to Find Me Between the Pages. Thankfully, the coffee shop is only a couple of doors down and across the street from the bookshop. That cold air is becoming more painful as the day progresses.

I’m hoping that today will be a better day, but I don’t have much reason to believe it will. The bell chimes above my head when I walk through the door. The soft tunes of music are playing around the shop.

“Good morning, Warrick. Didn’t think you were coming when you didn’t show up before I opened the door this morning,” Aspen says with humor in her voice. Almost like she assumed her stunt yesterday would have pushed me away for good.

Walking over to where she is standing by one of the display tables, I lean in close and our chests almost brush against each other. As I place her coffee down, I let my finger graze up her arm. She lets out a soft gasp when I lean in by her ear and whisper, “You can’t get rid of me that easy. Even when you are trying to make me jealous.” My nose runs down her neck, inhaling her scent as I go. Before she has a chance to say anything else, I lean back with a wink and head over to the lounge chairs.

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Holding up the book over my shoulders, I give them a gentle shake. “Anyway, I have some reading to do. So, if you don’t mind, I’ll be over here in these comfy chairs reading my books.”

My coffee cup sits on the small table between the chairs as I plop myself down. After adjusting myself and propping my feet up on the footrest, I glance up to find Aspen still standing exactly where I left her with her mouth hanging open. Chuckling, I say, “You good over there?”

That seems to snap her out of it. She spins around, grabs her coffee, and heads to the back stock area. I chuckle to myself because I believe I won this round. Shifting until I find the most comfortable spot, I hold up both book choices, debating between which one I should start with. The second chance one is really calling to me. Maybe Gail was on to something with this suggestion.

Cracking the book open, I am already hooked on the first page. Of course, the guy is a football star, and she is the nerd nobody saw dating him. Letting out a snort, I know exactly why Gail wanted me to read this one. Could it be any more obvious?

It doesn’t take long for me to immerse myself in the story. I don’t even realize the time flying by until there is a soft clearing of a throat. I blink my eyes a few times before I look up. Standing in front of me is Aspen, with a humored look on her face.

“How’s the book going?” she asks.

Stuffing the receipt from coffee this morning into the book so I don’t lose my place, I say, “You know, all these years I’ve wondered what has kept you so invested in these

stories and, I have to say, I get it now.”

“Really, one book changed your mind?” she asks with a note of curiosity.

Standing up from the chair, I gather all my stuff and wrap my jacket around me again. “Yeah, it only took one chance to see that it’s worth it.” I wink before I head out the door. Time to head out to grab those supplies before the storm. Since I know she will be here all day, it won’t be hard to get into her cabin to put them there. Smirking, I head down the sidewalk to the convenient store.

Chapter 11

Aspen

He isn’t here this morning like I thought he would be. I didn’t think it would be that easy to get rid of him. I mean, sure, I thought it would piss him off to see me with Chase, but not enough to stop coming. I don’t expect many visitors today since most people are staying in because of the storm coming in. The mini remote clicks when I tell it to turn on the music.

Rolling my metal cart to the back, I fill it with all the books that I need to stock the front of the store with. There are a few tables that will need the most attention, especially my table that is specifically for monster romance. The ladies of Jasper sure do love that table.

I’m busy setting out some of the new books that I got in when a chime rings out. A quick glance over my shoulder brings a smile to my face that I try to hide. He showed up. I love coffee and all, but doesn’t he have work he should be doing?

“Good morning, Warrick. Didn’t think you were coming when you didn’t show up before I opened the door this morning,” I say with humor in my voice.

He doesn't even say anything, just walks over to me with his eyes locked on mine. Eyes unblinking and with the determination of a hunter tracking his prey. He leans in close to me, our chests are only a breath apart, and if I leaned just a little more forward, our lips would caress. Those full lips that are smirking at me like he knows what I'm thinking about. There is a soft plop of the coffee cup being set on the table beside me before I feel his finger trailing up my arm. My skin prickles with goosebumps and the urge to shudder is right there.

I let out a soft gasp when he leans over and whispers in my ear, "You can't get rid of me that easily. Even when you are trying to make me jealous." His nose runs down my neck with a deep inhale. Before I can even think of something to say or even react to what he is doing, he pulls back with a wink and walks to the lounge chairs.

My mouth is hanging open as he shakes some books over his shoulder. "Anyway, I have some reading to do. So, if you don't mind, I'll be over here in these comfy chairs reading my books."

What in the world is happening? First, he has been showing up each day with coffee. But now, he isn't just here with coffee but he has books to read? I don't think in all the years that I've known him that I've ever even seen him crack a book open besides the required ones in school.

"You good over there?" he says with a chuckle.

This man! I clearly am dreaming, because there is no way that Warrick is sitting in my bookstore reading books on his own. Grabbing my coffee, I decide that clearly I need to work in my back area today. Maybe some time with the inventory and stock will clear my mind of what I'm feeling.

A few hours later, I walk out to grab my lunch from behind the counter. I'm shocked to find him still sitting in the lounge chair with a book in his hand and a serious look

on his face. Grabbing my lunch box, I'm about to walk away when he lets out a full belly laugh. A glimpse at the cover of the book in his hand, and wouldn't you know it, it's the one that I recommended to Gail. The second chance romance. Now, that I didn't see coming. Although, knowing Gail, it doesn't shock me that she gave it to him. What is shocking is him actually reading it.

He is so invested in the story that he doesn't even look up when I snap a photo or when I laugh at his facial expressions. Leaving him to it, I go back to what I was doing. I did tell him that as long as he stayed quiet, he could stay here.

Shaking my head, I open the group chat with the girls. They have to see this.

Nova might be right about him making changes, but I still don't understand why he is doing all of this now. We have had almost five years to claim each other, and he never has shown a lick of interest in it. Now, here he is not only showing up every day, but he is reading a book. Surely, he doesn't think that just reading a book will win me over.

Hours later, I come back up front to find that he is halfway through the book and, outside of adjusting his positioning, I don't think that he has really moved at all today. My head shakes from side to side as I walk up to him. I make it right in front of him, and he still hasn't even stopped reading or acknowledged me.

When I clear my throat, his eyes snap up to mine finally. "Hey... you know that it's closing time?"

His eyes are full of wonder when he asks, "Are all books this amazing?"

Laughing softly, I tell him, "Wait until you meet a fae prince that is coming to save you from certain doom. Then you will really be amazed."

Looking at me, he says, “Is that what you want? Someone to save you from certain doom?”

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“Alright, time for you to head home. I have to close up.” I pat his shoulder as I walk back to start shutting off the lights at the back of the store.

“I’m almost done with this one.” I nearly jump out of my skin when Warrick speaks up from behind me.

“Oh, yeah?” I say when I look over my shoulder.

“Yeah. Actually... I hoped you could give me a recommendation for another book? Now I really see what all the fuss is about.”

A mischievous thought crosses my mind and, realizing the opportunity that I have to torture him, I grab Throne of Glass off the shelf and hand it to him. “Start here for fantasy. Be warned though, it's a seven book series, so be ready to be invested. Also, we don’t loan books around here. Let’s get you ringed up so I can close.”

The key slides out of the lock as I turn around to see that Warrick is waiting with his fresh copy of Throne of Glass.

“Can I walk you home? Not expecting anything, but I figure since we are both heading that way that maybe this time we can walk together?”

“Sure,” I say with a nod of my head.

We fall into step with each other as we walk down the sidewalk. “So your...” he starts at the same time as I say, “What did you...”

We both laugh before he says, “You go first.”

The snow starts to fall in that slow way where you can see the flakes as they drop. I watch as one catches on his eyelashes. He really is handsome. He finally grew into those long legs he was given. His face is covered in a scruff of a beard that I am digging in a way I never thought I would. “What did you think of the book you were reading?”

“Uh, I liked it. I don’t think it will probably be my choice in reading going forward, but it has shown me some things I should have done differently. I have some thoughts that I want to work through after reading it. But it’s a cute story, and I’m cheering them on since he finally confessed how he has always felt.”

I consider what he says as we walk in the snowfall. “You know... uh... never mind.” I shake my head, deciding to keep the thought to myself.

“Hey,” he says with a nudge of his shoulder. “Tell me.”

I shake my head again. “It’s nothing. What were you going to ask?”

He continues to look at me, with the street lamp illuminating the snowflakes on his hair, sparkling in the night. “What were you just about to say?”

“I, uh, just wanted to say that you don’t have to make any drastic changes, Warrick, to win me back. I’m sure that you think that you have to do all this over the top stuff, but you don’t have to.” My eyes fall to the ground as I watch my booted feet walk along the sidewalk.

He gently tugs me to a stop before turning me to look at him. “Everything I do and will do is because you deserve it. You deserve the love you cherish in your story books. Not even I should be exempt from doing those things for you. Fate may have

said that we are meant to be together, but that doesn't mean I get a free pass."

This is the second time today that he has shocked me. Who is this man standing in front of me? I know that I might be holding the seventeen-year-old version of him against him, but I didn't expect any of that.

I place my hand on his shoulder and run it over his back. Looking up into his eyes, which are full of love and that I think maybe I shouldn't be so hard on him. Maybe I could let go of the past. "That is the most beautiful thing you have ever said to me. You also deserve love and someone to put you first above all else."

He grunts before he pulls himself out of my hold and starts walking back down the sidewalk.

I rush after him. "Do you not agree?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Aspen." He picks up the pace, and now I'm literally having to jog to keep up.

Finally reaching for his elbow, I pull it back. "Hey, don't run away from me. You can't say things like that, and then push me away when I try to reciprocate. Do you really think you are undeserving of love?"

"Let it go, Aspen. I don't want to talk about it. Maybe one day, but that isn't today. I think... I think I'm ready to go home. It was nice to spend the day with you, Aspen. Have a great night."

Before I can think of a response or stop him, he takes off toward his cabin.

I wonder what that was all about, because that isn't just someone who doesn't believe he should be loved, that is someone who has been hurt by love. Surely, it can't be any

of these women flitting in and out of his bed? Could I have been the one to subsequently hurt him without knowing it? That can't be it. There's only one person who can answer these questions, and I watch as he storms away until I can't see him anymore. I wonder if Hazel is home. I could use someone to talk to about all of this right now.

Chapter 12

Aspen

Except for yesterday, when I was closed, Warrick has shown up every single morning with coffees in hand and whichever Throne of Glass book that he is on for the day. He just quietly sits in his corner, with only the sound of page flips coming from him. The occasional gasps and quick page flips have been the highlight of my day. Watching someone, especially Warrick, discover the love of reading is absolutely delightful.

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The bell above the door dings, and without looking up, I already know it's Warrick. His sage, sea salt, and amber scent are becoming part of my daily life and fusing itself into the bookstore's scent. I have to say I quite like the combination of his scent with my books.

"Good morning, Aspen," he says as he brings over my coffee to the desk.

"Good morning, Warrick. Shouldn't you be working or doing pack stuff today? I can't imagine that Silas is okay with you hanging out here every single day." Curiosity is pouring out of me.

He shrugs his shoulders. "He is so busy with his new mate and preparing for the arrival of the twins that he hasn't been paying attention to what I'm doing. Anyway, I check in throughout the day with the pack and everything is doing good. We have the artisans back into working their crafts with the supplies they need. The businesses are slowly getting their feet back under them. As far as I can tell, there really isn't much to worry about, so I come here to be with you and to read these books." He holds up the Crown of Midnight.

"Speaking of," he continues on, "I have some theories I wanted to go over with you about this series before I move on to the next book. Do you think you have time? I can always talk while you work, so I don't keep you from the things that you need to do." I can hear the vulnerability in his voice.

Grabbing my coffee, I say, "Actually, I have some time. I'll sit with you while I drink my coffee this morning. You can tell me all about your theories. I have to warn you, though, I'm not going to tell you anything. So, even if your theory is right, I won't

tell you if it is.” My finger taps on his chest with each word while I narrow my eyes.

He holds both his hands up in surrender. “I swear I only want to talk about them. Not trying to pry any information from you.”

We spend the next hour going over all of his theories, and I have to say that I enjoyed watching the excitement play across his face. He really is invested in this series and I can't say I blame him, since they're amazing and so worth it. It's just not what I would have expected from him. He moves his hands animatedly while explaining his thoughts on the books with a sparkle in his eyes. This might be the most that I have ever heard him talk about in all the years I've known him. Granted, we didn't really have much in common before now, so what really was there to talk about?

In high school, our conversations were usually me chatting away for hours about the latest book I read, while he only gave grunts and yeahs in acknowledgement. The few times that I did get him to talk would always revolve around football and what the coach told him that day. He rarely would talk about anything he liked, movies he saw, or music he listened to. It was frustrating to feel like we were dating, but also not dating because I never really knew anything about him.

Now, though, I feel like I'm finally seeing the real Warrick. The one he must have kept locked away all those years ago. Maybe he thought people would make fun of him for it, but I am falling in love with him through these moments. I've learned more about him in just these few days than I did in the months we dated before. I always believe in “it's what people don't say that says more about them”.

You can feel the pure joy pouring out of him as he continues with his theories. It's not hard to tell that he really is enjoying the book based on his theories. Some of them are so spot on that I'm having a hard time not telling him.

The laughter is pouring out of me when I say, “Wow, when I recommended this

series to you, I didn't picture you getting this into it. You are onto something with some of your theories. Not going to tell you which ones, because I want you to see for yourself which ones are true. But I will say I'm glad that you are enjoying the series as much as you are. It's one of my favorites still to this day."

He taps a hand on the cover of *Queen of Shadows*. "Yeah, I can't say that I ever thought that I would read books, let alone want to read books, but it's actually quite nice. I like the fantasy genre more than I like the contemporary genre. It's far more fun to think about dragons, hidden princesses, and evil kings."

My eyebrows raise in shock. "Excuse me, but did you just use bookish terms like genres?"

He shrugs his shoulders again. "Yeah, I might have done a little more research into it. Figured if I would read books, then I should know what I like and don't like."

"Huh, well, I like it. Maybe one day you will be the one to introduce a series to me, instead of me introducing them to you."

He taps his book again before taking a sip of his coffee. "Well, I'll let you get back to work. I want to dive into this one. The tension is really building in the series."

"Have fun! I can't wait to hear what you think," I say while I stand up to head back to do inventory and stocking.

Immediately after getting to the back stock area, I pull out my phone and open the group chat for the girls.

I didn't know that Warrick wasn't entertaining any women anymore. Each night, I assumed things were normal: him with a different woman, me alone in my cabin. I didn't know that he was now alone each night, too.

Shaking my head, I try to clear my mind so I can focus on the tasks at hand. What Warrick does or doesn't do in his time isn't my business. It shouldn't delight me to know that he spends nights alone. I shouldn't feel a surge of excitement at knowing that he is finally putting me first and that I'm the center of his attention. It also shouldn't make me want to be the one in his bed tonight.

If someone would have told me a few months ago that Warrick, the biggest player in our community, would finally focus on me, his mate, I would have absolutely laughed in your face. Never did I imagine this would happen. Sure, I dreamed of him accepting our mating, becoming the mate he was meant to be, and us starting our lives together. Did I believe it would happen? Nope. But, watching him show up day after day, showing interest in something so important to me, and learning things about me, really makes me think he is actually serious about this.

I can't lie and say that I'm so convinced that if he asked me to exchange mate marks tonight, that I would agree. But, I can say that I'm getting there. I'm invested in seeing where this goes, which is hopefully to us finally settling down together.

Sighing, I run my hand down my face. Get it together. Just because he isn't sleeping around anymore changes nothing. Grabbing my barcode scanner, I get to work on the latest shipment of books that came in. I ordered some special editions a couple of months ago, and I can't wait to display them on the front table.

Hours later, after scanning all the boxes of books and getting them ready to be put out tomorrow, it's finally time to head home. No matter what I did today, I couldn't get the thought out of my head that I wanted to be the one in his bed tonight.

Shutting off lights as I head to the front, I find him exactly where I left him. Only now, he is already halfway through the book. I watch as his eyes flick back and forth with his face displaying each emotion as he reads. I can't say that I've ever been able to watch as someone explores a world. It's my new favorite thing. Tapping my finger

to my chin, I think about whatseries I should introduce him to next, since he said that he loved fantasy more.I'll have to think about that.

“Warrick, it's time to go.”

His eyes snap up to mine. “Is it really? Can't we wait just a little longer? I don't think I can stop right here and just go home.” His eyes are pleading with me to agree. It's almost like a child being told that their time at the arcade is over.

“I'm sorry. I just have a really long day tomorrow with putting out the order that came in yesterday. I was hoping to get some rest before having to do that.”

“Do you need me to help you like I did last time? I don't mind if you do,” he says while putting on his jacket.

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With a shake of my head, I say, “You don’t have to do that. I can handle it. Just wanted some extra rest before I do.”

He holds my jacket out for me to put on and says, “I know I don’t have to do it. I want to do it.” His hands gather up my long hair and pull it from the jacket. He leans in close to my ear and says, “One day, you learn I will do anything for you. For now, I’ll just have to keep showing you I will.”

A shiver runs down my spine. Between the thoughts that have plagued me all day and his words, a flush of arousal comes over me. Spinning around in his arms, he pulls me closer to him, and I can feel every hard plane of his body. He takes a deep inhale of air and his eyes darken. His finger trails down the side of my neck and over the swell of my breast.

“What is it you want, my rose?” What’s with the pet name? That’s new.

I gasp as I feel something else growing hard between us. He doesn’t know—he can’t know—that I’ve never been with anyone.

His hand rounds my breast until he comes to my nipple and my mouth falls open. He pinches it between his fingers and gently pulls. “Tell me you want this.” His voice is gravely and full of lust. “I can smell your slick, Aspen. I bet if I stuck my fingers down there, I would be drenched.”

My mouth is hanging open, with my breaths panting out of me. Goddess, I want that so much. His fingers graze my side as he travels down to do exactly what he just mentioned. How many times has he done this before? How many women have

experienced this with him? While I have been home waiting for my mate to see me, he has been busy exploring other women. It's like a bucket of ice water is dropped over my head. I push my hands against his chest, breaking out of his arms. His face is full of confusion.

"I am not ready for that, Warrick. I'm not one of those girls you bring home and fuck." I turn to walk out the door before he can say anything else.

He follows quickly behind me. "Wait!" he yells out, as the door begins to close between us. He thrusts it open and reaches for my elbow. "Don't run off, Aspen. What just happened?"

Whipping around, I glare at him. "What happened is you think I'm just like every other girl you have been with! All it takes is the right words, the right touches, and you will have me right where you want me. Isn't that right?"

He looks confused and hurt. "What are you talking about?" he asks quietly.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. I can't imagine you need me, of all people, to spell it out to you." I know that I'm being irrational, but I can't get out of my head that I'm just going to be one of many for him. While he will be my one and only.

He reaches out slowly to pull me into his arms again. "Aspen, I know you aren't like the other girls. I'm sorry that I made you feel like I was treating you as though you were. If you don't want to do this yet, we don't have to. But I would like to walk you home, if that's okay with you?"

I nod my head; I don't want him to think that he is necessarily doing anything right now. It's not as though he is currently making me feel this way. Years of whispered words, past times watching him with others, and my mind's own conjuring, it's all

there. It's his fault, but it's also not his fault. He can't control how I feel, but he can help me feel differently, at least now. I shouldn't have snapped at him. The look on his face right now, he is hurting, thinking he did something wrong. It seems he isn't the only one who has something to work on.

Exhaling a heavy sigh, I let him in on the thoughts running through my mind. Maybe now, he will understand where I'm coming from.

He nods his head once. "I understand. I'll show you what you mean to me. That's a promise."

After locking the door to the store, we head off down the sidewalk toward our homes. We walk in silence together.

He doesn't take off toward his house like he normally does each night; instead, he prompts me to head toward mine. We make it to my front door before he tugs on my arm to slow me down. Turning around, I find him looking nervous.

"Aspen, wait, before you go inside..."

"Yeah?"

"Uh, can I take you to dinner? It doesn't have to be anything serious, but I want a chance to talk to you without the interruptions of pack life and work."

Leaning in, I kiss his cheek before saying, "I would love that, Warrick. See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," he says as he walks back off the porch.

Closing my door behind me, I lean my back against it. It scares me how quickly I've

become used to him being in my daily life. I just hope that I don't regret it later on. I send off a text message to Chase to see if he can call me. Maybe a talk with him will help settle all these feelings I'm having.

Chapter 13

Aisling

Waiting hours for her to stop talking to that mountain lion shifter, I finally am able to wrestle control from her and shift. With Aspen finally sleeping, she doesn't know that I sneak out. We usually know what the other side is doing at any given time unless the one in control chooses for us to not know. Which is what I'm doing since I know our mate is outside, like he is every single night. But tonight, I want to know what he is doing.

Nudging the door open, I walk into our backyard to exactly where he sits every single night. The air is smothered in his scent, which means he has already done his rounds where he scent marks the entire outside of the house. How Aspen hasn't noticed is beyond me.

"Why are you out here?" I ask Wraith.

"I am out here every single night. Unlike my human side, I want to claim my mate and make her ours," his deep baritone whispers into my mind.

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“Good, I want to claim our mate, too.”

“What about the mountain lion shifter that comes around her? I can scent him on her, although it’s fading,”he growls.

“He is nothing but a friend and of no genuine concern. I have a plan, though.”

“We have to get the humans together. They are the ones standing in the way. Although, your human has done his fair share to ensure that this is going to be no simple task,”I say with a glare at him.

“He won’t be standing in the way anymore. I’ve made sure that he keeps himself only focused on her.”

“Good. I want to bring them together, and if I’m right, then we should be able to finally get them to mate with each other,”I say.

He lifts an eyebrow at me.“Okay, what’s your plan?”

“He needs to keep doing what he is already doing, but he needs to do the mating gifts. Has he even thought about those?”

He shakes his head.“Not that I know of. What do you need me to do?”

Huffing, I sit down. I give him all my ideas, and we spend the next hour going over what we will do to encourage the mating. He even throws in some ideas of his own that she can do to help Warrick.

Later, we are nuzzling each other and covering each other in our scents when I pull back from him. “We have to stop.”

He pushes me onto my back as he looms over me. He nuzzles into my neck as I let out a whimper. I can feel his canines run over the fur of my neck. So close to doing what I want him to do, but far enough to only be teasing it.

“You don’t want me to stop. You want me to claim you right now and why shouldn’t I?” He bites down on my neck but not enough to break the skin.

Panting, I say, “We have to get our humans to mate first. Then we can have each other as much as we want.” He applies a little more pressure with his teeth, but I stay firm and tell him, “Wraith, we have to stop.”

Growling, he rips his mouth off of me before stepping back. He walks off towards the shadows of the trees. “We will be seeing each other really soon.”

I watch as he disappears into the trees.

Chapter 14

Warrick

I convinced Aspen to let me take her on a date, although she is calling it dinner and not a date. Semantics. I have one goal in mind with dinner and that is to finally win my mate over. Nothing and nobody will stand in the way of that. After last night, I know she is feeling some of the same things that I am.

“You think you can manage to not fuck this up this time?” Wraith growls into my mind.

Rolling my eyes, I say, “Well, I’m going to try not to fuck it up. Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I’ve let you handle this up to this point and where are we at? Not between the legs of our mate where we should be. If I had my way, we wouldn’t be anywhere else but there.”

Wraith is fuming. I didn’t know he was this mad about it. I mean, sure, he has bitched at me, but for the most part, he has kept quiet.

“You haven’t been exactly vocal about the issue. What gives?”

A growl rumbles through me. “You have been busy with other females and ignoring the one that we are supposed to be with. I’m done with it. If you don’t fix it, I will.”

With that, he recedes to the back of our shared space, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I finish getting myself ready and pull out my phone. If I don’t get my shit together, prove to Aspen that I’ve changed, and win her over, I will lose everything. I won’t ever be able to mate, settle down, or have pups with anyone if she rejects me.

Can I come pick you up for dinner?

Aspen: No, I’ll walk.

I would like to pick my date up for dinner. It’s the proper thing to do.

Aspen: Well, this isn’t a date, so you don’t need to worry. See you there at 7.

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Sighing, I pocket my cell phone. Maybe I haven't made as much progress as I thought I had, given she isn't even considering this a date. I want to get there early so I can have the table ready and waiting for her. Grabbing my jacket, I pull it on. That last snow storm should blow in any day now.

