



Beast Bear (Return To Fate Mountain #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: An independent beauty. A raging bear. And a dangerous conspiracy that will test them both.

Cougar shifter Serena Vaughn has spent years running from her past—and her father's vicious, domineering example of the mate bond. Training as a wilderness paramedic in Fate Mountain was supposed to offer her a clean slate—until a certain grizzly crosses her path. The last thing Serena needs is an unhinged, too-gorgeous mate who threatens her hard-won independence.

Theo Keenan walked away from celebrity-chef stardom after losing control of his inner bear one too many times. Now his ferocious grizzly roars to protect anyone in danger—especially his curvy, reluctant mate. He's determined to claim Serena's heart and prove he's no monster, even as she resists the magnetic pull between them.

When faulty gear and rigged ropes endanger lives, these two shifters must team up to stop a hidden enemy targeting the academy. As scandal swirls and trust is tested, can Serena face her deepest fears, and can Theo keep his raging bear in check? Only their fated connection can save them—and Fate Mountain itself.

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Chapter

One

Grizzly shifter Theo Keenan grabbed his duffel bag and headed to the hallway of his parents' two-story house. Family photos lined the walls leading downstairs. He paused at one snapshot of himself at nineteen, proudly wearing a harness from his first mountain-climbing course. That was seventeen years ago. Before he'd spent more than a decade cooking in some of the top restaurants in the Pacific Northwest. Long before the catastrophic events that finally drove him back home.

He rubbed a faint scar along his forearm, the spot where a bullet had grazed him during a bank robbery in Portland. He still saw the terrified face of the little girl, held at gunpoint by desperate criminals, and remembered how his grizzly had burst out in a frenzy to protect her. That feral urge was still like a curse under his skin, ready to erupt if he ever lost focus.

The city had been good for Theo, until it wasn't. He'd soared to culinary stardom, piling up awards and money. After the