After a brisk walk to the diner, I stomp my boots by the door to knock off the snow collecting on them. Gail would have my ass if I dragged this much snow into the diner. The heat of the restaurant engulfs me when I step inside to find Gail, of course, standing at the hostess stand.

"Oh good, I was hoping you would be smart enough to show up early for your date tonight." Gail gives me a wink before grabbing two menus and walking towards the back booth, away from the rest of the customers.

Shaking my head, I follow her. One day, we will all figure out how she knows everything without people telling her. It's almost like mind reading the way she just knows. I didn't tell anyone, other than Aspen, that we were going out on a date—sorry, out to dinner tonight. The bench of the booth gives a slight creak as I shuffle into it. Gail sets down the menus for both of us, followed by the silverware needed.

She gives me a warm smile before saying, "I'm glad to see that you guys are moving along nicely. How are you enjoying reading that series that she recommended to you?"

My jaw drops slightly as I stare at her in shock. "How did you...?"

Her small, aged hand lays gently on my shoulder. "Warrick, it still pleases me

tremendously how much I shock you all with my knowledge. How nobody has figured it out yet truly tickles me.”She pats my shoulder while her smile widens. “Now, how's the reading coming along?”

Still unable to process what she said, I stumble out a response. “It's, uh, going well. I really like the series and think I am far more of a fantasy reader than a contemporary reader.”

“That’s good dear. I know it means a lot to Aspen that you are reading, especially a series that she loves so much herself. Keep up the good work, dear.” With one last pat on my shoulder, she walks off to probably meddle in someone else’s life. Goddess knows I can’t be the only life that she is meddling in right now.

I’m reading through an article on my phone about the upcoming spring training for the football team when I hear a tiny clearing of a throat. Glancing up, I find Selene looking nervously at me. “Hey Selene, what are you doing here?”

She hooks her thumb over her shoulder. “I was having dinner with my folks when I saw you come in. I rarely run into you, but I wanted to let you know I talked with my parents. I told them all about the photos, showed them that same album, and asked for a camera for my birthday! They said they will be getting me one! I just wanted to thank you for pushing me to do this.” Her hands twist together, showing her anxiety.

“That’s really cool, Selene. I’m glad to hear that you took my advice. Do you have any new photos to share with me?” I smile broadly, hoping that it will calm her nerves.

Her face lights up with excitement as she pulls out her phone. She looks between her phone and the open space next to me. Before I can really say yes or no, she slides in next to me.

“Since I’m moving to a camera soon, hopefully, I don’t have a ton of them on my phone anymore because most of them have been uploaded to my computer. But some of these are my favorites, so I kept them on my phone so I could easily show people,” she says animatedly as she swipes open her screen.

Watching her face light up in excitement, I can’t help but think of someone else. Someone whose face lights up when she is telling me about a book she read, reminding me of the days when we were teenagers and I would watch her recount the entire story to me. I’m so lost down memory lane that I hear nothing Selene is saying, nor do I hear Aspen approaching.

“I can’t fucking believe I thought it would be different this time around.”

That snaps me out of it. My eyes find my beautiful mate with tears starting to fall down her face and the shattering of her heart, yet again because of me, is evident. I’m innocent this time around, but to her, I’m guilty.

Not that I can blame her. I built this expectation of myself and, without even thinking about it, I made her think it was happening again.

She doesn’t know Selene like I do or realize she is just a child. She doesn’t know that she was showing me pictures she has taken lately or that I’m the reason she is so excited about them to begin with. I want to stop her, the words dry up in my mouth. I can tell by the look on her face, there isn’t any hope. All she is seeing is a girl hugged up on my side as we smiled together. I’ve got nobody to blame for this trigger, only myself. I created this reaction with all my past actions. I don’t blame her. Resigned to my fate, I do nothing but watch as the pain washes over her like a tidal wave.

Selene looks between the both of us before jumping out of the booth. “I’m...” she looks at Aspen. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Aspen is staring at me as her tears are falling down her cheeks. Selene tries one more time to say something, but Aspen just shakes her head. I watch as if in slow motion as Aspen turns around and runs out of the diner.

Selene looks back at me with an apology written all over her face. “I’m sorry, Warrick. It wasn’t my intention to make her think that something was going on. I was just so excited about my pictures.”

Sighing, I drop my head into my hands before saying, “It’s alright, Selene. You didn’t do anything wrong. If I hadn’t hurt her as much as I have in the past, then she wouldn’t have jumped to those conclusions.”

“Is there anything I can do?” she asks.

Shaking my head in my hands, I tell her, “No, this is my mess to clean up.”

“I’m sorry,” Selene says before I hear her footsteps retreat.

I have nothing else to do other than exactly that. This isn’t how it was supposed to go. I was supposed to win her over tonight, but now the exact opposite has happened.

As I’m walking back to my house, Wraith decides he is done waiting. Before I can wrestle control of him, he rips out of me. When I blink open my eyes, I’m on all fours, running right to Aspen’s house.

“What are you doing?” I demand.

“You broke our mate’s heart again. I told you that if it were up to me, we wouldn’t be here. Waiting for a chance for our mate to forgive us,” he growls as he runs the last of the stretch to her house.

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“I didn’t do it this time. Selene is one of our young pack members. It wasn’t at all what she thought it was. Granted, if I hadn’t been messing around with all these other females, she might not have jumped to that conclusion. So while I’m not to blame for this specific time, I am to blame for her feeling that way to begin with,” I huff.

“Regardless, I want to make it up to Aisling. At least she listens to me.”

I pull back into the recesses of our shared mind and watch as he does his rounds around Aspen’s house before sitting in the woods.

“One day, you will have to stop hurting her but, one day, she will also see that you aren’t the same guy anymore,” he says as he watches Aspen move about her cabin.

“I don’t know if that day will ever come.”

Chapter 15

Aspen

Three Years Ago

“And that’s it for today’s class. We will see you all after winter break,” my Lit Con teacher announces.

The room fills with the sound of everyone packing up their belongings and excitedly talking about their plans for their winter break. Willow and I plan to go home. When we came up with the idea to attend college, it seemed so grand, but now, we really

miss home. It doesn't help that Hazel wasn't able to get into the same college with us, so we are missing one part of our trio.

The strap of my bag is already digging into my shoulder as I make it down the stairs of our seating area. When you first see the classrooms in college, you think the elevated seating is cool and edgy. After walking up and down it four to five times a day, five days a week, that idea wears off. They never tell you that you won't care about cute outfits and shoes after trekking across the entire campus to get to class. You will swap out those strappy heels for a comfy pair of tennis shoes not long after the first few days.

"There you are!" Willow exclaims, as if she didn't know which building I would walk out of. We exchanged schedules and marked them on maps the minute schedules were released.

With a roll of my eyes, I turn to look at her. "Willow, you know exactly where to find me."

Giggling, she wraps her arm around mine. "I know, but sometimes I pretend that it's only coincidence that we ran into each other."

With a shake of my head, I pull out my cellphone to scroll through socials as she pulls me through the crowds of kids all going in different directions.

"You ready to be home for two weeks?"

Honestly, no. I don't want to tell her that, though. She is excited, and I don't want to dampen that with my lack of interest. Ever since I found out that Warrick was my mate, I have wanted nothing more than to see how far away I could get from him. I promised Gail that I wouldn't break the bond, which left only putting distance between us. We don't live in a town big enough to avoid each other.

It was nice to be in a place where people didn't know that your mate had rejected the mating bond, rubbed other women in your face, and that you hadn't had any other boyfriends since. Here at Fairview University, nobody cares about any of that, because nobody knows about it. It's been a breath of fresh air, for once.

Willow nudges me in the side to draw my attention back to her question. "Uh, yeah. I can't wait to see Hazel. Hopefully, she is enjoying her time at Jasper Springs Community College."

"Ugh, I know. I hope she can get in here next semester so she can be with us instead of by herself there," Willow says.

Thankfully, it doesn't take us long to walk back to our dorms. As much as I am dreading going home, I do love my mom's baking and hearing my dad yell about football. It's the playoffs this weekend for the NFL, so goddess knows, there will be yelling.

"You better be packed already, Aspen. I want to get on the road in the next 10 minutes before everyone starts clogging up the streets trying to leave," Willow calls from the bathroom as clunks of products hitting each other rings out.

"I was packed yesterday. I just have to throw in my hygiene products, but it sounds like you are doing that for the both of us!" I yell back to her.

Willow peeks her head out of the bathroom. "Hey! Not fair. I just want to make sure that we don't need anything while we are home. Don't judge a girl for thinking she might need to wax her eyebrows again while being home."

Shaking my head with a smile on my face, I fall back onto my pillow to wait for the princess as she finishes packing. I open Instagram and immediately, videos of people sharing their road trip home mini vlogs flood my screen. Social media is a strange

world where you think everyone wants to know everything that you are doing, so you share every aspect in hopes that you will get a like on that post. I'm mindlessly scrolling through it when Willow claps her hands together, startling me back into the present world.

"That's all of it. Once we have the car packed up, we can head on home," she says as she places one last bag on the pile of suitcases by the door.

My eyes bulge. There are seven full size suitcases with an assortment of bags piled on top of them. "Goddess, Willow. We aren't going to be gone that long. Did you pack up all of our personal belongings?"

She simply shrugs her shoulders. "You never know what you are going to need and when you are going to need it. You will thank me when you think of some random item you wish you had, and I just hand it to you."

Pulling myself up to a sitting position, I slip my feet into my shoes. "I highly doubt all of that. Too bad the dorms don't come with those cart things that hotels have," I say with a sigh.

It takes us every bit of thirty minutes to lug all the luggage downstairs and load it into her Nissan Altima. You would think we were moving out for the two weeks instead of going home to see our parents.

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After a long two-hour drive of car karaoke, we finally pass the ‘Welcome to Jasper, Colorado’ sign. The butterflies in my stomach take flight as the idea of bumping into Warrick becomes a real possibility. I wonder if he looks different or if he will look at me differently now that we have been apart for several months. As we roll through town, I watch as everyone mills about, just like they always have. It’s one quality I love about small towns; nothing really changes. You always know that Gail is going to be at the diner giving everyone a run for their money. That Moe will have some new dish he has created. Sally will have new flavors of ice cream she has come up with. There is consistency in small town life that you don’t get anywhere else.

I’m not shocked to see that my parents are both home when Willow pulls into her spot in the driveway. I’m also not shocked when Hazel comes bounding down the steps toward us. Willow puts the car in park and we both step out of the car. Squeals of excitement ring out as we run to each other, wrapping ourselves together in a tangle of limbs.

“I’ve missed you guys!” Hazel’s muffled voice says between our smushed cheeks.

Looking over her shoulder, I find both my parents standing together on the porch. Dad with his arm wrapped around Mom’s shoulder while Mom is wiping tears from her eyes.

Once Hazel finally lets go of us, I rush over to my parents for one of those welcome home enveloping hugs. I’ve never believed that home was a physical place, but more the people you consider home. When my parents’ arms are wrapped around me, I know I’m home. The drops of liquid wetting my shoulder tell me that my mom has gone from gentle crying to full-blown sobbing while we are in each other’s embrace.

“Mom, I wasn’t gone that long.” I wipe away the falling tears.

She sniffles. “I know, but you are all grown up. My last baby is home from her first semester of college.”

Dad chuckles before patting me on the back. “She has been like this since you left. Empty nest syndrome and all that. Wait till you see the seventeen different projects she has started to fill her time.” He shakes his head before heading inside.

Mom wipes the tears from her eyes quickly before saying, “He doesn’t know what he is talking about. I just can’t decide which hobby I want to do, that’s all.”

The girls and I follow my parents into the house. That first inhale of breath settles the butterflies in my stomach. I might run into Warrick, but at least I feel a sense of ease just being in my familiar space with my parents.

“Where’s Jakob, Mom?”

She waves her hand over her shoulder. “You know your brother is around here somewhere. Probably in the woods, if I had to guess. I texted him when you got here to let him know you were home.”

We all settle onto the couches in the living room. Dad has Sports Center playing in the background.

“Hopefully he will be here soon so I can convince him to lug all this luggage in that Willow is determined we will need,” I say, glancing over at Willow out of the corner of my eye.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I’m telling you that you will need something out of what I packed and will thank me for bringing it.”

Hazel leans around her to look at me. “How bad is it this time?”

“Seven full size suitcases with more bags than I know what could possibly be in them.”

Hazel playfully slaps Willow on the shoulder while her mouth hangs open. “Willow! We have talked about this. It’s okay to go without it, too!”

My parents watch with warm, loving expressions on their faces. I can tell by looking at them that they missed this the most out of us leaving. I can imagine the house has been quiet without us here.

Mom claps her hands together. “So, what are the plans while you are here? I can’t imagine you have done any runs as your wolf while cooped up at Fairview.”

Willow pipes up before I have any chance to respond, “Well, Maeve, the first thing I’m dragging our girl here to is a welcome home party we are throwing. Since so many of us left for college, Hazel and I thought it would be fun to throw a party to celebrate finishing our first semesters of college.”

My eyes bulge at the news. This is the first I’ve heard of this. When were they planning to tell me? On the way there? I really don’t want to party and she knows that. I would rather we have a slumber party and watch cheesy rom-com movies than spend five minutes at a party. I glare at the side of her head as she animatedly tells my mom all about the plans for tonight. Hazel peeks around Willow’s back with an apologetic look on her face as she mouths, “I’m sorry” to me.

I know they mean well, and I don’t blame them for wanting to celebrate, but why do people even like parties? They’re loud, people are obnoxious, and you can almost bet money on at least one fight happening before the night is over. It’s just overall not a fun time. I can count off the top of my head how many times I’ve had beer spilled on

me without even really thinking too hard about it. Who even likes that hangover feeling the next day?

I don't realize that someone asked me something until Willow bumps me with her elbow. Looking between her and my mom, I'm pulled out of my pit of party hatred in my head.

"I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

My mom clears her throat. "I was asking if you were planning to talk to Warrick while you were here?"

I feel a stone drop in the pit of my stomach. I knew this question was coming, and I know she means well, but my mom doesn't know about all the things that he has done to me. Willow scoots in closer, giving me the support I need without verbalizing it.

"I, uh, won't be going out of my way to see him, but I'm sure that I will see him around town." I look anywhere but at her disappointed face.

Outside of the fact that I am not accepting my mateship with Warrick, at least in her eyes, my mom didn't understand why I wanted to go off to college instead of integrating into the pack life like she did. Thankfully, Hazel and Willow joined me in my adventure to build my own way in this pack life by following me to college as well. Otherwise, I don't think my mom would have let me go as easily as she did.

Dad was the more supportive one when it came down to it. He was the one who really convinced Mom that it was a good thing to bring new trades and businesses into the pack. We can't all do the same things. She hasn't fully supported it, but at least she stopped trying to convince me otherwise.

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Dad taps her on the leg, his way of telling her to stop. “I’m sure the girls would like to freshen up before the big party tonight. Why don’t we let them do that? We will have plenty of time to talk with them over the next two weeks.”

Willow looks over her shoulder to see the hesitant look on my face before she quickly turns around to face me. “Come on, Aspen, I promise it won’t be as bad as it was the last time we were here. I’m sure that he isn’t here, and even if he is, fuck him.”

She wraps her arm around mine, pulling me through the front doors. If I thought the music was loud outside, it has nothing on the ear bleeding level that it is inside. The bass of the music is vibrating my soul at this point. Willow and Hazel weave us through the groups of people dancing and mingling around the pack hall. People are nodding their heads, and some are wrapping Willow in hugs like we didn’t see each other our entire lives up until six months ago. Each time that we are stopped, Hazel keeps close to me, because, of course, she does. She is our mother hen for a reason. It takes far longer than it should for us to finally reach the table with the drinks and even longer to finally grab one. Between the people stopping Willow and the ones hovering by the table, I almost gave up.

I’m hanging out at the back of the group of people who have crowded around Willow when I feel Hazel lean in close to my ear. “You okay?”

Looking at her, I can see the concern written across her face as she scans my own. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s not really my scene!” I yell back to her.

We all chat and hang out with our pack mates until Willow comes giggling over to us. “Guys, let’s go dance!” she yells as she wraps her arms around Hazel and me.

Hazel gives me a questioning look, and I simply shrug my shoulders. Willow squeals in delight as she pulls us into the main area, where the crowd is all jumping and dancing along to the music. As she pulls us through the crowd, my shoulder bumps into a girl who whips around to glare at me. Her face morphs from anger to mischievousness when she realizes who I am. I don't have a chance to consider that before my arm is being yanked in the opposite direction. Looking back to see if I know who that was, I can't see her anymore as the crowd has moved back to where it was before.

The song changes as we begin to move our bodies, and before I know it, I'm lost in the sea of music and moving bodies. It feels nice to let go and allow the music to sweep me into its embrace. We are enjoying ourselves without a care for how much time has passed when my body signals that it's desperate for a bathroom break. Tapping Willow on the shoulder, I lean in to yell into her ear that I'm heading to the bathroom.

"Do you need me or Hazel to come with you?"

Shaking my head, I turn to push my way back through. If we were at the clubs by campus, I would have said yes, but this is pack territory. There isn't much to worry about except our creepy pack leader, Orion.

I push my way past the last bodies on the edge of the group and breathe in the first full breath of air I've had in what seems like ages at this point. Thankfully, I'm not far from the bathrooms, because I don't know how much longer I can hold it.

There are tables with booth style seating lining the outside wall along the room. Each one with varying amounts of people. Some look as though they have sat there the entire time, while others have an array of personal belongings, with only one or two people sitting at them. I walk around a couple stepping out of their booth, only to come to a halt when I see who is in the next booth. Or should I say with whom?

The girl from earlier who gave me that strange look is staring right at me from the top of some guy that she is grinding on. Her face lights up when she sees me, with a look of pure joy before she gives a dark laugh. I don't even know who she is or how she knows me, but clearly she knows who I am. More power to you, I guess. She keeps staring at me as she runs her hand down the face of the guy without breaking eye contact. Confusion is coloring my mind as I try to figure out why this girl is staring at me like that when I realize who the guy is she's grinding on. It's none other than Warrick, who looks drunk out of his mind while his hands grip her hips.

He is so out of it that he doesn't even register that she is only enjoying this because I'm standing here, shattering, while she grinds on my mate. I watch in horror as she leans down and pulls him into a kiss. His hand leaves her hip to wrap around the back of her head as she keeps pace with her grinding.

Her mouth pops off of his as she gives a maniacal laugh and looks right back at me. He finally sees that she isn't paying any attention to him and looks to see who has her attention. His eyes lock with mine right before I turn and push myself back through the crowd.

I don't stop. I don't tell anyone that I'm leaving. I just leave. I'll never understand how he can do this to me over and over again. He knew that I would be here. There isn't any way he didn't. I'm sure at this point that he is doing it on purpose.

The burn behind my eyes intensifies as I try to make it through the crowd. Mouthing "sorry" and "excuse me" to people who are too drunk to even hear me, I finally make it to the other side of the crowd and close to the door.

Shoving the front door open, I push the person coming throughout of the way in my rush to get as far away from here as I possibly can. Running down the steps, I consider where to go. I can't go back to my parents' house. They will ask questions I'm not ready for. I don't want to make the girls leave. Looking around, I decide the

only thing I can do is run through the woods.

Letting Aisling take over, I drop to the ground as the shift takes over. It doesn't take long for my legs and arms to cover in white fur and my hands to become paws. Aisling shakes herself and stretches out in a downward dog position.

"I wasn't expecting this. Are you okay?" Aisling asks.

"Just take us for a run. I want to get away from everyone, especially him."

She growls, "I can rip her off of him and show her who he belongs to."

Shaking my head even though it's metaphorically, I say, "It's his job to put her in her place. He allows these females to have a chance with him instead of telling them he has a mate."

"Give me five minutes and I'll put both of them in their place. He won't have to worry about any other females if I threaten his favorite appendage."

I can't help but snort. Aisling is the sassy, bad bitch side of me. Honestly, I wish I could be more like her most days. I doubt she would have anyone walk all over her like they do me.

She snaps her jaw, clicking her teeth together. "A couple snaps of the teeth near it and I bet he keeps it to himself."

"It's fine. Let's go for that run."

"You sure?"

Sucking back the tears that are wanting to fall, I nod my head. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Maybe one day someone will choose me first, but I'm tired of being the one to wait around for our mate. If he can have his fun, then so can I."

"I like the sound of this. Anyone in mind?"

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“Not really. I haven’t thought about another guy since I found out about our mate. I don’t even understand how he doesn’t hurl every time he thinks about someone other than me. Even the mere thought of someone getting that close to me makes my stomach turn. I blame the hopeless romantic inside of me.”

“Just means that we have to find someone that gives you the attention and love that you deserve without crossing the boundary that makes your stomach turn.”

Why does he have to get drunk and sleep with other women? What I’m really asking is why does he push me away?

Aisling starts to run towards the woods as the cold wind flows through our fur. “I don’t know Aspen. If I could ease your mind and soul at all, I would. He doesn’t deserve a beautiful soul like you.”

She picks up the pace as I push myself further into the recesses of our shared mind. I just want to disappear for a little while. Allow her to take over and just run or whatever she wants to do.

“Hey Aisling?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t shift back until I tell you to. For now, I would rather be in the woods where it’s quiet and nobody is going to ask me why my mate doesn’t choose me. Or give me those pitying looks when they see him with someone else.”

“I’ll give you the night, but at dawn, you have to take back over. We can’t stay out here forever or stay shifted for that long.”

“Fair enough. Thank you.”

I pull back as she weaves between the trees. I watch for a while until I decide to close my eyes and rest.

Chapter 16

Warrick

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I don’t think she is going to hear me out, but I really need to tell her that it isn’t what she thinks it is. Pushing open the door to the bookstore, my way is blocked by none other than Chase.

“She doesn’t want to see you, Warrick.” His arms are crossed over his chest as he glares at me.

“Get out of my way, Chase. This has nothing to do with you.” A growl rumbles out of me as I attempt to step around him, but he shifts to stand in front of me again.

“I know she is your mate, but this has to stop.”

A growl comes out of me. “She is my mate and not your concern.” I shove past him, making sure to knock my shoulder into his.

“Doesn’t it bother you? Hurting your mate all the time? Have you ever considered that with everything you have done to her?”

My head whips around to him as I turn to face him. “You don’t know what you are

talking about.”

“Rose,” I yell out, hoping wherever she is in the store, she will hear the desperation in my voice.

He shrugs his shoulders. “Maybe. Maybe not. But I do know that, of the two of us, I’m the one that she has been confiding in. I’m the shoulder she cries on when you fuck up, yet again. At this point, I think it would be best if you just left. You are doing far more damage than good at this rate.” I take a step toward him, ready to give him a piece of my mind, when he delivers the final punch to my gut. “If she was my mate, and goddess knows I wish she was, I would worship at her feet, because she is an amazing woman who deserves it. I would never dream of doing the painful, heartbreaking things you’ve done to her, like fucking any woman other than the one fated for me. But alas, I haven’t found my mates. Instead, I found someone who I can love, cherish, and respect.”

My shoulders drop and all the anger rushes out of me. He’s right, and I hate him for it. Turning, I set the coffee for her down on the table and head to the door. Before I leave, I look over my shoulder and say, “You’re right,” before walking out and letting the door shut behind me.

The coffee in my hand doesn’t even sound tempting, and the book that has been my escape for weeks holds no appeal today. Discarding the coffee, I briskly walk down the sidewalk toward the pack house.

I don’t know how I will win Aspen over now. Even though what she saw isn’t what she thinks, I’ve burned that bridge already. If I hadn’t fucked around so much in our life, then she wouldn’t have assumed anything when she saw Selene talking to me. She didn’t even see who it was, just that another girl was sitting with me.

It’s going to take one hell of a gesture to win Aspen over this time. Nothing short of

something from a romance book or Hallmark movie. I just don't know what it would be.

My office is exactly as I left it: a total mess. There are papers everywhere and at least an inch of dust on top of the furniture. Honestly, I rarely come in here. What does a Beta need an office for? Most of the time, I'm moving around the pack land and mingling with other wolves. But Silas insisted and, today, I'm grateful for a place to hide that nobody would think to look for me.

Deciding that a messy office isn't a great place to think, I begin clearing the desk of all the papers strewn about. I shuffle the papers into piles, clearing all the trash off the desk, and neatly putting the pens into the cup that Nova got me that says "#1 Pain in the Ass."

It doesn't take long for the office to be cleaned and look like I've never seen it before. I've just sat down at my desk with a notebook when there is a knock at the door. Inhaling, I know immediately that it's Gail. Shaking my head, I say, "Come in."

Gail's weathered face with her gray curls framing it peeks around my door. "Do you have a moment, dear?"

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“For you, I always have a moment.” I gesture with my hand to my lone chair in front of my desk. It’s not the best, but I clearly don’t exactly use the office much.

Her face lights with a warm smile as she makes her way to my chair. After she is settled and adjusted, she looks at me. “Seems you have a lot of work ahead of you, and I’m not talking about the pack life.” Her eyebrow raises with a knowing glint in her eye.

“Should I just pretend it’s normal that you already know what I’ve been thinking this morning and somehow know of the conversation I had with Chase?”

“Don’t sass me, boy. Do you want my help or not? I’m not the one who is floundering at claiming my mate.”

Sighing, I run my hand down my face. “I’m sorry, Gail. I didn’t do anything wrong this time. It doesn’t make up for all the other times, but Selene was just showing me pictures she took of the pack. I didn’t even think anything of it until I saw Aspen’s face.”

“You can’t fault Aspen for assuming it was like every other time. Especially since the first time it happened, you had invited her to be there, too.” She gives me a look of disappointment.

I slam my fist down on the desktop. “I know, alright? I’m trying to make it right, but it’s like nothing I’m doing is working!”

Gail reaches across my desktop to lay her hand across mine. “Be patient. You have

years of pain to work through. Nothing you do is going to be a quick fix, but I may have an idea that would certainly be the grand gesture that you are looking for.”

We spend the next few hours going over her idea and planning out how to do it, without word getting around about what I’m doing. Gail even suggested that I give Aspen space while I am working on it.

We call in the carpenter to go over the plans that we have created. He promises to have the drawn up plans to me by the end of the week, after he has the measurements and a feel for the layout.

The sun is setting as our meeting wraps up. It was a productive day with a plan that will hopefully work.

Bill, our carpenter, claps a hand on my shoulder. “It’s going to be beautiful when it's completed. Thanks for trusting me with the project.”

A smile stretches across my face. “I can’t imagine anyone else working on it, man. Your work is always stunning. I’ve been jealous of that cabinet in Silas’s office for a while now.”

He blushes. “Thank you. I’ll shoot you a message when I have the plans done. You alright with me dropping by tomorrow to measure everything?”

“Yeah, it sounds good. See you then.”

He walks out of my office as Gail turns back to me in her chair. “This is going to work, Warrick. Have faith in yourself and fate.” She pulls herself up from the chair before she leans in closer to me. “Fate never gets it wrong. Some people just have to work a little harder at it than others.”

She cups my face with her hand as she lifts my chin slightly. “You are a wonderful man who has just made poor decisions along the way. You will get there one day.” She pats my cheek before walking out of my office.

Sighing, I drop my shoulders before my back slams into the chair. A little harder, she says. I feel as though I have a mountain the size of Everest to climb to earn Aspen’s heart. It’s nobody’s fault but my own, but the feat is still the same.

I gather my jacket and cell phone before flipping the light off in my office. Sliding the lock in place, I head back home.

Hours later, long past the time that I should have gone to bed, I’m standing inside the empty room that will hopefully show Aspen how committed I am to us. It’s plain now, but after Bill is done, the room will be magical.

The ice chinks against the side of the glass as I whirl around the bourbon. I think it’s going to take around three months for it to be completed. Right around when Silas and Nova are to be wed. Maybe, just maybe, I will be there with Aspen on my arm, too.

Chapter 17

Aspen

It’s been three months since the night that I walked into the diner to find Warrick with a girl beside him. I’ve thought a lot about it and, honestly, I think that it’s for the best that it happened. As much as I would like to finally claim my mate, I am glad to know that nothing has actually changed about him before I couldn’t take it back. I don’t know what I would have done if we had claimed each other and then I found him cheating again. My entire body shutters at the thought of it.

Chase glances over to me. “You alright?”

Nodding my head, I reply, “Yeah, just thinking of what would have happened if I found out about the cheating after we had claimed each other.”

His arm wraps around my shoulders, pushing the hiking backpack down my back. “Well, thankfully, you don’t have to worry about that.”

My feet kick rocks along the path as we ascend the climb up the mountain. Chase decided it was time for our first hike of the year. Since the spring sun is high in the sky and the blooms of the wild flowers are open, I couldn’t disagree, even if hiking is my least favorite activity. Air blows out of my nose in annoyance.

“Don’t even give me the pouty lip, Aspen. Being out in nature is great for the soul and mind.” Chase cuts a playful glare at me when my lip begins to push out in a pout.

He reaches over with his free hand and quickly runs his fingers down my side, tickling me into bouts of laughter. Jumping away from him, I put my hands on my hip and give it everything I have to look as angry as I can.

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“Not fair, Chase. You know how ticklish I am. Just like you also know, I hate hiking.”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “I do. But I also know that you have either been in your house or in your bookstore, hiding from the world since you caught Warrick. Come on, you know that after you get through your tantrum that you will have a good time out here.”

Why does he have to know me so well? It’s actually unfair because I have no counter argument with him. I just want to lie on my couch with my fuzzy blanket and a book, but I know I’ll feel better after getting out in nature. Is that really that bad?

“We don’t have much further till we get to our stopping point today.” He waves his hand in a come-on motion as he turns to walk up the incline.

Tall cedar trees line the path’s right side, forming a canopy that blocks most of the sun. The dirt path beneath our feet is littered with rocks of all different sizes and grooves cut into it where the rain formed a trail as it went down the mountain. The left side is the drop to the bottom of the mountain, but if you look beyond it, the view is breathtaking. Greenery as far as the eye can see, with mountains of all varying sizes dotting the horizon. The blue sky fades to white, creating a mental image that is prize worthy. Clicking the camera icon on my phone, I snap a few photos of it. I’m not a photographer by any means, but the beauty of it is hard to pass up.

“You coming?” Chase yells back to me from where he stopped further up the trail.

Pocketing my phone, I scurry to catch up to where he has stopped. The smile on his

face would melt snow in the dead of winter. The bright, warm smile has always invited me in and it's something I've always loved about him.

We walk in companionable silence listening to the leaves rustle in the wind, birds chirping back and forth, and enjoy the silence of nature. I can't keep my mind from wandering as we walk. Did I overreact when I saw Warrick with Selene? I mean, she is only seventeen years old. Is he really dating someone that young or fooling around with her?

She came to see me not long after that all happened, swearing to me it wasn't what it looked like. She showed me the same photos that she was showing him and explained that she wants to be a photographer when she grows up. Her serenity was clear when she told me all about him finding her taking photos on his walking path. The conversation he had with her about pursuing it as a career. How because of him, she finally told her parents about her passion. Now that I feel like a complete ass for assuming the absolute worst about her, it showed me I still have unresolved feelings about what happened over the years. Until we discuss those, I don't think there really is a chance for Warrick and I to be together. I think I will always fear that one day, he will slip up again, and I'll find my heart shattered into a million pieces.

Chase veers off the path to the left, where the alcove between the trees opens up. It's been our favorite spot for years now because of the breathtaking views that it offers. Who could pass up on the opportunity to dangle their feet over the edge of a mountain while watching the sun move across the clear, blue sky?

He pulls his backpack off and pulls out our blanket to sit on. Flicking it open, he gently places it close to the edge. After I get over the initial freak out of sitting this close to the edge, we move closer a little at a time, until we sit on the edge of the drop. It's best not to look directly down at the sheer fall that you would face if anything went wrong.

Since we are both creatures of the mountains, we love being outdoors, but with Chase being a mountain lion, he loves the thrill of living, or, in this case, sitting on the edge of the cliff. Me, on the other hand, as a wolf, I like being in the forest enjoying the cool breeze that blows through them.

I pull out our thermos and pour each of us a cup of coffee as he pulls out the mini lunch box he packed with our morning snack. He really is the perfect boyfriend with all the snacks he pulls out. He even brought me a bag of only the red Skittles because he knows those are my favorite. I imagine him sitting at his table separating out all the reds into that small snack-size plastic bag. A snort comes out of me at the thought of him bent over the table, grabbing each red Skittle with his massive hands to drop them into the bag.

Glancing up at me with an amused look on his face, he says, “Something funny?”

“Just thinking about you hunched over your dining table separating out the red Skittles one by one. The visual is quite hilarious.”

“Hey, I’ll have you know it’s more that I eat the other ones while ensuring to leave all the red ones for you.”

Giggling, I say, “You really are an amazing guy, Chase, your mates will be so lucky to have you.”

I just wish that Warrick could be as caring and as attentive as Chase has been all this time. Is it too much to ask that my mate would do even the simplest thing, like remember that I love the red Skittles and that I love to tuck my cold toes under his thigh to keep them warm? To run me a hot bath after delivery days because my muscles are sore from unloading all the boxes?

I’ve never been first in anyone’s book, not even with Willow and Hazel. Yes, they

both love me, but they are each other's soul matches. While I never question their friendship with me, I know I wasn't their first choice. To find out that your mate is not only here, but also doesn't choose you first? I don't think I can ever move past that. Glancing at Chase, I find that he is already watching me with a look of concern on his face.

"A cookie for your thoughts?" He holds out an oatmeal raisin cookie.

This! The cookie is another reason why I believe he is the perfect guy. He always makes sure to have them with him on our hikes. Not exactly the best food for hiking, but it just reinforces how much he knows me.

It's warm from being in his backpack. "I've just been thinking about how I wish Warrick knew as much about me as you do. To remember things like my favorite cookie or that I only like to eat the red Skittles. I know he was trying to reach me through reading, which is great, but there is more to me than those books. Sometimes I feel like he is more into the idea of the mating than he is into me. Does that make sense?"

His eyes fill with pity, which is why I don't talk about this with anyone. I don't want pity or for people to feel bad about me. I know I was dealt a more challenging case when it comes to fate, but I don't need pity. What I really need is validation of my feelings. "Don't pity me, Chase. You know I don't like that."

"I don't pity you. I felt sorry for you because I believe you should be loved and cared for the right way, but that doesn't mean I pity you. You have every right to want Warrick to know things about you and want you for you. It's perfectly okay to demand those things and make sure he is here for the right reasons."

"You know, I think that something happened to him and he has never talked about it. I get that when we were kids that he cheated, but to reject the mating all this time and

to throw women in my face over and over? Is he doing that to punish me or himself? The Warrick I knew would never hurt someone on purpose. He might not seem like it, but he does have a big heart buried deep under all the flashy muscles and deflective behavior.”

I look down into my cup of coffee and watch a bubble swirl around the cup. I haven’t voiced that thought aloud to anyone. I’m not sure why I am now, other than Chase has always made me feel as though I can voice all my thoughts, regardless of if they are absurd or not.

He hums for a moment before speaking. “I think you might be onto something. Didn’t he lose his parents during a football game or something like that? That was after you caught him cheating under the bleachers, if I remember correctly.”

My mouth drops open. I didn’t think about that. I don’t know if that is what caused it, but he might be onto something. The cheating when we were teens was just a horny teenage boy with all the popularity to boot. But everything since then? It does come off more as someone trying to keep people at a distance than someone who just can’t keep his hands to himself. There is so much I really don’t know about Warrick, a lot of things that I’ve made assumptions about, and what’s worse is I’ve never tried to look closer. All this time I’ve left him to his own devices without considering the why or pushing for him to tell me what’s wrong. Maybe he isn’t the only one who needs to work on themselves? How can I harp on him for not being a good mate to me, while I left him in his pain without a second thought?

“You might be onto something there. But I can’t make him open up to me.”

Chase reaches across the blanket and pulls my hand into his. With his thumb brushing over my knuckles back and forth, he says, “No, but you can show him that he can’t push you away like he does everyone else. Maybe show him that he means something to you and he will, in turn, see that he doesn’t have to keep deflecting.”

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I stare at him for what feels like ages. Why couldn't he have been born a wolf shifter, so I could just mate with him? It's rather unfair, really.

Tapping his hand with my other hand, I say, "That's enough about me. How's the search for your mates going?"

He pulls back from me and stares out at the horizon. "It's not."

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. It's not like him to be so cut off. "What do you mean?"

"It means that I've stopped looking and don't want to talk about it anymore."

"You don't get to make me talk about my mate's situation and then close off when I ask about yours. That's a bit unfair, don't you think?" My lips purse in anger.

"Fine. I've told you before that we have two mates. I mentioned how they are going to be females, but what I didn't mention is that I'll have trials to be chosen by them." My eyebrows shoot up as my eyes bulge.

"Wait, let me finish. The similarities between our kind are that the male feels a draw to each of his females, but they can choose not to accept it. Each month on the full moon, there is a ceremony where each Triad Bond comes forth in front of the Moon Goddess to present their selections. The pillar, which is the male's role in the Triad bond, then faces several challenges to test if he is ready for the bond. It's all secretive and each person's experience is different. We are told not to share the information outside of our packs, not really sure why, but the elders, what we call the

heartkeepers, have always warned us against sharing the information.”

My heart swells with love. He feels comfortable enough to share something with me that he isn’t even supposed to. I can’t even imagine having to do all this to be with your mates. “Thank you for sharing with me. Why did you though, if you aren’t supposed to?”

“I trust you, Aspen, and with everything you have shared with me, I couldn’t keep this one any longer. Plus, clearly my mates aren’t in my pack and they aren’t close or I would have felt the pull towards them by now.”

I lean my head on his shoulder as I wrap my arm around his. “Neither of us is having much luck in the mate department. You will find your mates soon. I can feel it.”

We fall into our quiet contentment as we watch the clouds cast shadows over the valley. A quick glance at the sun lets me know that we have been sitting here at least an hour or so. Sometimes I wish we could stay out here until the sun sets, but the numbness in my butt cheeks lets me know that it’s not an option.

Sighing, I push off his shoulder to start packing up our stuff. “At least we have the babies to look forward to.”

He chuckles, “Yeah, isn’t the gender reveal soon? I still don’t quite understand the point of that.”

Standing up, I brush off my butt and hands. “Yes! We finally find out if the babies are boys, girls, or one of each. It’s a very human activity, but remember, it wasn’t that long ago that Nova was human. Silas doesn’t want to take away those things just because he turned her.”

“Fair enough, I suppose.”

As we begin our descent down the mountain, I think about all the things that I have to look forward to and, right now, being anaunt is the most exciting thing coming up. As excited as I am to welcome the new pups into our pack, I can't help but feel envious of her. I want my own pups to be excited about. Maybe I can just adopt since it doesn't seem Warrick and I will ever be able to move beyond our pasts.

Chapter 18

Aspen

It's the day that the entire pack has been waiting for: Gender Reveal Day! The anticipation of what Nova and Silas will be having is something everyone has been gossiping about, even the town folks. I'm pretty sure there is even a bet going on with what everyone thinks they will be. Something I'm sure that Warrick was behind, since that is completely something I could see him doing.

Speaking of him, he hasn't shown up around town, at least not that I've seen, since that night that we don't talk about. He is obviously here somewhere, but it seems that he is doing everything he can to not cross paths with me. I'm sure that, no matter how hard he tries today, we will cross paths at some point. It's inevitable, with him being Silas's best friend and me being Nova's. Part of me wants to avoid him, but a small part of me wants to inhale his scent for that singular moment of peace it gives. No matter how many times he's broken my heart, he's still my mate. There's things being in his presence will bring me that no one else can. Some days I really hate it, I've cried to the goddess asking why. But then I think about those moments in the bookstore when he was telling me about his thoughts, and I can't help but yearn for more of those.

I slip on my pink, floral mini dress with a sweetheart neckline. With spring finally showing up around here, I am beyond ready to wear the cute dresses that have been hanging in my closet. Sitting down at my vanity, I slip on a rose gold pendant

necklace my parents got me for my eighteenth birthday, one of the few good things that came from that night.

As I'm curling my hair, I can't help but wonder what he is going to look like today. A girl can fantasize in the privacy of her room. One of my favorite things about Warrick is his arms, something I should be able to see today, given that it's finally warmed up outside. Will he be in his typical Henley and jeans? Or will he dress up, since it is a party, after all? Has he shaved off the beard he grows in the winter or has he finally embraced the bearded life? Sometimes I catch myself wondering what that beard would feel like as his lips moved across mine.

Hiss. With a muttered curse, I yank my finger back from the curling iron. Fuck, that hurt. Shaking my head, I pull myself out of my daydream of Warrick and focus back on finishing getting ready.

I never do heavy makeup, always sticking to the light side of it. Foundation, a hint of blush, nude eyeshadow, and mascara is all that I've ever done. I never wanted to take away from my natural beauty and my hazel eyes. The last couple brushes of mascara finish off my makeup and with a final inspection in the mirror, I get up to put on my shoes and grab my purse.

Checking the time on my phone, I realize that I only have ten minutes before I'm supposed to be at the pack house to set everything up. As Nova's best friend, it's my job today to ensure that everything runs perfectly. Of course, Nellie, Willow, and Hazel are going to be there as well, but this is our first time ever experiencing something like this. I want it to be perfect and so it will be.

I'm running through the house, grabbing the last of my things when my phone dings.

Nova: You on your way?

Yeah, grabbing the last of my stuff and then I'm on my way.

Don't be mad, but Warrick is already here.

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Glaring at my phone, I think about what I want to say. Typing and erasing several times before settling on...

That's fine. I assumed he would be, since he is Silas's best friend. No biggie! I'll be a good girl, I swear.

It's not you that I'm worried about.

What's that supposed to mean?

The three dots pop up and disappear several times. Seems I'm not the only one considering what I'm saying before actually sending it today.

Warrick...ugh. Idk you will have to see for yourself. He isn't being normal. It's weird, but like... he is being super sweet, attentive, and extra helpful?

I'm sure he is just excited to be an uncle is all.

Yeah...

Alright, I'm heading that way. See you soon!

I pull my wagon around to the steps and pile everything I have to bring into it. Grabbing the handle, I walk the trek to the pack house. I chose my cabin to be sort of midway away from it. I didn't like the idea of being super close to the main building, but I also wasn't going to be anymore of a loner by choosing one of the houses on the outskirts or further out like Warrick and Silas.

I haven't been walking for long when I see Warrick walking down the path toward the shops on the pack land. He is walking with a determined pace, like a man on a mission. I follow him with my eyes as I watch him walk into the bakery. He must be on cake duty if he is going there today.

Caelon and Xavior are carrying a table inside when I walk up. Xavior nods his head at me, which is about as much communication you can expect from him.

Caelon beams with a smile as he notices me walking up. "Uh, hi, Aspen."

Caelon has always been the shy, quiet type. But once he warms up to you, he is quite the chatterbox. Most people walk past him and never acknowledge him, but I do because we are the same, really. Instead of books, like me, his vice is computers and math. Don't ask me to explain a single thing he has ever talked about because it was a low humming sound, essentially, in my ears. I always try to listen, at least enough to show that I care what he has to say.

"Hey, Caelon! Are you ready to find out what the babies are going to be?"

He looks around nervously. "Yeah... I, uh, guess I am."

"Are you going to stand here holding the table chatting, or can we get inside to drop this one off? It's not like we don't have ten more to move in," Xavior snaps from the top of the stairs. Whoops!

I place my hand on Caelon's shoulder. "It's alright, we can chat later during the party." I give him a warm smile and cut my eyes to Xavior. Sometimes, he can be so brash with his behavior.

"Sorry." Caelon ducks his head, and they finish walking the table inside.

I follow behind them, leaving my wagon at the foot of the stairs.

The girls are all bustling about when I walk into the kitchen area. Nellie is the first one to see me, and I watch as relief washes over her.

“There you are! I am freaking the fuck out right now, and there is so much to do!” Nellie squeals.

Placing my purse and phone by the coffee bar, I make myself an iced coffee with caramel and chocolate syrup while Nellie gives me the rundown at turbo speed. I’m not sure if she even breathed during the entirety of the explanation.

The first sip of coffee is always the best one. It awakens your soul, I swear. Holding my hand up to pause her rant, I say, “Nellie, breathe for me. It is only 8:20 A.M., and the event starts at 11. We have plenty of time and plenty of people to get everything done. I know that you want it to be perfect, so do I, but I need you to dial back the anxiousness. You are stressing me out, and I just got here. Don’t you remember Dr. M told us that stress isn’t good for the babies?” I lift an eyebrow up as I glare at her.

Her face goes from shock that I stopped her, to anger, and, finally, to resignation. “You’re right. I’m sorry. There is just a lot going on and I don’t feel like we will be done in time. Nova deserves for it to be everything she hoped it would be.”

Hazel walks over with a coffee for Nellie. She hands it to her, and Nellie gulps down a sip of it. “Better?” Hazel asks.

Nellie nods her head, and Willow walks over to the group with a mischievous look on her face. “I’ve got a blunt if you think that will mellow your ass out more.”

Nellie’s mouth falls open as she looks between the three of us. I just shrug my shoulders while Hazel glares at Willow.

“I think I’m good for now,” Nellie tells Willow.

Willow just shrugs. “If you change your mind, it’s in my purse.”

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Just then, the kitchen door bangs open, and in walks Warrick with the cake. All of us whip our heads in his direction right as he looks up to see us staring at him.

“Uh... I’ve got the cake here.” He looks between the four of us. “I was told to bring it in here until it’s time to cut it. Something about keeping it cold so the icing doesn’t melt.”

Hazel is the one to speak up first. “Yeah, let me take some racks out of the fridge real quick so we have space for it.”

She jumps into action while I’m still stuck staring at him. He didn’t shave his beard like I thought he would. Instead, he trimmed it and; I have to say, I’m loving it. He styled his hair and even put on a button-up with his signature Henley on beneath. He moves to follow Hazel as my eyes move to follow him. His ass looks stellar in those dark denim jeans that hug his thighs until the knees where they fall straight down. My lips are between my teeth as I imagine what it would be like to see that ass without the cover of clothing.

“Rose,” whispers past his lips while his eyes stay locked with mine.

A quiet “ahem,” followed by a giggle, comes from beside me, jerking me back into the here and now. I look over to find both Nellie and Willow with hands over their mouths, trying to keep from laughing out loud. My eyebrows drop and I glare at both of them.

“Do you want to be seen checking him out as though you would love nothing more than to strip him naked right here?” Willow whispers to me.

I shake my head.

“Didn’t think so. So, you’re welcome,” she whispers again before looking at Nellie. “Nellie and I are going to get the stuff from Aspen’s cart.”

She jerks Nellie behind her as they rush out the kitchen door. I watch them both walk out as I look at Hazel with confusion on my face. Hazel is looking at the door that just swung shut when she says, “I’m going to start working on the tablecloths now that Caelon and Xavior have brought the tables in.” She rushes out the same door without a single glance back.

The refrigerator door shuts as Warrick turns around. “That was weird.”

Nodding my head, I take another sip of my coffee. He walks over to where I’m leaning against the island and stops only a step away from where I’m standing. I suck in a breath as I stand up in front of him. It’s been three months since we have seen each other and the only thing that I can confidently say that has happened since that time, is that I know I want my mate. I want Warrick. More like need him.

His nostrils flare as he takes in my scent. He reaches up and twirls one of my curls around his finger. “You look beautiful today, Aspen. You always do, but today I have to say...” His fingers run over the ruffled cuff of my dress and trail down my arm. “Today, I love this dress and how stunning you look in it.”

He runs his fingers down the length of my arm, capturing my hand in his. I hold my breath, unsure where this is going, as I watch him bring my hand to his mouth. He gently kisses each knuckle while whispering words of affirmation to me. “Beautiful.” Kiss. “Intelligent.” Kiss. “Worthy of love.” Kiss. “Strong.” Kiss.

My chest is rising and falling in sawing breaths as I flush with arousal. I watch in rapt attention as his nostrils flare wider, pulling my slick scent into him. He gently pulls

me the last step forward, slamming our bodies flush together. My arm is now crushed between us as I feel all the hard plains of his body mold around my soft ones.

“Why...” my mouth dries as I try to form a coherent thought. “Why did you call me Rose? That’s the second time.”

He smirks, “So you did hear me in the bookstore?”

My face heats with embarrassment. “Yes, stop avoiding the question.”

He shrugs. “Not avoiding it. Just proving a point.” He leans down, brushing my hair over my shoulder, and runs his hand down to the small of my back. “I call you Rose because I can’t wait to watch you bloom with each swipe of my tongue, with each moan, with every chant of my name.”

With a firm pull, he erases all the space between us, cocooning us in our mingling scents. I can’t help but close my eyes and bask in it. The rightness of this moment. My soul feels at peace for the first time. He leans in closer, his nose brushing along my shoulder and his breath ghosting across my skin, sending a shiver down my spine.

“One day, I will earn the privilege of knowing each and every thing that will make you scream my name. One day, I will be honored with a place by your side. And one day, I will earn your love.” His lips move across my neck as he speaks and my knees begin to quiver. What I wouldn’t give to just give into it right here, right now.

He moves up my neck and ghosts his lips across my jaw line. “Today isn’t that day, but just know that the day isn’t far away. I will do everything I can to earn your love, Aspen, even if it means walking across burning coals barefoot.”

A gasp escapes me at his declaration. “You...” I gulp. “You don’t have to do that for me, Warrick.” I let out in a husky breath.

He cups my cheek with his hand as my eyes open. He is looking at me with pure adoration and it might just be the best moment of my life. I've waited years for him to see me.

"You deserve to be loved like the fairy tale books you read, and I'm determined to give you just that. Don't give in now, Aspen. I can see it in your eyes. I'm sorry that I've mistreated you in the past. I don't deserve to even hold you in my arms like I am now. You should hate me for everything I've done to you, embarrassing you in front of others, and flaunting women when I knew you would be around. I don't want your forgiveness right now. I want to earn it. Can you hold out a little longer for me?"

His eyes are pleading with me, and I can see by the droop of his shoulders that he truly believes that I should never forgive him. He doesn't believe he deserves love. Maybe that has been the issue all along. Not me, but him?

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry," Caelon says from the doorway.

We jump apart, breaking the moment we were just having. I watch as Warrick retreats back into himself.

"It's fine, I have to find Nova anyway to see what else she needs me to do." Warrick moves toward the door.

"I was actually coming to tell you that we need to run down to You're Bacon Me Crazy to pick up the catering for the event," Caelon says while staring at the floor.

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“Sounds good,” Warrick says as I watch him walk out of the kitchen.

Caelon looks at him, his eyes retreating back to me, and back again. “You okay, Aspen?”

I just nod my head, because, honestly, I’m not okay. I think I finally understand the piece that I’ve been missing this whole time and I don’t quite know what to do with that.

We were able to get everything done in time, like I figured we would. The pack house is full of everyone, from pack members to townsfolk. The level of excitement for what the twins will be is almost a physical being inside here. You can feel it everywhere you walk in the room. It’s funny how something this town has never done before has brought together so many people. We even have the Mountain Lion Shifters, the Goat Shifters, and the Hawk Shifters present. Nova really does have a way of bringing everyone together.

“Alright, who is ready to find out what the gender of the twins are?” Silas’s voice booms around the room.

The room erupts in whistles, cheers, and noise as everyone chants. “Show us! Show us!”

He wraps his arm around Nova, pulling her under his arm as he says to her, “I don’t think they want to know. Maybe we shouldn’t tell them. Doesn’t seem as though they are excited.”

I didn't think it was possible for the room to get louder, but it does. He holds his hands up in surrender as Warrick and Nellie walk up, each holding an enormous black balloon with blue and pink ribbons hanging down. Each balloon has a bold white question mark on it. Warrick is the only one who knows what the gender is. Not even Nova or Silas were told, which makes him the world's best secret keeper, since I know that she had to be asking him daily.

After handing off the balloons to each of them, Warrick steps to the side as his eyes slide to mine. He points to them and then he mouths "One day" to me.

"Alright, who's ready to count down? On the count of three, we will pop the balloons!" Nova yells out to the crowd.

Everyone begins to chant: "3...2...1..."

Nova and Silas slam their pins into the balloons as confetti drops to the floor in a shower of... blue!

"We are having BOYS!" Silas and Nova announce together.

Nova's mouth falls open as she rushes to hug Silas. He kisses her forehead, each of her cheeks, and then once on the mouth before he wraps his arm around her shoulders.

"Welcome to the pack, Damon and Kael!" he announces to the crowd.

Awe, I love the names that they picked. Since we knew she was having twins, we had to pick two of each name, just in case. We also spent hours going over name combinations to make sure they sounded great together.

Glancing over to Warrick, I see his pained expression. I can see the desperate

yearning playing across his face, the envy of what they have, and the moment he resigned, that he wouldn't ever have it. I'm about to say something to him, when he turns and disappears through the crowd.

Maybe, just maybe, our fate is about learning how to love each other and accepting that we deserve that love.

Chapter 19

Warrick

"We don't have as much time together like we used to, huh?" Silas asks from beside me as we make our walk around the perimeter. It's not really necessary for him as the pack leader to do these walks, but he tries to walk at least once a week with me.

I scoff, "You have been a bit busy with Nova, the twins on the way, and being Alpha. Doesn't leave much room left for your best friend."

A grimace crosses his face. "I know. It feels like ever since we talked about me challenging Orion for Alpha, that my life has been on fast forward. The last six months have been a complete whirlwind and the twins haven't even arrived yet. I can only imagine how quickly time will pass once we are busy changing diapers, burping babies, and sneaking in sleep where we can."

I look over at him as he is watching his feet step one in front of the other. There is a troubled look to him that has me wondering if he needs this walk more than I do. "You're good though, right?"

He shakes his head as though to pull himself out of his head. The laugh that comes from him seems almost forced. "Yeah, man, I'm good. Just worried that I won't be a good enough dad and husband."

I clap my hand on his back as I say, “I can’t say I know anything about being either of those things, but I can say that you being worried about it is a good indication that you will be great at both. I also, kind of, feel like Nova might keep you in line when it comes to that.

She can be kinda scary, especially right now.”

“Who are you telling! I thought that she was growly and possessive when it was the full moon, but it has nothing on pregnant Nova. Ever since the baby shower, I can’t even look in the direction of another female. It’s why we haven’t been going to town as of late. We went to the diner for her waffles and she almost bit the arm off of one of the poor servers because she walked too close to me. I spent at least thirty minutes consoling Nova because she felt so awful about it.”

My mouth hangs open, with shock coursing through me. “I didn’t know the females were that possessive during pregnancy.”

He laughs before turning to me. “When was the last time you were around a pregnant female, especially a wolf?”

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Putting my finger on my chin, I think about it before saying, “I can’t say that I have ever been around one.”

He gives me that knowing look. “Exactly. I guess we know why now. Safety.”

We both burst out laughing just as a deer leaps across the path in front of us. It’s one of my favorite parts about doing patrols. It’s a time to walk through the woods, listen to life, and enjoy the quiet. There isn’t anything that can match the serene feeling of it.

“It’s always nice to see the forest come to life after a long, cold winter. Watching the babies of each species popping their heads out, flying for the first time, and taking those first steps. I’m excited that this year, we will have the first set of babies to watch do all of those things, too,” I say, as I squat down to inspect a tiny pink flower pushing through the brush.

Silas walks up next to where I’m squatted. “Yeah, it’s nice to see our pack flourishing again. Do you think our parents would be proud of what we have done with it?”

Bolting upright, I brush my hands off on my pants. Without a word, I take off, walking down the path. Silas mutters a “fuck” before I hear him catch up to me.

“Come on, man, you ever going to talk about it?”

“What is there to talk about? They’re dead, and nothing I say is going to change that. No amount of talking about it is going to bring them back to life, so why even bother?” I snap.

“You know it’s not your fault, right?”

Growling, I spin on him. “If I hadn’t been playing that game, they never would have been on that interstate. So, forgive me for feeling like it’s completely my fault. I said I don’t want to talk about it. Leave it, or I will leave you.”

Stomping off, I head down the path. I know that he is right, but you can’t tell that to the irrational side of me. I understand that it could have happened regardless of the game, but I also can’t help but think that if I wasn’t at the game, then they wouldn’t have been out there.

My parents never missed a game, and I knew that night when I looked in the stands to see they weren’t there, something was wrong. But the coach kept my head in the game by keeping me on the field as much as possible. It wasn’t until we had won the game and I still didn’t see my parents that the coach finally told me what had happened.

I never played another game of football after that and I haven’t talked about the incident with anyone. Instead, I’ve bottled it up and buried it. Between drinking and women, I made sure I didn’t have a whole lot of time to think about much of anything. Except, there was one thought that kept making it through the haze.

The look of utter heartbreak on Aspen’s face every time she would find me with another woman. Flashes of each time would make it through the haze until I would drown it with more alcohol. It wasn’t my parents that haunted me, it was her face each night.

How can fate be so cruel as to give me a mate who I had already hurt once, right after losing the only two people in the world who ever loved me for me?

People always think that being the popular guy, the football star, is some glamorous

life until you realize that nobody is around you because they want you. No, they are around you for what it can do for them. The popularity it offers them. The access they have because they are friends with “that guy.” You quickly learn that none of those “friendships” mean anything and that nobody gives a shit about you.

So, yeah, when I lost my parents, I decided to dive into the playboy role that everyone expected of me. I pushed away my mate, and I kept it all bottled up. It wasn't until Silas stood up for the pack and Nova came crashing into his life that I realized maybe I didn't want to be alone anymore.

Maybe I need someone to weather the storms with me. Someone who sees me as I see them.

There is a tug on my shoulder that snaps me out of the spiral I'm in.

“Hey, I'm sorry for bringing them up again. I know that you don't like to talk about feelings and all that. I just worry about you.” Silas's face is marred with concern.

“It's fine. I should talk about it, but there isn't a point to dredging all of this up.” I shrug his hand off my shoulder.

“Eventually, you need to talk about it. Maybe you should talk to someone else? If you aren't willing to talk to me. But if you don't deal with these emotions, they will show up anyway. Like with women coming and going instead of settling down with your mate?”

“About that...” I start, but hesitate. I haven't talked to anyone about my feelings toward Aspen and how I'm trying to earn her back. Of course, some people already know, like Gail, since she seems to know everything. But am I ready to actually talk about it with someone?

He gives me a questioning look. I heave out a heavy breath as my shoulders drop. I'm going to do this.

"I've actually not been sleeping around or had any women in my bed since around the time that you claimed Nova."

His mouth hangs ajar as he stares at me, unblinking. "I..." His mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. "You mean...? All this time you have been single and doing... what exactly?"

"It means that I've been trying to earn my place beside my mate. You have been super busy, so I'll forgive you for not noticing that I've been at the bookstore every single day. Well, not recently, because shit hit the fan again. It wasn't my fault this time. Well, it is because of my past, but..." I'm rambling on and I can't seem to stop the words from flowing out of me.

"Look, I know I've done a lot of shitty things to Aspen in the past. I get it. I deserve for her to not trust me. I thought I had finally won my chance with her, but fate, or whatever, stepped in again. Now, I'm out here doing something massive in hopes that it will show her that I want her for her. I want to be the man she deserves, like the men she reads about in her books."

I pace back and forth in front of Silas as he silently watches. My hands are fisting and rubbing together as the words are rushing out of me.

"A couple months ago, I got this wild idea that I just had to tell Aspen I wanted her. You know, like 'because you are my mate, let's just accept it now.' It was shitty of me because I didn't even bother to consider her thoughts or feelings in it. I just wanted her, but in reality, it wasn't her I wanted—just the 'mate' aspect. She immediately rejected it and Chase kicked me out of the store."

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Silas snorts out a laugh, and I cut my eyes at him. He holds his hands up in surrender, so I continue.

“Gail, being Gail, showed up and told me to read a book that Aspen had recommended to her. Some second chance romance bullshit. At first, I was against the idea because, what is some book going to tell me? But Aspen had clarified that the only way that I could be in the store was if I was quiet and sat in the corner. So, I did the only thing that made sense and read the book.”

“Smart.” Silas nods his head.

“It quickly made sense why Gail recommended it. It was about a football player and this quiet girl. He fucked up, she rejected him, and he earned his way back into her heart.”

Silas slides a hand over his mouth to quiet the laughing I can still hear. I stop my pacing to fully glare at him. There isn’t anything funny about this.

“Continue,” he says as he tries to quit laughing.

“So after finishing the book, I panicked because I needed a reason to keep being in the bookstore. I did the only thing I could think of and asked Aspen for a book recommendation. She told me she doesn’t loan books, but that I could buy them from her. What else could I do? I bought the book.”

“And...?” he asks.

“I found a hobby that I enjoy. All this time, I would see her reading all those books and wonder what could possibly be so amazing about it that she could read book after book. It wasn’t until this fantasy series that I realized following a person as they battle for their lives and overcome major challenges is enrapturing, really. Look, I even used a big word that I learned from the books.”

Silas can’t help but burst out laughing now and I don’t blame him. We laugh together for a few moments before it finally dies down.

“So, what went wrong then?” he asks.

“After weeks of bringing her coffee, reading in the bookstore, and walking her home at night, I finally convinced her to let me take her to dinner. She decided that it wasn’t a date and would meet me there. I arrived early because I wanted to ensure we had a table in the back, away from so many prying eyes. While I was waiting for Aspen to arrive, Selene walked over. She wanted to show me the pictures she has been taking of the pack.”

“Oh, no,” Silas says.

I nod my head solemnly. “She had slid into the booth next to me so I could see the photos on her phone. I was smiling because of her excitement and the really great shots she got of all of us. That’s when Aspen walked in. She saw me smiling at Selene while Selene was pressed up against me in the booth. I didn’t even have a chance to stop her or tell her it wasn’t what it seemed.”

“Fuck... What happened next?”

“I showed up the next day to the bookstore hoping that I could have a chance to explain, but Chase blocked my path. He said some things that hurt, but, honestly, it made me think about it from a different perspective. All this time, I’ve only ever

cared about myself. I deserve for her to reject me for good, maybe find someone like Chase, who will do right by her.”

“Damn, I’ve been trying to get you to see that for years. What did he say that made it click?”

“He said that if he was her mate, he could never dream of doing the things that I’ve done to her. Let alone have the nerve to pretend I didn’t.”

“That’ll do it. How long ago was that?”

“Three months before the baby shower. I decided after that to work on myself. I could never be the perfect mate for her if I didn’t take care of myself first. Gail and I did come up with a plan to be my over the top gesture, though. I’ve been working on it ever since and it should be ready soon.”

“And that is..?” he prompts me.

“Can’t tell you. I swore the two people involved to secrecy. I don’t want it to get back to her before I’m ready.”

His hand slams to his chest. “You don’t trust me to keep it a secret?”

Laughing, I say, “I trust you, but you never know who is listening in the woods.”

“Fair enough. I do have to say I’m proud of you, man. You are making the right moves to earn her back, but I still think you need to take some time to process the death of your parents. It won’t change anything when it comes to them, but what if that’s what’s holding you back from being the best mate you can be for Aspen?”

I turn to start our walk through the woods again. The sun is peeking through the

leaves above the canopy of the trees. The cool spring breeze is wafting through as the scent of fresh flowers blows past. As we walk side by side down the worn path, the pine needles crunch under our boots.

I glance over at Silas, who is already watching me. “You’re right. It won’t change anything and maybe it is what is holding me back. I’m going to say something that I’ve never said aloud to anyone, not even you.”

There is a bird's song breaking through the silence as Silas waits for me to speak. It feels as though the forest is waiting for me to say it, too.

“I’ve never felt as though I deserved love. I’ve seen how people have used me for their own gain. I watched how my parents sacrificed so much for my success. What did it get me? Nothing. Why should I have someone who loves me when the two people who loved me the most can’t be here to see it because of me?”

The words flow out of me and are carried off in the breeze as I wait for him to say something, anything. We keep walking for a moment, with only the bird chirps to be heard. I almost don’t think he is going to say anything until he finally does.

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“Nova said to me that she would rather love and be loved for one year, knowing it would end, then to have never experienced love at all. I think you need to hear that and absorb what she said. Love isn’t always going to be a bright sunny day or the perfect run through the woods. Being with someone is knowing there will be bad days and choosing to love them, regardless. Your parent’s love for you is why they made those sacrifices. Don’t take that away from them. We all do things for those that we love. Not because we have to, but because we love them and want what’s best for them.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, I say, “You’re right. I’m trying to do what’s right for her by first accepting the things I did wrong. Owning my mistakes. I’ve already apologized to her, but it will never be enough. There aren’t enough words to explain how sorry I am.” My head drops as I fear I will never be able to earn her back.

Silas wraps his arm around my shoulder as he says, “I’m sure she heard you. Why don’t you try showing her how sorry you are with your actions? Your road might have hills and curves, but if you keep walking down the path, you will get to your destination.”

I nod my head once. “Thank you,” I whisper.

He claps his hand on my shoulder a few times before releasing me. “You’re welcome,” he says before he walks down the path, looking up into the trees lining the path.

The sun beams through the canopy, lighting my face and warming it with its caress. I close my eyes and bask in its touch.

It's time to show her that I'm sorry and I will never hurt her again.

Chapter 20

Warrick

My eyes peel open as the sun warms my face through the window by my bed. The silence of my room rings through my ears as I roll over and remember my empty bed as the loneliness creeps back in. I shake my head to dislodge those thoughts before they consume me.

Flipping the blankets back, I shift till my feet hit the ground. The bed might be empty today and the next few weeks, but hopefully for not much longer. My head rocks side to side, cracking my neck as I stand up and pad toward my bathroom. My hair is sticking up at all angles when I look at myself in the mirror. Using a dash of water, I smooth it down into a semblance of style. I'm not worried about my appearance today so much as I'm worried about this project being perfect. The confidence I've been feeling that this project will be flawless is dwindling the more time that passes. What if she hates it? I mean, I don't think she will, but will it be exactly what she would have done if it was hers to do?

Pushing the toothbrush around my mouth, I consider a few different ways to ensure this turns out exactly how she wants it. What if I sneak into her house and look through her laptop? No, we won't be breaking and entering.

"You could always ask Hazel to help, you know, her friends?" Wraith suggests.

"That's a great idea! Why didn't I think of that?" I say eagerly.

"Because you've been too busy ignoring me and I'm tired of waiting. So I pushed through to keep you out of jail."

“I’m not ignoring you, I just have a lot going on. You know that.”

“What I know is that you have one more chance to win Aspen over or I will take over and make it happen.”

“Humph. Like you would have a better chance with her than I have.”

“One of us cheated. One of us rubbed the other women in her face. And the other one of us is a handsome, furry beast that she can cuddle with.”

“You don’t have to remind me of my mistakes. I’m well aware.”

“Are you though?”

“Yes, I’m clearly trying to right the wrongs.”

“As long as you aren’t just doing this so you can have a mate. She’s made it clear that she wants someone to want her for her. Can you be that person?”

“I’m going to do everything in my power to show both of you that I’m here to be that person for her and our future.”

Wraith goes back into our shared consciousness, leaving me with a pit in my stomach. Can I be that person for her? Shaking my head, I run my toothbrush under the water and rinse it off. Placing it back in its holder, I dry my mouth with the hand towel.

My cell phone dings on the bed side table with an incoming text message. Walking over to it, I see that Gail has sent me a text message. Odd, I didn’t even know she knew how to do that. Isn’t she too old for texting?

Warrick, Hazel is coming by with some coffees this morning. Can you stop by to pick

up these documents that need to be signed? Love, Gail

Shaking my head, a small smile plays across my lips.

Yeah I can be there in ten.

Good. We'll be waiting, dear. Love, Gail

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Placing my cell back down on the table, I quickly get dressed in a pair of distressed jeans, a black Henley, and my work boots. My cell slides into my front pocket while I snatch my keys off the hook by my door. It took me less than five minutes to get dressed, but the walk will take up the rest of the time.

Before long, I'm walking into Gail's office for the paperwork when Hazel's eyes snap to mine.

"Why is he here?" she says as her eyes flick between me and Gail.

Gail only waves her hand at me like it's not a big deal. "He is here to grab this paperwork that I need signed. My legs are a bit stiff this morning. Although, I believe he has something he wants to talk to you about."

My eyebrows lift in complete shock. Sometimes it's really freaky how she knows things without anyone telling her. "I do?"

Gail's face lights up with a warm smile. "Of course, you do. Come! Come sit down, we have much to discuss and a very small amount of time in which to do so."

My body jerks into motion as I move awkwardly toward the chair sitting next to Hazel. Sitting my massive body down on what feels like a child's chair, even though it's clearly meant for adults. Hazel hasn't said anything else, but confusion tinted with a bit of anger is clearly written across her face. She crosses her arms and slams her back against the chair as she sits back.

Gail smiles at me before she looks at Hazel. "Hazel, I'm sure you aren't happy with

the way things are going so far this morning, but there is a good reason for it. Warrick here has been secretly working on a project for Aspen. Something that would be his way of showing how serious he is about her and being the man for her.”

Hazel's eyebrows pinch together as her eyes flash with her wolf's. Sitting forward, she says, “Is this your attempt at forcing her into mating with you? All the women in town no longer good enough for you?”

“Hazel, hear him out...”

I cut off Gail by holding my hand up. Turning, I look directly at Hazel, whose chest is heaving as her anger builds. Her eyes continue to flash between hers and her wolf's. I don't think I've ever seen her this mad, but it's why the girls have always called her the pack mom. “I deserve that and much more. While I don't expect you to understand any of my actions, and I'm by no means trying to justify what I did, I need you to hear me out. Just give me a chance before you make any decisions.”

She looks from me to Gail who simply dips her head in acknowledgment. “Fine, let's see if you can even convince me.”

I spend the next twenty minutes recounting everything that has happened, why I made the choices I made, and what I'm trying to do. The entire time I'm speaking, she doesn't interrupt me once and continues to listen. I watch as the anger drops from her and the understanding forms.

When I finish my story and what I'm working on, she finally speaks. “What about her walking in on you with another female during the dinner she finally agreed to?”

I shake my head. “That was Selene. I found her snapping photos one day during a walk to stretch my legs. The kid has a serious talent, and I had encouraged her to talk with her parents about purchasing a real camera and becoming a photographer. I

hadn't seen her since we discussed that, since I've been busy trying to be the best mate for Aspen. Selene saw me sitting there and took the opportunity to tell me about her conversation with her parents. I thought nothing of it when she slid into the booth next to me. She is seventeen years old! I might be a man whore, but, damn, I do have some limits."

Hazel covers her mouth with her hand as she shakes her head. "All this over a horrible misunderstanding? I mean don't get me wrong, you built that impression, but she didn't even stick around to find out that it was just Selene?"

I shake my head once. "She flew out of there and, the next day, when I went to the bookstore to try to talk to her, she had Chase block my path."

Hazel's face crumbles in confusion. "She wouldn't do that. Chase might have done that on his own because he is super protective of her."

I can't help the growl that rumbles out of my chest at the idea of him thinking he has the right to be that protective over my mate.

"Nobody should be protecting her but me," I growl.

"We are going to get you there, Warrick, just a little bit longer," Gail calmly says.

Hazel whips her head between us again. "What's the deadline?"

Gail speaks for me as she can tell I'm struggling to wrangle my wolf back into submission. He didn't like hearing that anymore than I did. "Warrick, is aiming for the night of the wedding. He wants this project to be completed so that on the night of the wedding, he can take her to see it."

Her mouth drops open. "That's a month away! You can't be serious? How much of

the project is even done?”

“The framing is all done, the shelves have been installed, and we are in the home stretch really. I think we are in the finalizing stage of it, isn’t that right, Warrick?” Gail gives me an imploring look to give me something to focus back on.

Shaking my head a few times from side to side, I’m finally able to speak, “Yeah, we are down to paint, lighting, and decorations. It’s why I wanted to see if you would help. You know her far better than I do and I want to make sure this is perfect.”

She claps her hands together. “Alright, when do you want to get started?”

My hand rubs across the back of my neck as I consider the answer. “Would you be able to get away tonight to come by and look at the room? I would like to keep this secret as much as possible. We have enough cackling hens in our town that it wouldn’t take long for it to be ruined.”

“Yeah, I should be able to. I don’t see why not. As far as I know, she will be at the bookstore. She pretty much is either there or at home.”

My ears perk up at that. “She hasn’t been going on dates with Chase?”

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Hazels shakes her head. “Not really. He pretty much has only been able to drag her out of her house to take their hike a few times since this all happened.”

“Hmm, that’s interesting.” I rub my pointer finger and thumb along my jaw.

She busts out giggling, startling both Gail and I. We look to each other then to her as she continues to laugh. She holds her stomach as she leans forward bracing her other hand on Gail’s desk. With a peek over her arm at both of us, she laughs harder at our confusion.

“You good? What’s so funny?” I attempt to break through her laughter.

She leans back as she wipes both of her eyes. “I’m sorry, but I can’t believe it actually worked.” She bursts into another fit of laughter.

My eyebrows are practically glued together on my forehead. What is she talking about?

Hazel leans over placing her hand on my arm resting on the arm of the chair. Laughing she says, “Did you really believe she is dating Chase?” Seeing the confusion still on my face, she laughs even harder. “Oh my god, you did!”

“Well, aren’t they?” I say as I push myself out of the chair. What is she saying? Aren’t they dating?

She leans away from me still laughing.

“What aren’t you saying Hazel?” I growl out as I pace the room.

At the tone of my voice, she attempts to cut off her laughter. “Oh, no! Listen, have you ever heard of a situationship?”

“A what?”

“A situationship? It’s where two people come together for companionship, to have ‘someone’, but there aren’t any feelings between them.”

“What the fuck is that? What does it mean?”

“Essentially Chase and Aspen are nothing but friends. The situationship gives them someone to laugh with, cry with, and go places with without feeling like a burden to the other. When Aspen realized she would never have the mate she deserved, she decided that something was better than nothing. Chase has to find his mates still. Last time I talked with them both, they were discussing helping him find his mates.”

My anger rushes out of me as I deflate. This is all my fault. She is only with him because I was such a jackass that she put herself into something where she at least had someone. “Thank you for letting me know.”

Hazel dips her head. “I’m sorry for laughing, but it was too perfect. She didn’t think you would actually get jealous of Chase since you know they can’t mate. After the last time that you had another female in your lap knowing she would be there,” she says, glaring at me, “she decided it was time to have a mate for herself. If you could do it, then so could she. Too bad that she has never taken it any further than casual dating. I don’t even think she has been with someone... well, you know. Sexually.”

“What are you not saying?”

Huffing, she says, “Men can be so dense. Unlike you, Aspen has never been with a single male sexually. She tried once but ended up vomiting at the idea of it. Seems only one of you had that issue.”

I pace back and forth in the tiny office. I didn’t know that. That changes everything. Not the being untouched part, don’t get me wrong, that excites me. But I thought I would have to fight Chase for her. No, instead I just have to replace him and show her that I’m ready to be that shoulder for her, the laughter she needs, and the rock she deserves.

Hazel claps her hands down on her thighs. “Alright, I’ve been here long enough today.” She puts a hand on my shoulder as she stops next to me. “Leave the past in the past, Warrick. Show her that you can be the right guy for her future. I’ll see you tonight after I close the coffee shop.” With that, she walks out of Gail’s office.

I am still pacing hours later when Hazel knocks on my front door. I’m worried that she will hate it or think it isn’t good enough. Pulling the door open, I find Hazel with a skeptical smile on her face.

“Come on in.” I wave to her as I move my arm out into the open space behind me.

My front door opens directly into my living room that flows right into the island that separates the living room from the kitchen. There is a hallway off to the side that leads to the master suite and the second bedroom. The room that we are working in is right off the living room on the left side. Thankfully, we don’t have to walk far because I get the impression that she isn’t keen on being here, even though she agreed to help.

“I don’t need to worry about some girl walking out of that bedroom, do I?” she asks as she points to the door at the end of the hallway.

Shaking my head, I say, “There hasn’t been a single woman in this house in over six months. So, no, you don’t have to worry about that. You’re the first woman to be here since I decided to fix my shit and become the man I’m supposed to be.”

She hums as she takes off her boots and hangs her purse on the hooks by the front door. “Fair enough.” She claps her hands together. “Where is this room?”

I jolt forward as I move towards the door right behind the sofa in the living room. “Here,” I say as I open the door and flip on the temporary light.

Stepping into the center of the room, I envision what it will be like to bring Aspen here to show her the same thing. Maybe I will blindfold her? I watch as Hazel moves toward the room, taking hesitant steps. The minute the light from the room shines across her face and she peeks around the door frame, her mouth drops open in surprise. A soft gasp leaves her mouth as she scans across the room.

“Warrick... it’s perfect.”

Chapter 21

Warrick

The next morning, as I'm sitting at my desk going over the paperwork that Silas left for me, there is a knock at my door. A quick inhale lets me know that it's Gail. What is this woman up to now? I already have the paint colors, fabrics, light fixture, and all the things picked out, thanks to the help of Hazel. She ended up staying for several hours as we combed through shopping sites looking for the perfect pieces.

"Come in, Gail," I say without lifting my head from the paperwork.

"Perfect, I was hoping you were in here and I didn't need to hunt you down." She comes over to my desk and gently sets herself down in the chair in front of it.

Glancing up, I find her smiling warmly with what looks like another list in her hands. "What's on the list?"

She passes the list over to me as I skim down it. "After you left yesterday, I found Aspen's wishlist of books she would like."

I lift an eyebrow at her. As if she just happened to find it.

"Yes, well, I searched on one of her favorite retailers and found them. Wasn't that hard, really."

Flipping the page over to the next, I see she didn't just give me titles, but printed

them out showing the front cover of the books, the titles, and the author's names. Everything I would need to grab these books. As I skim through the list, I remember seeing some of these titles at her own bookstore. "Some of these are in her own store. Why wouldn't she just grab a copy?"

Gail shrugs her shoulders.

"Seems that it would be an easy way to grab them, don't you think?"

"Besides the fact that I'm not allowed in there? It would be too obvious I was up to something if I showed up buying all the books off her wishlist."

Gail gives me one of her mischievous looks before she says, "Seems a great time to bring another friend into the loop, don't you think?"

"Who?"

"Nova."

Walking into Silas's office, I find him buried in a stack of paperwork with his hair in a frazzled mess. "Hey, man, I'm going to head over to get some lunch from You're Bacon Me Crazy, do you need anything?"

He says nothing as he continues to scan the page he is working on.

"Silas."

His eyes snap up to me and he shakes his head as if to bring himself back into this world. "Sorry, man, were you saying something?"

"Yeah, I was asking if you needed anything since I'm heading to get lunch."

He checks his watch before letting out a string of expletives. “Actually, can you do me a favor and run a to-go plate to Nova? I don’t have the time to stop right now and she is struggling to get out of bed.”

Shit, maybe my idea won’t work then. “Uh, yeah, no problem. Want to text me her order so I get it right and we both don’t end up in the doghouse?”

“Yeah. Thanks, man.”

Heading out the door, I wonder if she will help me or if I will need to consider another option.

After picking up her order and mine, I head to the pack house, hoping that my idea will work. Otherwise, I will need a new one.

I find Nova laying on the couch watching some cheesy reality TV show in a cami that barely covers her swollen belly. She has built quite a little nest for herself out of pillows and blankets. A half-eaten pack of Oreos lays open on the coffee table in front of her with a melting iced coffee creating a water ring next to them. She barely moves when I come into the living room.

“Living our best life, are we?” I razz her as I walk around the couch.

“Fuck off, Warrick! I’m fat, swollen, and desperately need to pee right now, but the idea of moving to the bathroom exhausts me,” she grumbles as she rolls to try to sit up.

Throwing our food containers on to the coffee table, I rush over to help her sit up. Once she has adjusted her blankets and settled, I reach into the plastic to-go bag to grab her lunch. Passing the container to her with her fork, I move her drink to the side table closest to her.

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“Not that I mind the company, but why are you the one bringing me lunch and not Silas?” she asks while she stabs her fork into her salad, collecting a bit of everything.

Now that she is settled, I grab my container and plop down into the armchair closest to her. “I stopped by to ask if he needed anything as I headed out to get food and I guess he was buried in some paperwork. So, he asked me to grab your lunch for you with an apology that he can’t be here today.”

“Ah, yeah, he is still working to build the pack back up and I swear I’m just as mated to the pack as I am to him at this point. Nobody told me he would be gone this much,” she harrumphs as she shoves another bite of her salad into her mouth.

“It won’t be like this forever. I mean, you are mated to both, really, because there are a lot of times that he’ll be pulled away. But, eventually, it will mellow out a bit. How are you doing with everything?”

She gives me a confused look. “Warrick, are you okay? I don’t think you have ever asked me how I’m doing, let alone said it in a caring way. You feeling alright?”

I toss a crouton at her, and she puts her hand on her chest in mock horror. “Forget that I asked then, brat! I walked in on you laying out on the couch watching crappy TV. Figured I’d make sure you are alright.”

She throws the crouton back at me. “Don’t talk shit about my Real Housewives shows! Seriously though, I’m just tired. They don’t write that in those damn books.” She points with her fork to a stack of parenting books on the coffee table.

“You mean it’s not all happy moments of baby kicks, picking out clothes, and anticipation of their arrival?” I say with a chuckle.

She points her fork at me. “Watch it, mister. Between the baby, my wolf, and the hormones, I’m liable to either bawl my eyes out, throw sharp objects, or vomit. Never know which one you will get.”

I hold my hands up in surrender. “Easy, killer. Don’t murder/hurt the guy who brought you lunch today.”

She goes back to eating her salad and we both eat in companionable silence after she pushes play on her show. We wrap up the episode she was on as we finish our food. Not going to lie, that show is a bit addictive. It didn’t take me long to get pulled into the drama along with her.

Pushing pause before it starts another episode, she slides the remote onto the cushion beside her. “Warrick, I know we aren’t close or anything. But I also know that you made a sudden change after I met Silas. What’s going on with you?”

The empty carton rattles as I slip it back into the to-go bag. Dusting off my hands, I look at Nova. “Actually, there is stuff going on and that’s part of why I didn’t mind bringing you lunch. I actually was hoping to talk to you about a favor I need. Although, now I’m not sure that I can ask it of you.”

She picks up the remote again and aims it at me. “Just because I’m the size of a whale doesn’t mean I’m incapable of helping. What did you need?”

I spend the next twenty minutes going over everything with Nova, from my dumbass choices as a teen to my most recent mistake with Selene. To her credit, she doesn’t interrupt me and only shifts her weight when she is uncomfortable again, which is frequent.

She claps her hands together when I finish telling her everything up to this point. “So, what do you need me to do?”

I unfurl the paper that Gail brought me earlier and pass it to her. “Gail was able to get her wishlist of books that she wants. I circled the ones that are actually in her bookstore already. If I go in there, it will be too obvious. I hoped you could go in and purchase them. But, I don’t think Silas is going to let you walk into town, let alone buy books.”

She glares at me. “First of all, he doesn’t get to tell me what I will or won’t do. Let’s get that out of the way. I do agree, though, that physically I can’t make it there. No matter, though, I have the perfect way to get them.”

Without saying another word, she pulls out her phone and clicks some buttons before holding it to her ear. It doesn’t take long for whoever she called to answer the phone.

“Hey, Aspen! What are you up to?” She nods her head as she listens to whatever Aspen is saying to her.

“Girl, I bet! The babies are growing, and I’m feeling more like a whale, and less like a human by the day.” She listens again as her eyes light up as Aspen responds to her. She glances at me before she says, “Speaking of needing things to keep me busy, if I send you a list of books that were recommended to me, would you be the best and bring them to me? Silas would shit a kitten if I tried to walk to town right now.” She laughs at whatever Aspen says back to that as she nods her head. “Perfect! See you soon, bestie!”

She clicks the end call button before looking up at me with a beaming smile. “Alright, those books will be here in less than twenty minutes. What are you doing about the rest of the list?” She hands the paper back to me.

I glance down the list again. I hadn't really thought about that. "Uh, I will see if I can have them shipped here. Hopefully, before the deadline."

Nova scrunches her nose before asking, "What's the deadline?"

"Your wedding night."

She gasps in shock before throwing a pillow at me. "You have been holding out that detail this whole time?! You better behave at my wedding! Wait—actually I have an idea, but we will keep it between us, too!"

Later that night, after toeing off my boots, I walk into the room to check on the progress. The painters were here today, which is part of why I was away as long as I could be to give it time to airout. Flipping the switch on, I'm blown away by what I see. When Hazel explained it to me, I couldn't quite picture it, but this is amazing.

I'll be really glad when the electrician comes tomorrow to switch out the temporary light for the chandelier that we picked out together. It really will piece this together. Flipping the switch back off, I close the door and head over to my laptop resting on top of the island. I have some orders I need to place and pray that they are here on time.

Clicking through the books, I put all of them into my cart along with the armchair with a footrest that Hazel picked out. I try not to question my sanity when I click the expedited shipping to ensure they are here on time.

"Fuck, man, I really hope this works," I say as I close my laptop and head to bed.

Chapter 22

Warrick

The girls have been checking in with me daily on the progress of the surprise. It's been three weeks since I brought them in on it. Hazel comes by each day on her way home to check on the progress. Even when there aren't any updates, she still stops by to check. Thankfully, I received a notification this morning that the chair was being delivered today. I have no idea how we have kept this secret as long as we have, but we are almost to the end. We are down to the last day. It couldn't have run up the clock anymore than it did.

Everything else has arrived and just been sitting in the boxes in the new room waiting for this final piece. I call the delivery driver and arrange for an afternoon delivery, then shoot off a message in our small group chat Nova created because she was tired of bouncing around the message threads. Sometimes, she just sends memes she finds hilarious and we all react because we know she is struggling right now. Between the babies, the wedding coming up, and being stuck on the couch, she is just tired of being alone.

The chair will arrive at 2 p.m. today! I know we are all getting ready for the Bachelor/Bachelorette parties. Anyone have time to squeeze in to help me put everything together?

Gail: You don't need to worry. We will all be there, except Nova, who better be resting. Otherwise, she will be on bed rest while we party.

Nova: ??

Gail: Watch it, young lady! I'm not too old to whoop your ass.

Nova: You have to come over here and I can leave before your old ass gets here!

Gail: On my way, dearie!

Hazel: ... what did I just walk in on?

These two clogging up the group chat again.

Nova: Kiss my ass, Warrick.

Hazel: Warrick, I'll be there. I'm excited to see everything set up.

Nova adds Willow to the group chat.

Hazel: What are you doing, Nova?

Nova: ??

Willow: What the fuck is this chat, and why is that asshole in a chat with you three?

Nova: Oh goodie! My own version of Real Housewives. ??

Gail: Nova, you better explain it to her. You started this.

Nova: ?? ??

Willow: Someone better explain ...

Sigh, Nova, just because you love the drama shows doesn't mean that we need to make it happen in real life. Willow, can I call you? It would be faster and easier to explain if I do.

Willow: Sure ...

Swiping away from the text thread, irritated with Nova and her antics, I click Willow's contact and hit call.

It doesn't even fully ring before she answers. "Explain."

A heavy breath pushes out of me as my shoulders drop. I run through the entire story again because I know with Willow, there is only one way to win her over: honesty.

When I finish explaining everything, she says, "I'm hurt, Rick. Why wasn't I brought in on Operation Win Over Aspen?"

I rub my hand across the back of my neck as I pace across the living room. "Honestly, I was trying to keep this as minimal as possible. I didn't want it to get back to her. So, the fewer people who know, the better. I'm pretty sure that Gail brought in Nova because the girl is practically living on her couch watching drama TV all day."

"Shit, that's fair. Last time I came over, I was pretty sure that the couch was about to swallow her and she would become a cushion soon."

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“Yeah, it wasn’t meant to be a keeping of secrets, or anything like that, from you. Just trying to keep the hens from catching wind of what I’m doing. I’ve managed to keep it a secret for six months. Can’t fuck it up at the finish line,” I huff out.

She laughs. “Fair enough, Rick. Alright, I’ll close my knife for now. When is this shit supposed to happen?”

“Tomorrow.”

The sound of a quick breath being pulled in, followed by a “fuck,” comes through the phone before she says, “What do you need me to do?”

“Gail and Hazel are coming over this afternoon before the celebrations to help me put everything together. Could you run interference with Aspen if she wonders where they are or tries to come looking for them?”

“You got it. Oh, and Rick?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t fuck this up again. I’m tired of cleaning up your messes.”

Before I can say anything back, she has already hung up the phone. I pull the phone back from my ear and look at the now blank screen staring back at me. Shrugging, I pocket my cell and get to stacking all the boxes to one side of the room so the delivery people have room to place the chair. Oh, shit, I need to lie out the rug, too.

Glancing around the room, I find it tucked in a corner of the room, leaning against the end of the shelf. There isn't enough space to lay it out fully with all the boxes in here. I'll have to move everything first before I can lay it out.

After shifting all the boxes into the living room, there is finally enough space to lie out the rug. If I lay it out now, it should have enough time for it to flatten out.

Several hours later, after I've practically worn a path into my hardwood floors, the delivery truck arrives with the chair. It doesn't take them long to place it and pull off the plastic wrap and tags. After they leave, I shoot a message off in our group chat letting them know we are a go.

It doesn't take them long to show up. I chuckle at their disguises as they glance around like operatives on a mission.

We spend two hours unboxing and placing everything on the shelves. I really hope this works. I've been dreaming of this moment since the idea formed all those months back. Hoping that I could have the moment. The one where she sees it, mouth dropping open, and spinning in a circle in the center of the room. Her dress picking up as she twirls in a circle. Her eyes twinkling from the refractions of light coming from the chandelier. Watching her decide what she will say or how she feels about it. I want to stand here as I watch her run around the room, examining each piece we selected for her, plopping down in the chair to test its comfort.

I want to find her cuddled up in the chair with a fuzzy blanket, her favorite drink, and whatever fantasy book she is reading. Sitting by the fire as she tells me all about the things she reads about. I want to share stories as we both read a book and compare notes, the quiet nights as we read in bed together. To watch her cheeks bloom red when I find her tender spots and whisper sweet nothings in her ear.

Checking the time on my phone, I give one last look at the room as I watch the dream

versions of her moving around it. The door snaps shut as I place my hand on it. “Tonight is our last night apart. I vow you will never be alone after this. You’ll realize I’ve always been the man you’ve needed. I just had to find him first.” I rest my head on my hand as I huff out a breath that wets the back of my hand.

Forgetting that the girls are all still here, I hear a small snuffle before I turn around. I find Hazel wiping a tear from her eye. “Don’t mind me. I’ve just been waiting for this moment for so long. Hoping one day you would finally realize you weren’t living a full life.”

She walks over and wraps her arms around me as she whispers in my ear, “I’m proud of you, Warrick. I know we haven’t ever been close, but I look forward to not only watching your relationship bloom but also getting to know you as well!”

I wrap my arms around her back and squeeze her to me. We might not have ever been close, but we have always known each other.

She pulls back as she taps her hand on my shoulder and walks over to slide her shoes on and grab her purse. With a glance over her shoulder, she gives me a nod before opening the front door and stepping out.

Gail is still patiently standing in my living room when I look at her. “Would you like a drink before you go?”

“Sure.”

I pour both of us two fingers’ worth of bourbon on the rocks in the crystal glasses. I pass her one as I step past her to sit in the armchair. She sits down on the sofa and takes a small sip from her glass.

I take a large sip from mine before holding it up and watching the ice move back and

forth as I twist my hand from side to side. “It’s all come down to this. Tomorrow is it. My last shot at winning over Aspen and claiming her.”

“I wanted to let you know I’m so proud of you and the changes you have made to get to this point. Putting aside your desire to claim the life that fate wished you to have takes courage and strength. Just remember that your journey is only beginning. You both will face challenges that will test the strength of your bond. Not the goddess given one, but the one you will forge as you face your demons from your past. I can see two paths, but the deciding moment is still far down the path for you both.”

My brows scrunch in confusion. “Gail, what are you saying?”

“I’ve already said more than I can. Just know that the only way you will get through it is together. Set aside those thoughts, choose her every time, and you will make it to the dream you’ve been having.” With that, she stands, places her glass on the table in front of her, and walks out the door.

I stare at the door, trying to process what she said. Does that mean that tomorrow works and somewhere down the road, we have a harder decision to make? What could possibly happen?

Shaking my head, I remind myself of what her parting words were. Choose Aspen every time and I’ll have my dream come true. That’s exactly what I’ll do.

Chapter 23

Warrick

The pack house is buzzing with activity as we all prepare for our Alpha's wedding. It's shining with polish and there isn't a cobweb in sight. Shifting from side to side in front of the mirror, I make sure every part of my tux is in place, not a hair out of place, and a quick pit check ensures I don't smell either. Snatching the boutonniere from the bar top, I pop the lid open and grab the delicate rose with baby's breath around it out. Hopefully, I do this shit right. I am just finishing pinning it on in the mirror when Silas walks in.

It's his wedding day, and he is still in pajamas with his hair in disarray. Does he not realize how important today is? Shit, I'm not the one getting married today and I'm a mess. Granted, it's for a completely different reason, but still.

He is staring at me with a look of confusion written across his face before he asks, "You good, man?"

I turn around to face him. "Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

His eyebrows are still pressed together as he looks me up and down, as if he is looking for some kind of physical sign of my lie. "I don't know. You have been different the last few months."

I walk over and clap him on the shoulder. "I'm good, man. Besides, today is all about you and your mate." I look down at what he is wearing before looking up at him with a smirk playing across my face. "Speaking of, don't you need to be getting dressed? I know we don't normally do weddings, but I think it's frowned upon to get married in

pajamas.”

Silas chuckles before he walks to where Nellie hung his tux when she came in, like the tornado that she is. Whatever man claims her is going to have his work cut out for him. “Fine, fair enough. You know you can talk to me whenever, right?” Silas says, as he pulls the tux down from the bag.

“Yeah, man, I know. I just have a lot on my mind lately. But this isn’t about me. Let’s get you out there to that beautiful bride of yours,” I say, before straightening my tux and heading over to the wet bar.

Silas walks into the en suite bathroom to get himself ready as I pour myself two fingers of bourbon. I need something to knock these nerves down a couple of notches. After a few sips of my drink, I check the time and realize we have got to get going or we will be late. Silas pops open the door to the bathroom as he works on his hair.

Leaning my head into the bathroom, I say, “Hey, it’s time. Let’s go.”

He gives himself one last look before flipping off the light and following me to the door. I swing it open as I give him a bright smile. “You ready for the future?”

He claps me on the shoulder, “More than ready,” before he walks out the door.

I grab my cell out of my pocket and shoot a message to Nova. I have one last thing to confirm before we head down. She quickly sends me a thumbs up message before I pocket my phone.

Everything is in motion, and the butterflies erupt in my stomach. The time is here and I don’t know if I should be excited, or nervous, or both. Fuck. I feel like a schoolgirl getting ready to talk to her first crush. Coughing, I hit my chest a few times with my fist. A failed attempt to dislodge these bubbling emotions. I’ve never felt this way in

my life. Actually, I take that back, there was one other time. The first time I looked up in the stands to see Aspen wearing my jersey, cheering me on. I should have known then.

We walk down the double doors that lead to the outside. This is where we will part ways. Nova wanted the groomsmen to walk the bridesmaids down the aisle. Turning to Silas, I clasp both my hands around his shoulders and squeeze.

“You got this, man. I’m so proud of the man you have become, as well as the Alpha. I always knew you had it in you.”

His face lights up with shock.

“Don’t get mushy and shit. I’m just in my feelings, so don’t look too hard into that.” I dust off his jacket, ensuring he is ready before taking a step back. “Now, get on out there to your spot before the scary lady finds out that you aren’t there.”

He hits the door bar with his hip as he stares at me. With a point of his finger at me, he says, “Don’t think we won’t be talking about all that when this is over.”

“I’ll hold you to that, even though I know Nova is going to keep you pretty busy the next few days,” I say with a wink, right as the door closes shut behind him.

Pushing out a heavy breath, I turn around to get ready for the first part of my plan. Caelon and Xavier show up shortly after and I discuss with them the change of plans. See, the idea Nova had was that instead of Caelon walking Aspen down the aisle, it would be me. We didn’t announce it to keep it as a surprise. Both of them agree to the change with a few comments of “finally” and “about damn time”. We are chatting with each other when Caelon taps my shoulder and points behind me.

Turning around, I find Aspen walking with Nellie, Willow, and Hazel. My mouth

drops open when she steps around them, giving me a full view of her dress. She is stunning in the muted green off-the-shoulder dress that hugs her breasts and stomach as it flairs down to the ground. My breath catches as the dress shifts, showing a slit going all the way to the top of her thigh. What I wouldn't give to run my finger up that slit and find out exactly what is hiding underneath it. To run my fingers through her soft curls that are pinned over one shoulder with a sparkling earring hanging down from her exposed ear.

Several things are happening at once. My wolf is perking up as her scent moves closer to us. My dick is hardening as I think of running my nose up the long column of her throat as I tighten my fist into the hair at the nape of her neck. The butterflies are in full flight as my brain tries to give us any sort of coherent thought before she comes closer to us.

Hazel nudges Aspen to bring her attention to me, staring at her. Her nostrils flare the moment our eyes lock and I know right then that she is just as affected by this as I am. Taking a tentative step towards her, I watch every single tic going off across her body. The tightening of her nipples inside the cups of her bra, the quick rise and fall of her chest, and the flaring of her nostrils. Seems someone else is having naughty thoughts.

Eating up the ground between us, I pause a breath away from her, waiting to see what she will do next. I couldn't care less about those around us. There is only one person in my world and she is standing in front of me. Leaning in, I run my fingers down the side of her forehead, brushing the hair out of my way as my eyes stay locked on hers. She tilts her head back as she leans into my embrace.

I suck in a breath as her scent wraps around me, mingling with mine, and creating the best scent I've ever experienced. I should have known they would complement each other.

“Warrick,” she says in a breathy whisper.

“I’ve waited months for this exact moment. The one where I got to see you dressed up like Belle in Beauty in the Beast. The moment where I could wrap my arms around you, proclaiming my love to you. 183 days, 5 hours, 34 minutes, and 13 seconds of waiting for this exact moment. Feeling anxious over how you would react and praying to our goddess that I wouldn’t lose the nerve to not only tell you, but to show you.” I lean in closer as she gasps. Brushing my lips against her ear, I say, “I plan to show you in as many ways as it takes for you to believe me.”

Nellie coughs as we pull back from each other. “Listen, that is hot as shit, and I’m here for it, but we need to get down the aisle. Like we should already be down there.” She glares at everyone as we all move into position.

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Pulling Aspen's hand around the crease of my elbow, I look down at her with a smirk. "You ready for the future?"

She scrunches her eyebrows together, but misses not a single beat before saying, "Yes."

The double doors open as two pack members pull them back. We are the first in line as the Best Man and Bridesmaid. I was supposed to walk Nellie down the aisle, but I asked for Xavior to be the one, since it's hilarious how much she gets under his skin.

Right before we step through the threshold, I glance over to Aspen before asking, "You ready for this?"

"More than ready." She smiles at me before looking forward as we walk down the path.

I don't take my eyes off of her as we walk down the path. I want to ingrain this into my memories forever. The first moment I knew there was actually hope for our future. Watching the sunlight dance across her amber brown curls as streaks of blonde shine through it. Seeing the gold flecks in her eyes that I never knew existed. The way her eyes crinkle as she smiles. Her face lighting up as she waves at different townsfolk. I catalogue all of it into my memory, praying I will never forget this moment. Before I know it, we have made it to the moment we are to separate, but I'm not ready to let go. She glances up at me with a questioning look on her face.

"Warrick?"

“Give me a chance tonight? Let me show you something after the wedding is over. Please say yes,” I plead with her.

“Yes,” she answers as she pulls her arm away from mine to take her place.

Taking my place beside Silas, I see he has a smile playing across his face. “Seems I’m not the only one that has been making big changes in their life. You owe me an explanation.”

Nodding my head once, I keep my eyes focused on her.

“Tonight will be the night. I can feel it.” Wraith’s excitement is almost palpable.

“If everything works out, hopefully, we won’t ever be alone again,” I tell him.

“Don’t fuck it up. I would hate to have to take over and show you how it’s really done.”

“Fuck off, Wraith.”

He chuckles before stepping away again.

I’m sure the wedding was beautiful, just as I’m sure that their vows were heartfelt. But, if you were to ask me anything about it, I could only tell you based on Aspen’s reactions. The moments of the tears welled up and slid down her cheeks before she blotted them with a tissue. The moment she clapped with her entire body as they kissed. How I watched her envy what they had. Or the moment I knew that we would have a wedding just like this, or whatever version she wanted. Because from here on out, she’ll get whatever she wants so long as it will make her smile at me like this, where her eyes crinkle. Where she will cry tears of happiness at our sappy moments. I want it all.

Nova and Silas walk down the aisle, each of us stepping in behind them to follow. Just as before, right before we step through the threshold, I look at Aspen and know that it's now or never.

Chapter 24

Warrick

My skin prickles with the sensation of a thousand needles as I spin Aspen around to face me. Pulling her flush with me, I lean close to her ear, "Leave with me. I have something I want to show you and I can't wait any longer."

She nods her head subtly as I pull her hand into mine and pull us back toward the exit.

We pass Xavior on our rush back to the doors and he gives us a bewildered look. "Where are you two going?"

"No time to explain. Have a great night, Xav," I toss over my shoulder as I push open the double doors.

The cool breeze blows past us as we push out into the canopy of trees. The sun set not long ago and the temperature is already dropping. Aspen shivers as it blows across her bare arms.

"Where are we going?" she asks, while running her hands up and down her arms to warm herself.

Pulling my jacket off, I place it over her shoulders. "Just to my house."

She gives me a questioning look.

“Trust me, it’s worth it. I promise to be a good boy and keep my hands to myself,” I say while holding my hands up.

She smirks. “I don’t think you could be a good boy even if you tried.”

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I nudge my shoulder with hers, “Are you sure about that?”

She barks out a laugh. “Positive. Really, though, what are we doing?”

I mime zipping my lips before she laughs again.

“Fine, keep your secrets. Thank goddess your cabin isn’t a long walk. I can’t walk through the woods in these heels.”

Glancing down, I watch as her ankles roll as she tries to walk along the uneven path full of pine needles, twigs, and rocks. Shit, I didn’t even consider that. Before she can say a word, I swoop down and pull her into my arms bridal style. With a determined pace, I head down the path toward my cabin.

She smacks my chest with her hand. “Put me down, you brute. You can’t carry me all the way to your house!”

Quirking an eyebrow, I say, “Says who?”

“Me!” She smacks my chest another time for good measure.

“Well, I disagree, and I’m bigger than you.” I laugh as she crosses her arms over her chest and huffs indignantly.

“I promise it will be worth it,” I say as I pick up the pace to get there as soon as I can. The butterflies from earlier have returned, flying around my stomach, causing me to feel nauseous. Is she going to love it, or is she going to think I’m just trying to buy her

love?

It doesn't take us long to get to the porch of my cabin and I place her feet down on the bottom step. Ensuring she has found her balance before I let her go, I rest my hand on her lower back as we walk up the three steps.

We stop before my front door as I pull her to face me. "You said earlier that you are ready for the future. I want you to know that I'm ready, too, for whatever that will be." I pull out the deep red, silk blindfold from my back pocket. Her eyebrow quirks in question. "I've dreamed of this moment for months now, imagining your reactions, your eyes, and the sounds that you would make. Will you give me the chance to see if it lives up to my dreams or exceeds it?" I ask as I hold up the blindfold between us.

She sucks in a breath before nodding her head and turning her back to me. The blindfold slides down over her eyes as she holds it in place for me to tie it.

Leaning close to her ear, I whisper, "Can you see anything?"

Her mouth is slightly ajar as her breath pants out of her. She shakes her head.

I turn her gently until she is facing the front door. Quickly working the locks, I push it open as I guide her through it. Leaving her standing in my living room, I quickly shut the front door and guide her toward the room. With a flick of my wrist, the door swings open.

Thankfully, everything was completed in time. I left the curtains pulled open to show her that there is a beautiful view of the forest right outside her picture window.

"Stop right here," I say, as I walk her a few steps into the room. "When I say now, drop the blindfold."

Rushing over, I stand in the center of the room and I feel the rush of adrenaline course through my veins. All the planning, long nights working in here, secrets, staying away from her, has accumulated to this exact moment. My chest rapidly rises and falls in anticipation. One last look at her standing here, in my house, in the room I designed for her, I finally say the word, “Now.”

She tentatively reaches up behind her head with shaky fingers and pulls the tail of the ribbon, allowing the blindfold to drop. Her eyes blink a few times, allowing them to adjust to the light. I know the exact moment they do because her mouth drops open as she pulls her hand to cover it. Her eyes roam slowly from one side to the next, taking in the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves covering both walls and next to each side of the window. She looks down at the cream rug we chose with navy blue constellations weaved into it. She gasps when she sees the matching constellations painted in the deep navy blue ceiling that sparkles with the refractions from the crystal chandelier.

I take a step to my right to move out of the way of the best part of the entire room: the overstuffed armchair with a footrest to match. We even made sure to give her a small side table for a lamp and to place her drinks. She takes tentative steps toward the chair, watching me for any sort of reaction to her movement. I nod my head gently and she squeals as she bounds to it. Her contented sigh slips from her mouth when she realizes it's as comfy as it looks.

“Warrick, did you do all of this for me?” she asks timidly.

I nod my head as I hold my hand out to her. She slides her palm across mine as she looks up to me, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“I’ve dreamt of this exact moment for so long now that it feels surreal to be in it. So many emotions are warring inside me, but I have some confessions to make. Things I need to say before I allow any of these emotions to take over.” I pull her up to standing as I guide her to the center of the room. “But first I want to say, I’m sorry.”

Confusion clouds her face as her eyebrows scrunch together. “Sorry? For what?”

Chapter 25

Aspen

He shifts his weight from side to side. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Warrick this nervous. Besides, when he was about to run onto the field for a game, but even that feels different from this. Almost like he is scared of what I’ll say or how I’ll react.

He blows out a breath. “I’m sorry for many things, but the first is for being a young, dumb, idiot who cheated on you under the bleachers, knowing you were there waiting for me. If I could go back to that guy and kick him in the dick, I would. I think I realized that I’ve been on a path of self-destruction for a longtime now, not caring who I hurt along the way. Especially you. For that, I’m sorry. I can never take away all the times that you’ve seen me with other women or the times you heard about them leaving my cabin.”

“Warrick, we don’t...” I start, but he cuts me off.

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“Aspen, please...” He thrusts his hands through his hair as he paces. “I’ve never talked about this with anyone, not even Silas, until recently. I need to say this all and pray to the Goddess that you understand. Can we go sit in the living room?”

I don’t know what to say, so I simply nod my head and follow behind him as he walks out of this gorgeous room. With a last glance over my shoulder, I follow him out. He is already sitting on the sofa with his arms braced on his legs as they bounce. He is staring at the coffee table as though he is lost in his mind.

With slow, measured steps, I walk into the living room, taking the seat across from him on the loveseat.

“The night my parents passed, I was playing at the State Championship. Something I’m sure you know, but what you don’t know is that I felt as though it was my fault. I kept telling myself that night that it was odd that they weren’t there. Several times, I would glance into the stands trying to find them, only to come up empty each time. I remember being livid with them. How could they not be there on the biggest night of my life? Coach kept bringing my attention back to the game by keeping me on the field as much as possible. Looking back now, it’s because he already knew my parents had passed. Every time that we would come off the field, I would look to the stands. There wasn’t a single soul up there for me. One of them...” He looks up at me. “Because I was a fucking idiot, but my parents? I couldn’t understand why they weren’t there. They left only ten minutes behind the bus, so surely they would have made it.”

He pushes off the couch and walks over to his wet bar. Twisting the cork out of his bourbon before pouring himself a drink. He tosses the entire thing back before

coughing and hitting his chest with his fist a few times.

“The entire game, I was livid with my parents, at myself for pushing you away, and we ended up losing the game. I blamed myself for that, too. My head wasn’t in the game. Too busy wondering where my parents were to even focus. I dropped the winning pass one yard from the end zone. A catch I’ve caught hundreds of times before, slipped right through my fingers.” He slams the crystal glass down on the bar top before pouring another glass. The ice chinks against the side as he throws back another drink.

My eyes are welling up with tears, not out of pity, but for the boy who has been struggling with the loss of his parents. The boy whose entire world was changed in the blink of an eye. I already knew what had happened. They were killed in a car crash on the interstate on their way to the game. A dumb teenager was speeding down the road at over a hundred miles per hour and didn’t have time to slow down when Warrick’s parents switched lanes. They died instantly and there was no hope of saving them.

The glass grinds across the top as he slides it across the wood. His head hanging between his shoulders, he shutters out a breath. “The state troopers had told the coaching staff shortly after the game had started. They wanted to give me one last night as a normal kid before they told me the news. One last chance at being happy before my world crumbled.” He sucks in a pained breath.

“When the game ended, I had every intention of making it to my phone in the locker room. Determined to call my parents and find out why they let me down when I needed them most. I never even made it that far.” The first tear gleams as it traces the apple of his cheek. “The sheriffs were waiting for me outside the locker rooms with the assistant coach. They had their hats off and their heads bowed and, somehow, I knew then my life would never be the same.”

The tears are falling in succession as his pained words come out. “I barely remember what they said to me, really. It becomes an out-of-body experience. One that you will always question if you really experienced. Part of you is actively operating, but you feel as though you are sitting in the back watching the movie happen.” He hiccups out the last words.

“Silas came running to find out what happened, but they wouldn’t let him near until I begged them to. He rode with me in the cop car to the hospital where they were. Do you know they have to have a family member confirm their identity?” He looks at me with bloodshot eyes and tears streak down his face.

I’m not even sure he is expecting an answer from me. I shake my head once while maintaining eye contact.

He looks back to his empty glass as he swirls the melting ice around the cup. “Imagine being seventeen years old and having to see that. To this day, no matter how hard I try, I can still see that as clearly as I do you. No amount of alcohol, women, or adrenaline could burn it out of my mind.”

My eyes burn as he retells the story of that tragic night. Lucien and Elara Merrit were caring, loving parents. They always welcomed me into their home. His dad’s hugs were the best, the kind that you feel in your soul as his arms squeeze you. Elara loved to bake cookies and you could bank on her having several dozen every time you came to their home. As much as I miss them, I know it’s not even close to how much he misses them. I know the grief of losing a parent, but not the tragedy of loss like his. My father passed from an illness that not even our wolf healing could beat, a rarity in itself. I’ve never considered what it has been like all these years for him. The guilt he must feel over all of this. I want to reach out to console him, but I’m afraid to move in fear he will stop telling me how he feels.

He pours himself another glass as he slowly breathes through his tears. I wonder if

this is his first time processing these feelings. Maybe his first time working through his emotions and thoughts about it at all. He holds the crystal glass up in front of him as he watches the light bounce off it to create a tiny rainbow on the wall. “I convinced myself that not only was it my fault they were dead, but that I wasn’t worthy of love. How does one jump to that from there, you ask yourself?” He looks at me before taking, thankfully, a smaller sip this time.

“I’m not really sure, to be honest. I think some shrink would tell me the answer, if I had ever seen one of those. Never have, though. I think if I really considered it, it would be from the anger I felt when they weren’t there. Instead of worrying, I was angry with them. Instead of questioning it, I kept playing the game. How could I ever love someone else if I wasn’t there for the people who loved me?” I watch his throat bob as he swallows back the anger I’m sure is trying to rise.

“After everything that fate dealt me, I think the worst blow was when I realized you were my mate.” My mouth drops open. He looks over at me and sees tears streaming down my face. “I thought it was a punishment for how I behaved and the thoughts I had about my parents. As if the goddess was laughing at my pain and gifted me the one person I knew I would never deserve. The one person who always chose me for me. Not because I was popular, the big shot football player, or my looks. How could she give me the one person I had hurt the most?”

The bourbon swirls with the ice in his cup as he throws it back again. He slides it across the bar top before stepping away. I watch as he moves around the sofa to the mantle above his fireplace. Along it are a row of framed pictures I didn’t even notice until now. He lifts the largest framed photo, and I immediately recognize his parents in the photo.

“I’m pretty sure my mom would have beat me with a wooden spoon for how I’ve treated you over the years. She always loved you and always knew you would be my mate. I brushed it off because how would she have even known, ya know?” He runs a

finger along her hair as his eyes stare into their faces before he places it back on to the mantle. He picks up a smaller one beside it and I can see it's him and Silas during some wild trip they took. "Silas did everything he could the last few years to bring me out of this funk. Always lecturing me about how the goddess would be upset with me if I didn't follow my fate. He spent more time worried about what I was doing than he worried about even finding his own mate."

He lets out a hollow laugh before setting the photo down. "Guess that worked out for him in the end." He grabs up the other photo and I recognize it immediately. It was the time we snuck out to the flower fields on a clear night to lie under the stars. I talked his ear off all night about the different constellations. My mouth drops open as I look over to the room we left. It makes so much sense now. My head whips back to him. He is smirking as he brings over the photo to me. The cold frame bites into my skin as I pull it from him. Our smiling faces are blown from the flash as we squint against the bright light. I run my finger along the faces of our younger selves. So young and excited about what the future would hold.

"I..." I look up to him. "I didn't know you had this."

He sits down next to me, pulling the frame to sit between us. "What would you tell your younger self if you could?"

I glance between the frame and his face so close to me I can smell the tears mingling with his scent.

"I would tell her that sometimes life makes little sense, the journey isn't clear, but trust yourself to make the right decisions as you go." I angle my head to see his reaction. I watch as he contemplates what I said, his eyebrow rising, the quirk of his head, the dip of the edge of his mouth. "What about you?"

He is quiet for so long that I almost wonder if he will answer me, before he whispers

out, “It was never your fault.”

I slip my hand down his thigh to where his hand dangles between his spread legs. My fingers graze across the rough patches along his palm to lace our fingers together. I squeeze his hand as I shift to look at him. The photo drops into our laps as I let go of it to turn his face toward mine.

“You are right. It was never your fault. Not your parents’ car accident, not them passing away, and not even the emotions you felt. We never know how we will feel, react, or handle the challenges life throws our way. We can only take it one moment at a time and hope we make the right decisions along the way.” I splay my hand across his cheek as I use my thumb to swipe away the tears. “Your parents loved you and would never choose to not be here. But there is something you are wrong about.” I quirk my eyebrow at him as he continues to stare at me. “You do deserve to be loved.”

He attempts to shake his head, but I don’t waver in my hold on him.

“You do. Everyone deserves to be loved and love another in their lifetime. There is fulfillment in those feelings that you will never achieve anywhere else. Something in knowing there is someone always in your corner, to pick you up when you stumble, to lift your chin when you are down. Knowing each day when you come home from work, there is someone there to share in the burden of life. To share the wonderful moments, the highs and lows with.”

Letting his face go, I pick up the photo and hold it up again between us. “Keeping this photo means that you never let go of this moment. On some level, I think you never moved past this guy.”

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He quirks an eyebrow at me. “What do you mean?”

A timid smile crosses my face. “Some part of you is still here at this time. I think for you to be able to really move forward, you will need to let it go. It’s going to hurt, but I’m here for you.”

He shakes his head as the tears fall harder. He pulls his hand from mine and attempts to stand up. My hand comes to his shoulder with a slight pressure. “Don’t run away,” I whisper between us.

His eyes snap back to mine, seeing the earnest emotions shining in them.

“Warrick, why did you bring me here?” I ask without shying away from the hard question.

His eyebrows dip together as his eyes flick back and forth as if searching for something. “What do you mean?”

“Why am I here right now? You said you have been dreaming of this moment, what exactly have you dreamed?”

He looks from my face to the room just behind me and back to my face. “I’ve dreamed of moments together in that room. Reading books, sharing stories, and filling your library with all the books that we read together.”

“So you have dreamed of a life of companionship where we share something we both love?” I run my hand along his arm, back down to his hand resting on his thigh.

He nods his head before swallowing hard. “Yes, I guess that’s exactly what I’ve been doing.”

“Do you think you are ready for it?”

He jerks back from me as if I slapped him.

“Wait, before you jump to any conclusions, think about what I just asked.”

He sits for a moment in quiet contemplation as his thumb sweeps back and forth across the back of my hand. “I think I’m ready to try.” He shifts to drop his knees to the floor as he turns to face me. He grabs both my hands in his as he keeps sweeping his thumbs across my hands. He looks up at me with an open, earnest expression.

“I’m going to fuck up. I’ll stumble, probably drop the ball a time or two.” He chuckles quietly as I smile at him. “But, I can promise you that each day when I wake up, I’m going to do everything I can to be the best man I can be for you. I promise when I stumble, I’ll stand back up. If I fuck up, tell me. I want to love you for the rest of my life, through all the best moments and all of our worst moments. I’ll be your shelter to weather every storm.”

“This is a lot to process, Warrick. As I’m sure you’re aware of. While I understand where you are coming from, I need time.” It’s crushing to watch his face fall. I’m sure he was expecting for me to fall into his arms, declaring my undying love for him. While I do feel that pull to him, it doesn’t erase all the pain from the years past. It won’t take away the fear that he will cheat again or choose someone else instead of me.

He lets out a heavy breath. “Aspen, I don’t expect you to jump into my arms right away. I know that everything that has happened is going to take time to move beyond. I’m here begging for the opportunity to show you I’ll be different this time

around, I promise.”

“Warrick, you opened up, telling me about your parents, I’m so proud of you. I should have been a better mate for you. Instead, I left you to wallow in your pain. You aren’t the only one who needs to be better for the other. How can I sit here acting as though you are the only one who needs to make changes?” My heart squeezes with realization. He really believes he is the only one who did wrong, and that’s my fault.

“You don’t have to change anything about you Aspen.” He gushes as he leans forward, brushing the tendril of hair behind my ear. “You’re perfect exactly the way you are.”

“As sweet as that sentiment is, it’s far from true. Nobody is perfect. Relationships, successful ones, are two people who show up for each other each day. Choosing them over everything else, but remembering you also have to care for yourself. You can’t be perfect, and I don’t want you to be. What I want is for you to choose us each day, even the hard ones. Because this isn’t a fairytale, we won’t live a life of constant sunshine and rainbows. We will have challenging days, days where we might not like each other, but as long as we keep showing up for each other, we will make it through it.”

“See! This is what I’m talking about! You know so much more than I do about all of this. How?” his eyebrows scrunch together in confusion. “It’s the books, isn’t it?”

A laugh escapes me. “I mean, they help. You know everyone thinks it’s just books, but really, it allows you to experience so many situations that you may or may not ever experience in your life. I think it helps you better understand the world, especially relationships. At least in my experience.” I won’t ever claim to be an expert, actually I’m far from it. My two only relationships have been such different experiences. Warrick, with his lack of concern for me as a person, but instead treating

me as an object in his life, until the moment I found out I wasn't his only object in his life. To Chase, who has been loving, caring, compassionate, and treats me as if every thought I have matters. Sure, I had a string of first dates in college, mainly me trying to move past the pain of Warrick's betrayals. None of them stuck, none of them were him, and that frustrated me more than anything. The one person who hurt me the most was the one person I compared all of them to.

Why was it different with Chase? I think because I knew it wouldn't be more than companionship, so I treated it differently. I've learned so much about myself under the careful care of Chase. But, the biggest lesson I learned? That Warrick and I would never last going the way we were. I would've been in a loveless bond, with a mate who treated me like an object. While I wouldn't have been happy with him because I would've expected the fairytale prince who worships me. I think we needed this time to learn more about ourselves before we were thrust together.

Maybe with time, the pain, the heartbreak, and exploration of ourselves, we are better for it. We can be the mates we both needed. I hate to say it, but maybe it all happened exactly how it was meant to happen.

I pull my hands from his, and he drops his hands down to his side. His head droops as if I'm going to deliver the worst news to him. This poor man and his pain that's so clear to see now. With both my hands, I caress his face, lifting it till he is again looking up at me. Slowly, I lean down until our mouths are only a breath away from each other. "I'm ready, too," I whisper against his lips before closing the distance.

The kiss starts out slow and explorative. Like two people learning about each other and how to move together. He leans up and wraps his arms around my back before lifting me up. Shifting till I'm straddling his lap, his hands run up my back to tangle into my hair. The gentle pull on my hair as his lips dance across mine elicits a moan from me.

He growls against my lips at the sound pulling me closer. “You feel what you are doing to me?” He nibbles at my bottom lip.

I roll my hips along the impressive length between us. A gasp leaves my lips as I realize just exactly what he is packing down there. My eyes bulge as he smirks.

“Keep that up and we won’t be doing much more with clothes on.”

My skin flushes at his words. His nostrils flare as the scent of my arousal fills the surrounding air.

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“Someone likes the idea of that,” he mumbles against the skin of my neck as he sprinkles kisses down it.

My hands run up his neck to grip the hair on the back of his head.

His canines nip at my neck, pulling whimpers from me. There’s no hiding that I’m grinding on his dick now. When he comes to the junction of my neck and shoulder, he leans back and whispers, “I can’t wait to put my mark right there, Rose.”

My body shudders when he presses his teeth down, as if he’s going to do it right now.

“You aren’t quite ready for it.” He licks the indentions he left as I continue to move against him. “But I can at least finish what I started.”

Before I can question what he is talking about, he moves the chiffon of my dress out of his way. I can feel the slick soaking my thong to the point I’m sure it would drip down if I wasn’t wearing underwear to begin with. His fingers run up my thigh and I pant, watching them move toward me. My chest is heaving in anticipation. I’ve never been touched before by anything other than my own hands and toys.

“Look at me, Rose.” My eyes snap to his as the breaths heave out of me. “I know you’ve never been touched before. We are going to take this slow.”

His hand wraps around the back of my neck and with a firm pull, he brings our mouths back together. The kiss is nothing like the earlier one. This one is full of passion and feels almost hungry, as if we have both waited forever for this moment.

His fingers wiggle against my cloth-covered seam, causing me to twitch. He laughs against my lips. "Someone is sensitive."

I slap his shoulder before he pulls me back into him.

He breaks the kiss, and he moves down my chin as he slips my thong out of his way. The kiss of air against my swollen, flaming skin brings a gasp to my lips. Warrick leans in close to my ear, and he says, "I can't wait to hear what you sound like when you scream my name."

His middle finger twirls around my bud as he dips down every few times to gather more of my slick. His lips move back down the column of my neck as he continues his tantalizing movements. "You're so wet for me, Rose. I bet you bloom so prettily, just like everything else about you."

My clothes feel constricting, as if they're holding in more than my skin and the swelling of emotions inside of me. I can feel the slick dripping out of me onto his slacks, but I couldn't care less at this moment.

"Ready?" he mumbles against my ear.

I don't even know what I'm agreeing to when I nod my head.

"Words, Rose, I need your words."

"Yes..." I swallow, my dry mouth. "Yes!" I gasp out.

Several things happen next. He shoves his fingers inside of me while grinding his palm down on my clit. His teeth clamp down on my neck hard enough to break the skin. I erupt in an orgasm that whites out my sight. Screaming his name to the ceiling as the waves of the orgasm wash across me. It feels as though I'm in a turbulent

ocean as my body is rocked.

Warrick licks the drips of blood that came from his bite as he hums in contentment. “I knew it would be as beautiful as everything else about you.”

“What...” I swallow to wet my dry mouth. “What was that?”

He chuckles as he picks me up to set me down on the couch. “That, my Rose, was what orgasms are like between mates, with only the exception of truly being bonded.” He turns to walk out of the room down the hallway toward the back of the cabin.

I scramble to get up. The rustle of the dress causes him to turn around with a questioning look on his face. “Where... Where are you going?”

He smirks before he turns to keep walking. “I’m grabbing a washcloth to clean you up. I’m sure you don’t want to sit in slick and cum, right?”

My mouth hangs open as I watch him walk away. Who knew it could be like this for us?

Chapter 26

Warrick

I still can’t believe that we are here with Aspen walking around my cabin with slippers on her feet and her hair piled up in a bun atop her head. I catch myself just staring at her as she moves about, ensuring that I’m not imagining anything. We spent the rest of last night cuddled up on the couch, catching up on everything that we missed in the years that passed. Both of us glossing over some moments that we don’t wish to get into right now.

We talked mostly about her time in college and all the things she learned about herself during that time. What Silas and I were doing during that time. It was a nice way to end the night. Before we knew it, the sun was cresting over the horizon, informing us we didn't get an ounce of sleep.

We parted ways long enough for her to run home to grab her stuff and come back. Deciding that we really wanted to give this a shot, we needed to spend time together without the influence of the outside world. Which is fine with me, given we are both rather private people. Something she was shocked to learn, given my abundance of popularity.

“You mean to tell me that the super popular guy actually prefers to sit at home watching tv instead?” She razzed me from beneath our blanket fort in the middle of the living room.

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“I’ll have you know that being popular is not what it’s cracked up to be. It’s hard to know when someone is really there for you or for what you can do for them,” I said as I ran my fingers along her side in a tickling motion.

We spent hours sharing and learning about each other; our past and present joys, fears, hopes, and dreams. After all these years, we are starting to truly know each other on a deeper level. It was easy to spend hours cuddled together under our blanket fort, ignoring the outside world.

She finally looked through the selection of books that we purchased, realizing that the books Nova asked for were actually in here. Her eyes gloss with unshed tears, her mouth hangs open as I watch her process what this means. I chuckle as she moves through confusion with a scrunch of her eyebrows to narrowing her eyes at me with anger.

She has spent more time in the library than anywhere else in the house, which is fine with me. Coming around the corner, I pop my head into the library. “What would you like for dinner?”

She lifts her eyes from the book she is reading. “Hmm, eating in or ordering out?”

“I would like to make you dinner, if that’s alright.”

She closes the book and sets it aside. “I didn’t know that was an option.” She quirks an eyebrow as she crawls off the chair and slowly stands to walk towards me. Her wolf’s eyes flash as her hips sway as she moves.

Her scent fills my nostrils, someone is ready to play. My eyebrows lift to my hairline. I didn't know this was such a turn-on for her. "Is there something you have in mind?"

She runs her finger down my bare chest while biting her lower lip between her teeth. "Oh, I have something in mind." Her finger continues its path down to the waistband of my pajama bottoms. I snatch her hand in mine, pulling her fingers to my mouth.

Placing a tender kiss on the tip of each one, I continue to hold them and bring her focus back to the topic at hand. "Food, what would you like to eat for dinner?"

Her eyes flick to mine before backing down to the growing erection between us. "I've got something in mind along the liquid variety." She licks her lips as she watches my dick as it twitches inside my boxers. Don't get me wrong, that all sounds wonderful, but she needs to eat actual food.

"How about we eat dinner and then we can discuss after dinner activities?"

She growls at that before her eyes snap to mine. They aren't the normal hue of her irises, which lets me know everything I need to know right now. Aspen isn't in charge right now, Aisling is.

Fine white fur sprouts along her arm as she snarls. "Why don't you be a good boy and lie down for me, hmm? I've waited long enough for a taste of you."

Oh shit, if I don't get a hold of her wolf, then she will take this further than I wanted to go. I wanted the first time to be between us in our human forms, not the wolves. Clearly her wolf is as ready as Wraith is.

"Hello, Aisling. How about you let Aspen come back and I'll work her toward that? Don't you think her first time should be with her in charge, hmm?" Spinning the same type of question back on her.

She snaps her teeth at me, which has already lengthened. “I’m tired of waiting.”

“I know... we all are, but I want to take it a little bit slower. So, how about we get some food in her system before we do any other activities?”

“Fine.” She pulls back, and Aspen blinks her eyes a few times before bringing her hand to her mouth as a blush blooms across her cheeks.

“What just happened?” She looks around.

“It seems that Aisling is tired of waiting for us to get to the mating portion.”

Her cheeks flush a deep crimson that spreads to the tips of her ears as she ducks her head to evade eye contact with me. My finger hooks under her chin, lifting her eyes back to mine as she closes them, still trying to avoid looking at me.

“Open your eyes, Rose.” Her eyes flutter open. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.” My left hand brushes her hair behind her ear, then travels down her back, pulling her closer to me. “We are all excited for what is to come, but I don’t want you to be hurt.”

Her eyes crinkle as the confusion blooms across her face.

Clearing my throat, I try to think of the best way to say this. “I, uh, am rather large.” I flick my eyes down and back to her, hoping she received the message. “The last thing I want to do is move too fast and cause physical harm.”

She swallows before saying, “Is that possible?”

Chuckling, I bring my lips to brush against hers. Planting soft kisses along her cheek, I nibble her ear before whispering, “Very possible.”

She sucks in a breath as her hands grip my shoulders.

With a quick step, I move around her, leaving her standing there, panting, with the cutest scowl on her face. “Let’s have some dinner. Shouldn’t take me more than twenty minutes to whip something up.”

Her lower lip pushes out in a pout.

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“No food means no fun times. Decide now. The pouting doesn’t work on me, young lady,” I say with a tilt of my head as my eyebrow raises in challenge.

She stomps her foot, pushing her lower lip out even further. “Fine, but I better get what I want at the end because I can promise it’s not food.”

“Fair enough, princess.” I laugh as I walk into the kitchen to scrounge together something of substance. I didn’t really expect to have her here all weekend, so we will have to make due for now.

Twenty minutes later, I am plating the spaghetti and garlic bread onto both our plates. It’s not enough fuel for what I have planned, but it will do for now. I place both our plates on the kitchen island with forks, napkins, and glasses of water before I venture through the cabin to find Aspen.

It doesn’t take long to find her yet again on her chair in her library with that book from earlier. She looks up when I walk into the room. “Dinner ready?” she asks as she quickly slams the book shut and scrambles off the chair. I can’t help but laugh at her reaction, knowing she isn’t excited about dinner at all, but what comes after?

Laughing, I follow behind her as she quickly makes her way to the kitchen island. It’s adorable how excited she is and the youthfulness of it is exhilarating. The stool scrapes across the hardwood floors as she pulls it back to sit down. She doesn’t even wait for me to sit down before she digs into her food.

“Slow down, we have all night, all weekend, the rest of our lives,” I say with a laugh as I watch her shovel another mouthful of spaghetti into her mouth. Her cheeks are

pushed out like a chipmunk storing nuts when she looks sheepishly at me. A few strands of noodles dangle from her lips before she slurps them in.

I twirl the noodles around my fork as she chews a little slower on her mouthful. She swallows audibly before dabbing her mouth with the napkin. “You probably think I’m being ridiculous.”

My head shakes from side to side as a smile spreads across my face. “Not at all. I’m excited as well. It’s adorable and refreshing to bask in your excitement. Just don’t want you to choke on your food,” I laugh before putting another forkful in my mouth.

“It doesn’t bother you that I’m not as experienced as you? That I have literally no idea what I like? What if I suck at it?” She ducks her head as she slowly twirls her fork in the spaghetti.

“On the contrary, I look forward to learning what you like right along with you. Surely, in all the years of reading romance novels, you have thought of things that you would like to try?”

She tilts her head to the side as she contemplates what I said. It apparently doesn’t take long for an idea to come to mind as I watch the blush creep across her cheeks again. She doesn’t tell me, instead choosing to push more food into her mouth, avoiding eye contact.

My fork clinks against the plate as I set it down to turn towards her. “What was it?”

She shakes her head from side to side, still avoiding me.

Reaching across her barstool, I grab the side of her thigh and pull her closer to me. The squeal she releases is both hilarious and high-pitched. Almost as if she didn’t even consider this as a possibility.

My fingers push the hair behind her ear as I lean in and whisper, “Be a good girl and tell me what it was.”

Her mouth hangs open as she pants out a breath. “It’s embarrassing. I feel like such an idiot even thinking about it. You will be so weirded out when I tell you.”

“Doubt that. Come on, in order for this to work between us, you have to be as open with me as I will be with you.”

“I want to fuck you in your humanoid wolf form,” she mumbles quietly.

Did I hear her correctly? “What was that?”

She heaves out a sigh as her head drops back to stare at the ceiling. “I’ve always wanted to fuck your humanoid form. I don’t tell people, but monster romance is one of my favorite tropes. The size difference, the stuffing, and the breeding. I’ve fantasized riding your wolf while your claw tipped hands’ grip onto my ass.”

My mouth drops open because that wasn’t what I was expecting, but before I can even formulate words, she continues.

“I want to dominate you while calling you my good boy. To see you on your knees before me, waiting for my next command.”

Oh, she is a freak, and I’m here for it. My lips pull up into a smirk as I ask, “Anything else you want to do?”

Her face scrunches in confusion. “That doesn’t freak you out?”

I simply shake my head, waiting for her to continue. “I’m sure I can think of more things, but those are top of my list, at least for now.”

“We can check some of those off for sure. I don’t think tonight should be that time. For the first time, we should be more vanilla than those kinks.”

“Va...vanilla?”

I nod my head. “It’s what the kink community considers simple positions like missionary, doggy style, or laying on our sides. An easier way to think of it would be more like ‘love making’ versus ‘fucking’. There is nothing wrong with it, and it’s perfectly acceptable to only use those types of positions. Whatever satisfies you and your partner.”

“So, I’m not a freak for liking the idea of those things?” she asks timidly.

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“Not at all. Well, I mean, you are a freak, but not in the context you are asking.”

She slaps my shoulder, our dinners long forgotten, sitting on the counters. “Asshole.”

I chuckle when I grab her wrist before she slaps me again. “Seriously, being a freak isn’t a problem. It’s healthy to explore things you desire with your partner. You might find you don’t like it or find you love it.” I shrug my shoulders. “Only one way to find out.”

Pushing my stool back, I stand up, pulling her up with me. “Are you ready?”

She licks her lips. “More than ready.”

Chapter 27

Aspen

My heart is racing as I follow behind Warrick into his bedroom. A room I’ve never seen before but dreamed of long nights tangled in the sheets together. The muscles along his toned back shift with each step we take as I try to settle my anxiousness. All the years of dreaming of this moment are finally coming to a head and I’m not sure what emotion I feel the most right now. I just hope I don’t fuck this up with my inexperience. I know he said it won’t bother him, but I don’t want him to hate this with me.

He glances over his shoulder at me with a smile playing across his lips. I want to know what he is thinking about. Is he as nervous as I am? Is he as worried about this

not being as good as I am?

He pushes his bedroom door open with his arm as he moves to the side to allow me to pass. The deep earthy tones of his walls with the wood accents give this room the feel of being in the woods. His enormous bed is the centerpiece of the room, with the thick wood frame holding the mattress off the floor. End tables with simple copper lamps on each side frame the bed. It's very masculine, clean, and cozy. It's very him.

His body closes in on my back before he whispers, "Is it how you imagined it?"

"Yes," I whisper back.

"Hmm," he mutters as he walks around me. "What have you imagined doing in here, I wonder?"

"Lots of things," the words keep coming out in a whisper.

He runs his finger down my neck as my eyes watch him. Following the swell of my breast, he pinches my hardening nipple between his forefinger and middle finger. My teeth press into my lip as the pain elicits a moan from me.

"What was the most common one?" he asks as his fingers trail down my cami to the hem before sliding under it.

My breath hitches when his fingers touch my stomach and gently run back up. The cool air of the room moves across my skin, adding to the goosebumps already popping up along my skin. Breaths pant out of me as I watch his hands move under my shirt closer and closer.

"Rose..." he calls to me.

My eyes snap to his, where he is waiting for something.

“I asked you a question.”

“I, uh...” I say. My mouth is dry from the sawing breaths. Swallowing to wet my mouth, I try again. “I always fantasized holding on to the headboard while I rode you. The sheets bunched around my hips as our bodies dripped sweat. My nipples pinched between your fingers as I gripped your forearms.”

“Ah, I’m seeing a trend here. I think I can get behind it,” he mumbles as he lifts my cami, revealing my lace bra beneath it. His fingers brush across my hardened nipples as he continues to pull the cami up. “Lift your arms up, Rose,” he demands.

I do as he says, and his fingers trail up the sides of my arms as he pulls it past my face. I watch as he throws the cami to the ground over his shoulder. His pupils are dilating as he takes me in. My arms fall to my sides, already feeling as though I should cover my body.

“Don’t,” is all he growls out before pushing the straps of my bra off my shoulder. “The amount of times I’ve stroked myself to the thoughts of using these for my pleasure,” he says as he reaches around my back to unclasp my bra, allowing it to fall to the ground beneath us.

My nipples tighten to the point of pain between the cool air breezing past them and the absolute hunger in his eyes. “They are gorgeous.” His hand massages my breast as his other travels down my side to hook into the band of my pajama shorts.

His hand drops my breast to join the other around the band. “You ready?” he asks as I nod my head.

He lowers himself until he is kneeling on the floor in front of me. Every part of me is

exposed to him as I step out of the shorts. He tosses my shorts with my cami before grasping both of my ass cheeks into his hands and leaning into my sex with a deep inhale.

“Fuck, you smell as good as I imagined you would.” His tongue darts out to lap some of my slick into his mouth. “The most desirable taste I’ve ever experienced. Better than all the best desserts in the world. A feast I would die to taste every day of my life.”

Hooking my knee over his shoulder, he dives in with fervor. Licking, sucking, and nibbling at my sex like a man starved. My hands fall on his hair, gripping it to prevent myself from falling over. As soon as he hits a spot that shoots tingles up my spine, I push his face harder against it. Taking the hint he was given, he works that spot until I feel myself rising. Mewling his name, I gasp as he slides a finger inside me. The burn is minimal after years of toy usage. As if he already determined that, he adds a second and works them in a come here motion, hitting the spot deep inside.

He tilts his head back to look at me. “That’s it, Rose. Come for me.” My whole body lights up and I can feel it. It’s about to happen. Seeing how close I am, he leans in and nips my clit with his canine, causing me to erupt and convulse.

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“Look at you soaking my hand like a good girl,” he breathes against my skin as he moves up my body one kiss at a time.

He captures my mouth with his as he walks us toward the bed. The backs of my calves hit the edge of the bed before my body falls onto it. My elbows prop me up as I watch him slowly pull down his bottoms. His impressive length bobbing out, to standat attention as my mouth drops open at the sight. He smirks at me as he steps out of the pants. “See why I said we needed to take it slow.”

I watch his hand stroke along the length as he butts up against his swelling knot. The knot that doubles the width of his dick. There’s no way that is going to fit inside of me. My eyes bulge as his hand wraps around it and squeezes. His hand that barely wraps around it, I might add.

“That’s not going to fit!” I squeal as I scramble up the bed to the pillows.

He chuckles as he crawls after me, grabbing my knees and pushing them apart. “Oh, it’s going to fit. I can promise you that. Don’t you remember? We are fated for each other. There is no way we won’t fit together in every way,” he growls as his knees slide under my thighs.

I shake my head from side to side and say, “That monster is going to split me in half.”

“Well, you did say you were into monster romance,” he chuckles as his hand wraps around his dick, aiming it at my seam. It glides along my slick, building anticipation.

He pumps forward quickly, dipping the head into me, before pulling back just as

quickly. Repeating the motion a few times only further winds me up. My fingers wind into the comforter as I look for anything to hold onto.

His left hand moves to rest above my shoulder as he looks into my eyes. “I want one night to worship at your altar, Rose. One night to apologize for the pain. A night to wash away every bad memory and replace each with a blissful moment between us. Let me show you how I will worship you.”

I nod my head, afraid to speak.

He pushes forward slowly, allowing my body the time to adjust to him. I can feel the burn as I spread to accept him into my body. He never takes his eyes off mine, making this feel more than just a connection of our bodies, but the connection of our souls. As he keeps pushing forward, I slap my hands down on his shoulders, not realizing my claws have come out until he hisses.

A bloom of blood comes around each of my claws where they dig into his skin. “I’m sorry,” I say quickly, before pulling them back and holding my hands against my chest.

He smiles softly at me. “It’s okay, you can mark me as much as you want.”

The pressure reaches its peak when he stops. I look down between our bodies and back to him.

“This is going to hurt quite a bit, but that should fade quickly. Your toys don’t go this deep, so I have to make room.”

My face scrunches. “How did you...”

The laugh that rumbles out of him is full of mirth. “You are going to learn very

quickly that there isn't much I don't know, or won't know, about you."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see. Now, hold on tight, Aspen."

Before I can consider what he just implied, I grip onto his shoulders again right as he thrusts forward quickly. The searing pain rips through my torso, causing my toes to curl and my eyes to crash closed.

"Fuck, you are so tight. I don't know how long I'll last with you gripping my dick as if you could squeeze the life out of it."

When the wave of pain subsides, I flutter my eyes open to see that he is staring down at me, waiting.

"You alright?" he asks, with a note of concern.

"Yeah, I'm good," I say as my head nods slowly.

"Great, because here comes the real fun part." His hips begin to rock slowly like the small waves lapping in a lake as a boat goes by. I feel so full as he moves in and out of me.

"You are doing beautifully," he murmurs as he leans back on his heels and stares down at me with eyes full of lust.

With a quick tug, he pulls my thighs over his, angling my hips up to him. His palms splay across the tops of my thighs as he grips them tightly. The pace never stops as he slowly builds us up. "Fuck. This was harder than I thought it was going to be." With a stutter in his pace, he reaches to where we are joined, circling his finger around my

clit.

The moan that falls from my lips is low and lust filled as I feel the climax building again.

“Let’s see how many orgasms I can pull from you before you finally pull one from me. Hmm, shall we?”

He doesn’t even give me a chance to respond before pushing firmer down on my sensitive nub in a faster swirl. The wave is building, and for once, I’m terrified of the crest. I’ve never had an orgasm this way and I can already tell it feels different than any of the times in the past. No toy has ever built me up this way, this quickly, or made me feel this full.

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“Fuck,” I moan to the ceiling. There is a sharp pain on my nipple as I jerk my eyes down to see what it was. Warrick has pushed one of his claws out to flick my nipple with it. “Oh, goddess.”

“Someone likes a little pain with her pleasure. Wonder what this will do then?”

My elbows push me up so I can see what he is doing. I watch in rapt attention as he reaches back down between us with the claw extended. My eyes bulge as his claw moves toward my clit. He can’t be serious.

He smirks at the look on my face right before he uses the tip of the claw to flick the swollen bud. The explosion of sensation from that simple motion feels as though he flicked a switch. My back bows off the bed as the tingles rush across my body.

“That’s three already.” He leans down, kissing up my neck. “I think you can do two more.”

He rolls us to put me on top. The new angle makes him feel even larger than before. My hands fall to his chest to prop myself up. I move to adjust my legs, forcing him to hit a new place deep inside me. “Fuck, you’re so deep. It’s like you are hitting my stomach on the inside. How does this thing fit in your jeans?”

A laugh rumbles out of him. “You are in charge of your orgasm now. Use me however you need to. Hold on.”

I grip his shoulders as he scoots us back up the bed toward the headboard. His head rests on the pillow as he looks between me and the headboard above him. Giving the

clear signal to live out my fantasy. Leaning forward, I grip the wood, feeling the wood bite into my skin as I roll my hips forward, my mouth dropping open at the new feeling. Loving how it feels, I keep rolling and testing different ways to find which is my favorite. One of the ways hits just perfectly.

“That’s it, Aspen. Right there. Fuck, this feels so good,” Warrick chants to me.

I lift my hips as I work up and down, testing out this new way. “Put your hands on my hips, and dig your nails in.”

He doesn’t need to be told twice, quickly doing what I asked. The pierce of my skin under his nails is exactly what I need to push myself further into my next orgasm.

“Right there,” I moan as I continue to move myself along his length.

I move down to roll my hips, creating the perfect friction between us. With the pain, friction, and the angle he is hitting, it doesn’t take me long to crest over the hill again.

My body shakes as exhaustion racks my body from the overstimulation. I could fall asleep with how tired I suddenly feel.

“That’s my good girl. One last time and then we can shower.”

“I can’t. There’s no way,” I shake my head as I fall to his chest while trying to catch my breath.

“Giving up on me already?” he mumbles as he moves his mouth along my chin. My hair is sticking to my damp skin as he pushes it over my shoulder.

“I feel like I could pass out right here,” I murmur as I nuzzle against his neck.

He licks my neck up to my ear as he whispers, “One more,” as he rolls us back to him on top. “Let’s make this one quick.” His hand grips under my knee, pulling it over his shoulder, reaching a whole new place that feels deeper than before. Fuck.

“Don’t worry, it won’t take long for the both of us. Then we will soak in the tub together.” He rapidly thrusts while rubbing my clit.

He wasn’t wrong. Before I can even consider another orgasm, he has already ripped it out of me while following me over the hurdle.

The guttural roar that comes from his throat could’ve shattered the windows. “Fuck, Rose, you are going to kill me.”

“Me?” I squeal.

“Yes, you.” He leans down, nipping my neck. “I already want to go again and we just finished.”

With slow, deliberate motions, he pulls out of me as the gush of wetness follows him. His feet hit the floor before he bends down to scoop me into his arms.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking you to the bath, like I said,” he says as he turns toward the door leading to the bathroom.

When the light flicks on, you see an earthy bathroom with dark blue walls, stone tiles, and a deep tub large enough for two. The corner has glass walls framing the shower with a rainfall shower head dangling down from the ceiling. The double vanity has a dark wood base with a stone countertop.

My feet hit the cold tiles as he gently sets me down. The water roars to life as he twists the handle all the way on. Plugging the tub, he reaches over to pour soap in. I watch him as he moves gracefully around the bathroom, collecting supplies as he goes. My ankles are crossed as I stand here with my hands clasped together, not sure if there is something that I should be doing. When he seems satisfied with his stash of supplies, he turns to me with his hand reaching out.

“Come on, let’s get you washed up.”

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His hand is warm in mine as he pulls me towards the tub. His long leg lifts over the lip of the tub as he steps into it. I follow behind him, making sure to step in front of him. The water rises as he settles his massive frame into it.

He tugs gently on my hand, and I sink into the tub. “You know, I’ve always envisioned caring for you like this. Long baths together where you lean against my chest as we talk about our days. I don’t know, something about it always appealed to me. The calmness of it,” Warrick says as he grabs the loofa from the hook and dunks it into the water.

I wiggle against his chest as I scoot down to a comfortable position. “I can see that. There’s something intimate in these moments. The kind that can only be found in the quiet.”

My head tilts back as I watch him pour the sweet-smelling soap on the sponge. Lathering it into a soapy bubble, he holds my arm up as he runs it along my skin.

“If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?”

“Hmm.” I squint my eyes, considering the questions. “I haven’t ever really thought about it. After college, I really just missed home. All those years of wishing to get away from here, only to realize it’s not all I thought it would be.”

His fingers tickle across my skin as he sweeps my hair to the other shoulder. “That makes sense. I’ve never really been away from here, other than quick trips. If you had to pick, though, where would it be?”

The water ripples into waves as I pull my knees up. “I think I would like to see Ireland one day. I hear there is a huge wolf pack there with deep roots in the country's history. It would be cool to experience that.”

“Let’s go then,” he says, without a second of hesitation.

I twist around, causing the water to slosh against the side of the tub. His unfazed reaction is just as shocking as his statement. “What do you mean ‘let’s go’?”

He only shrugs his shoulders. “Exactly what I said. We’ll get our passports, book the flight, contact the pack you want to meet, and go.”

My mouth opens and closes as I process what he is saying. “We can’t just up and leave like that, Warrick.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one, you are the Beta of a pack that is just beginning to get itself back on track,” I say as I point to one finger.

“There are plenty of people here to handle things while we go on a vacation,” he says while wringing the sponge between his hands. “What else?”

Pointing to my second finger, I remind him, “I have a bookstore to run.”

“There are plenty of young pack members who are looking for ways to help the pack. I’m sure we can ask one of them to come in for a week before we leave so you can go over things with them so they can run the store while we are gone. With everyone here, there is no way anything would happen to it.”

I scowl at him, getting ready to hit him with the third thing. My third finger flicks up

as his eyebrow quirks. “We aren’t officially mated, which means we can’t travel to a different pack together. Wouldn’t want to risk some alpha trying to swoop me up as an unclaimed female wolf.” My mouth lifts in a smirk as I stare at him with my finger tip balancing on top of my third finger between us.

His eyes darken as he growls. “That can easily be rectified,” he says as he lurches forward, wrapping his arms around me. The water of the tub crashes over the side, splashing to the floor as I squeal in an attempt to get away from him.

“Shall I mark you on the right or left side?” he asks as he shifts his head from side to side, glancing at each side of my neck.

I swat him with my hands that are crushed between us. “Get off me, you big brute.”

“I’m thinking the right side, since you always part your hair to the left,” he continues, as if I’m not squirming in his arms.

“You better not,” I say as I poke him in the chest.

He doesn’t even bother to pretend he is listening at all, just stands up with me still in his arms. The water gushes back down into the tub as he brings us out. The sound of water droplets hitting the tiles below is barely audible over my squealing.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I try to twist my way out of his hold. The way he moves doesn’t even show it being an issue that he is carrying me as he tightens his arms around me.

“Rectifying the issue.” He continues to carry me into the living room while we are still dripping wet.

“Can’t we at least dry off first?” I plead, hoping to alter his path.

“No need,” is all that I get from him before he is plopping us down onto the couch, forcing my knees to straddle each side of his waist. The warmth from my core rests on his semi-hard cock laying between us. Before he releases my arms, he says, “I want you to mark me first. Wherever you want. My entire body is up for your choice. I don’t give a fuck if you want it to be on the side of my neck for everyone to see or the inside of my thigh for only your eyes to see. You choose.” His arms drop from around me to rest along the sides of my thighs as he gives me the chance to consider it.

“You really want to do this right now?” I ask with skepticism.

He only nods his head once.

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“Okay, well, I have something else in mind. Something more natural to us, at least for one part of us.”

“Go on.”

“What if we let our wolves out for a run? Allow them a time to bond like we have the last two days. What do you think?”

“I’m listening.”

I shift as I rub my growing slick along his growing bulge between us. “I want to go for a run, allow them to have fun, and if they mark each other, great. If not, then when we get back home, you and I can do it. What do you think?”

“I think you are stalling, but I’ll allow it.” He leans up till our noses touch. His eyes bounce from side to side as he watches me. “Just know that I’ll be marking this pretty skin of yours at some point today.”

I jump up as I turn to run to the back door. “Only if you can catch me first.” Running through the house, I throw open the back door, allowing the shift to take over. Before I can even blink, I’m running on four paws across the damp soil into the forest.

With a look over my shoulder, I see Warrick standing proudly on his back porch watching me run away. “Oh, I’ll catch you, Rose!” he yells out to me as he turns into his steel gray wolf.

Wraith

My paws pound across the dirt as I chase the blur of white fur running ahead of me. It feels amazing to be outside, running through the woods after being cooped up inside Warrick for so many weeks. He had such a tight leash on me I wasn't even able to continue my nightly tours around Aspen's house to mark our territory.

I'm even more excited because we can finally claim our mate. This run through the woods is more a mating ritual than anything else. I don't even bother to run at my full speed. Instead, I enjoy the time running a few paces behind her.

It would only take a few seconds for me to catch her. I'll allow her the time to think she is outrunning me. It will make it all the better when I catch her.

Her head whips to the side, checking to see if I'm still behind her. I clack my jaw together, eliciting a yelp from her as she picks up the pace again. Her agile body weaves to the left as she attempts to outmaneuver me, not realizing her coat is practically sparkling in the sun's rays coming through the canopy. I could easily spot her anywhere in the woods right now. Winter would be a different story.

The deeper she runs into the woods, the more excitement thrums through my veins. She wants us to bond, for us to have the time to mark each other without an interruption, like the chance of the humans stumbling upon us.

I lope gently behind her, keeping pace. Once I'm sure of the area she is heading off to, I change my course to catch her off guard.

It's easy enough to outrun her as my legs pound across the ground. Jumping over fallen trees and whipping around trees, I come to a clearing only a few feet ahead of where she should come out. I sit on my haunches and wait, only she doesn't come like she should be. She should already be here. My head whips to each side, looking

for any sign of her. My ears flick up in alternating directions to see if I can hear her movements.

I'm just about to go back into the woods to look for her when I'm tackled to the ground. In a blur of white and gray fur, we tumble to a stop with Aisling on top of me. She clacks her teeth at my jaw as I hold her back with my paw. Her hind legs dig into my stomach to find the leverage needed to push past my front paws. She isn't expecting me to use mine to push against her stomach, dislodging her.

Aisling quickly rights herself as she paces in a circle around me. Rolling to my paws, I jump up to keep her in my sights. Her growl is low as she lowers her head down to the ground. Oh, she wants a battle for dominance. Alright, pup, let's see who wins this game.

We circle each other as we both look for our opportunity, both taking lunges at the other, hoping to catch the other off guard. In all the times of circling each other, neither of us can get the jump on the other. She must realize it's a failed idea, as she lowers herself to the ground and exposes her belly to me. Good, I'm ready to move onto the fun stuff.

Sauntering over to her, I move my snout down her, inhaling her scent as I go. Finally. My legs move to stand over top of her. Feeling the victory, I move in to claim my prize. My jaws widen as I lower myself to her neck. I'm just about to bite her when she launches up and clamps her jaw down on my neck.

As her venom seeps into my skin, she tightens her grip on me as she rolls us over till she is on top of me. "Mine!" she growls through our mind link. After a few seconds of pumping the venom into me, she finally releases me as she steps back. "Now, be a good pup and mark me like you should have done years ago."

I roll over to my side and stare up at her in shock. I can't even believe that just

happened. I was topped from the bottom.

A laugh echoes through our link. “Yes, you were.”

Grumbling, I push myself up as she sits down on her haunches. “You will pay for that one,” I growl at her.

She tilts her head to the side, “I’m banking on that.”

Wasting no more time, I take my chance to mark her in return, savoring the moment our link fully snaps into place.

As soon as I let go, she stands up and shakes out her fur. “Now, the first one back home has to lick the other one to completion.” She lurches forward as she races out of the clearing.

Shaking out my fur, I realize that life is always going to be wild with Aisling and Aspen in our lives. I look forward to every second.

Chapter 29

Aspen

Aisling ran at full speed back to Warrick's home without stopping again, allowing me to shift back into our human form right as we met the bottom step of the back porch. We have a plan, something we discussed on the run here. Hopefully, Warrick will be game for it.

Throwing open the back door, I rush into the living room and slide onto the couch. My breaths are sawing in and out from all the running and exhilaration of the chase through the woods. I'm glad Aisling and Wraith were allowed their time together. I hope that there will be many more runs through the woods for them.

It doesn't take long for the back door to bang open as Warrick charges through it. His strides eat up the space between us. His large arm wraps around my back and pulls me against his chest. I let out a yip when the air rushes out of my lungs.

"You are a naughty one," he growls as he smashes our mouths together. As our mouths dance together, he twists to sit down on the couch, forcing me to straddle him once again. "It's our turn now. No more waiting."

I already know where I want my mark. It might be out of jealousy. It could be a bit of "fuck you" to the ones before me, but there is only one place my mating mark will be. Without hesitation, I lunge for his neck, sinking my teeth into his skin, breaking the skin to ensure it permanently marks him.

His dick fills rapidly as the venom flows into him. He grinds his hips up into me, rubbing himself along my slick. My skin flushes as I imagine what I want to do next.

Warrick doesn't wait for me to finish marking him before he is shifting to thrust into me at the same time that his teeth sink into me.

My mouth jerks from his neck as I moan out his name. "Yes, fuck, that feels amazing," I chant as I bounce on his lap. I can feel the venom working its way through my system, my skin feeling hyper aware of everything around me. Where his hands are, where our bodies touch, and the friction of his movements.

"There's..." I pant as I try to gather my thoughts through the haze. "There's one more thing I want to do."

He lets go of my neck as he licks the wound he left. A Cheshire grin crosses his face right before he transforms into his humanoid form. Not even bothering to slow his ministrations as he does so.

If I thought I felt full before, it is of no comparison to now. I feel even more full than I did in his human form. So this is what stuffing feels like. The slight burn as he pumps in and out of me is so worth it. My fingers run along his gray and white fur, enjoying the feel of it under my fingers. Leaning forward to run my chest along it as he continues to thrust gives me the exact sensation I was hoping for.

His knot slams against my clit each time, pushing me further and further up. "Breed me, Warrick. Stuff your knot in and keep me from losing a single drop."

One thick furry arm wraps around my back as he holds me against his chest. A growl rumbles out of him, vibrating against my sensitive nipples as he pounds harder into me. His long tongue reaches out to run along his mark, causing my orgasm to rip through me.

The first wave crests right as he shoves his knot into me. "Oh, fuck yes. Give it to me. Fill my womb." I sound like a wanton whore, but goddess, if this isn't everything I

expected it to be.

If I thought his guttural roar during his human orgasm could shatter windows, it has nothing on his humanoid form. It vibrates through me like two boulders grinding against each other. The roar feels more wolf than man, as if the beast's side is more in control than his human side. I can feel his seed splashing along my walls. So much pouring into me that even his knot can't keep it in.

His fur is matted from our combined juices as I lean over to scoop some up with my finger. I rub it between my fingers before running them across my nipple, moaning at the idea of something else I would like to try.

My eyes catch on his as they watch me. "I can think of some other ways I want to be marked."

He shifts back to his human form so he can grab my chin in his hands, pulling my face toward his. "We won't be leaving this couch soon if you keep it up."

"Who said I wanted to leave?" I say as I grind down on his barely deflated knot.

"Alright, fuck it."

Chapter 30

Warrick

It's been a few weeks since that weekend that changed the direction of our lives. We didn't come up for air until Caelon came knocking Monday afternoon. I glanced through the peephole and saw his hand covering his eyes as he yelled through the door about needing me to come into the office. When we cracked the door open, I might have made some sexual comments to make him blush. Shit's funny and was

totally worth it. Of course, Aspen smacked me and told me to stop giving him a hard time. We were both already dressed, anyway.

We decided we would go ahead and move her into my cabin. Everyone came together to help her move her stuff and clean out her old one. We reuse cabins for the next generation as they come of age. I'm sure someone will move into it soon.

Oh yeah, Nova and Silas had the pups! Both healthy, high-strung boys who didn't take long to run their parents through. Last week during our walk, I told Silas that it looked like he was already having gray hair sprout, for which he punched me in the arm.

Thankfully, I could actually convince Aspen to take the trip to Ireland that she requested. She doesn't know it, but I already have approval from both Silas and the standing Alpha of the Irish Wolf Pack. I purchased our plane tickets this morning once the email came through and we are leaving in three months. Conall, the Alpha of the Conri na Sliabh pack, told me when the best time was to come, based on the weather.

Aspen should be home shortly from the bookstore. I have an entire dinner planned to give her the news. We are doing a candlelit dinner on a blanket in front of the fireplace. All the foods are finger foods that we can feed to each other until food isn't the focus anymore.

The full moon is tomorrow, so I plan to take full advantage of the mating heat tonight. We don't have anywhere to be until Sunday morning for the pack breakfast Nova insists on having each week now. We all drag our asses to the Pack House for our Luna, even if we would rather be sleeping.

The front door pushes open right as I am finishing placing the last few plates down on the blanket. An exhausted-looking Aspen sighs as she hangs her purse on the rung

and she toes off her boots. She sniffs the air before she turns to find me standing above our dinner.

“A girl can get spoiled by this,” she says as she makes her way around the couch to where I’m standing.

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She stands on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on my cheek before I wrap her in a hug. “That’s the goal. Spoil my girl each day that I have.”

She pulls back to glare at me. “What are you up to?”

A chuckle rumbles out of me. “What makes you think that I’m up to something?”

She holds up one finger before placing her pointer finger on top of it. “One, your heart is racing.” Her second finger pops up as she moves her finger to that. “Secondly, you didn’t make a sexual joke the night before the full moon.”

I full belly laugh at that one because she isn’t wrong.

Her third finger pops up. “While you do spoil me, even this is over the top for you.”

Trying to keep the ruse up for longer, I say, “So a man can’t step it up every once in a while for the love of his life?”

Her hands drop to her hips as she just stares at me, waiting.

“Fine, I’m up to something, but can you at least sit down for dinner first?” I ask as I move my hand over the display of food.

She huffs before plopping down on the blanket. I can’t help but smile at her fit. She has the patience of a toddler when it comes to things she wants. I love it about her and she hates I make her wait. Especially if I delay her orgasms, another fun thing I learned I love doing with her. She claims to hate it, but we both know it’s all for

show.

She snatches bits of food from each of the plates, making sure she has something on her plate. Something I've learned is her way of appeasing me while still being a brat. She sits there waiting for me to reveal her surprise.

"You know how this works, Rose."

The strawberry gushes out its juice as she takes a bite. Rolling my eyes, I pull the envelope from my back pocket. I learned along the way to pick and choose my battles. She learned to give in to my requests if she wants something as well.

My hand extends across the space between us, with the envelope dangling from my two fingers. She quickly grabs it before flipping the tab open to see the contents inside. Her face crumbles in confusion as she sees the itinerary resting in there.

"Conall, the Alpha of the Conri na Sliabh pack, emailed me back this morning. We have permission to travel to Ireland and visit their pack, just like you dreamed."

Her mouth drops open as she looks between the paper and me. "I can't believe you actually were able to get permission. What about the bookstore and the pack?"

"I already talked to Silas, and he said it was not an issue. As for the bookstore, one of our teen wolves actually volunteered because she wants to be an author when she grows up."

"Who?"

"Callista Rue."

"Ah, that is so cool! I would love to have her hang out with me until we leave. Do

you think she would be okay with that?”

I nod my head, as I knew she would say that. “Yes, of course. I told her you would want to walk her through it before we left.”

“That’s amazing. I can’t believe you were able to get all that done already. I didn’t even think you were being serious about it.”

“Very serious. But, now that you rushed the surprise, can we eat dinner?” I ask with a lift of my brow.

She laughs as she earnestly begins to eat. We spend the rest of the night discussing all the things she would like to see when we go to Ireland. I listen as I watch her animatedly explain each place, even opening her phone up to show me pictures.

I can’t help but thank the goddess for gifting me with such a precious mate. I was such an idiot for almost ruining this forever.

Aetheria

Leaning in close to the window pane, I watch as my children finally give into the gift I gave them. Warrick finally accepting the love he deserved and Aspen giving him the chance to prove himself.

It’s a beautiful sight to watch as they spend their night together. Another successful mating. Time for the next one.

In a blink, I’m outside the cabin of my next child to focus on. He is busy on his computer as he always is. A fond smile crosses my aged face. This one will be one of the most challenging as I bring him out of his shell.

Chapter 31

Caelon

Another Sunday of pack breakfast, something I don't particularly enjoy. I know Nova means well, but watching her with Silas and now Warrick with Aspen, I can't help but feel so alone. Everyone is laughing together as they fill their plates with food, while I stand in the corner waiting my turn.

I've never done well with the complexities of human interactions, especially in settings as large as this. There are far too many factors to take into consideration. I watch Xavior as he argues with Nellie again, something that is becoming another common occurrence around here.

The one light of my day is whenshecomes in, the one who fascinates me as my complete opposite.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Gail asks from beside me.

"Who?"

"You know exactly who I speak of, Caelon," she says as she turns to look toward my obsession.

"Y-yes," I stutter out.

"I'm glad you think so. You know she wants to open a photography business. I bet she could use the help of someone great with numbers." She smirks as she taps my shoulder before walking to the buffet of food.

I watch her, with her peaceful smiles and camera dangling from her neck. She always picks the honeydew melon every single week, along with the apple juice and banana nut muffin. She doesn't realize that I know her smile falters when people aren't as excited about her photos as she is. How she lights up when someone asks to see the photos. I see her. One day, I hope she sees me.

Epilogue

Warrick

Three Months Later

“Welcome to Ireland, ladies and gentlemen. The current time is 9:53 A.M., with partly cloudy skies and a brisk 67 degrees outside. The flight attendants will come through the cabin to collect all your trash as we prepare for landing.”

Aspen squeezes my hand in excitement. The last three months have been a whirlwind of preparing for our month-long trip. I still have to pinch myself to make sure it's real.

After landing and exiting the plane, we make our way to baggage claim. Aspen might have packed like she was moving here, but her argument is you never know what you are going to need. As we come down the escalator, we find a tall, bearded gentleman holding a sign with my last name on it. I give Aspen a questioning look before looking back at the man with his sharp nose and hair tightly curled against his head.

“Ms Stone.” He nods his head. “Mr. Merrit. If ye both can follow me, I'll have someone collect your luggage.”

“How will they know which ones are ours?”

“Don’t worry, Ms. Stone, they will take care of it.” He turns to head out the sliding doors.

Aspen looks at me, she asks, “Did you know we were getting a car service?”

“Sure didn’t, but how cool is that?”

“I guess. Seems a bit excessive to me.”

As we prepare to walk through yet another doorway, I look at her and she asks, “You ready?”

I smile at her before saying, "As long as I have you, I’ll always be ready for anything.”

Later that evening, as we are unpacking our bags in the room the Conri na Sliabh pack offered us, I notice Aspen has been rather quiet since we came into the room.

Moving beside her as she tucks our clothes into the dresser, I rub my hand up and down her back in a soothing motion. “Everything okay? You’ve been rather quiet since we got here.”

She looks at me with a small smile. “Yeah, everything is fine. Just been feeling a little nauseous since we got off the plane. I thought it was from jet lag, but it hasn’t let up.”

The soothing circles I’m rubbing into her back seem to work as she leans into them. “You want me to see if they have some crackers or something to help with it?”

“No, that won’t...” Aspen is cut off when there is a knock at the door.

“Odd, I didn’t think we were expecting anyone yet,” I grumble as I walk over to the door. The door swings open to reveal a rather older-looking woman with a full head of gray hair and skin aged with the passing of time. Her milky eyes move across the room until they stop on Aspen, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:49 am

“The she wolf that I was lookin’ fer.” She barely manages to get the words out before she is pushing past me to Aspen.

“Whoa ma’am, who are you?” I step in front of her with my arms held out to block her from slipping around me.

"Oi'm the pack seer, darlin'," she says as she pats my arm out of her way. "Aspen, now, she's the very wolf I'm needin' to see."

Her movements are slow but deliberate as she makes her way over to the bed to sit down next to Aspen. "Could I take a look at the palms o' yer hands?"

Aspen eyes flit between mine and this woman before she cautiously holds her hands out, palms up.

"Ah, aye, a fierce bond between the two o' ye. Not without its trials, mind. It seems the love line, it was broken, but stitched back together, so it was." She looks at me, then back down at Aspen's palm. "Many a hardship lies ahead for ye both." She pats Aspen's palm gently before looking straight into her eyes. "The biggest trial, though, is the one nestled in yer womb."

My body lurches forward as her words register. “What do you mean?” My body falls down beside Aspen’s knees as I grab her hand into mine.

The old woman places her weathered hand upon my shoulder and grasps Aspen’s other hand in hers. "She's carryin' a wee one," she says with a sad smile on her face.

Bonus Epilogue

Chase

Patrolling the roads heading up the mountain can often feel like the most boring part of my job. With as small as our town is, it's really rare that people head up this way. The most traffic I've seen today is when two cars came up about an hour ago. The one enjoyable part of it? Lots of time to read. Aspen brought over a selection of books the other day that she thought I would love.

After she accepted the mate bond with Warrick, I thought he would be rather stingy about letting me see her anymore. In some ways, I would have understood, although it would have sucked. While we weren't dating in the typical fashion, I still consider her one of my best friends.

It was turbulent the first few months after they made it official. At first, he wouldn't let me even talk to her, let alone come over to the bookstore. From what I heard, the girls all ripped into him about how I wasn't a threat to him, nor was I ever. Now, I'm allowed to visit whenever I have free time. Which is close to never, but I still check in on her during one of my work rotations.

The beat of music echoes off in the distance. My ears perk up as I try to figure out where it's coming from. It's not a regular occurrence for anyone here to blast music that loud. With all of us having keen hearing, we play music at lower volumes. Turning my head until I pinpoint the exact direction, I realize it's coming from down the mountain. Goddess, how loud are they playing the music if I can clearly hear it up here?

The volume is steadily rising as the car moves towards where I'm parked in a small pull off of the road. There is a squeezing feeling in my chest, as though someone is slowly squeezing their hand around my heart. I pat my chest where my ballistic vest sits, trying to determine where the sensation is coming from. The closer the music,

the more the squeezing sensation increases.

What is happening? I grab at the top of my vest, trying to relieve the constriction. A yellow mustang convertible comes flying around the bend below where I'm parked as streaks of blonde and brunette hair whip through the window.

My mouth is opening and closing like a fish out of the water. I feel as though I can't breathe right as the car blows past me in slow motion. It's like a movie, everything is barely moving. I can't breathe, and the driver looks at me before she winks. The nanosecond that it took for that is like a snap of the spell. Suddenly, everything is moving at normal speed as they continue up the mountain.

I have to go after her, not only is she speeding, but the pain in my chest is pulling me in the direction she left.

Starting my cruiser, I slam it into drive and push the gas pedal to the floor. It doesn't take long for my Charger to catch up to her. Flipping the switch on my dash, the light bar above me flashes blue, signalling for her to pull over.

The brunette flicks her eyes to the rear-view mirror before her turn signal lights up as she slows down. Easing her way to the side of the road, her brake lights burn bright red as she puts the car in park. My campaign cover rests in the passenger seat, where I set my recent book underneath. My hand lands on the Mountain Peak of my hat as I snatch it up.

I make quick work of stepping out of my vehicle. My chest is tightening to where I'm not sure how many words I'll be able to say. There is only one reason that I'd be feeling this way.

Stepping up to the side of her car, sea-green eyes look at me as she attempts to portray an act of innocence.

With a pull of air into my lungs, my thoughts are confirmed. “Mate.” I squeeze out with a rumble of a growl.

The End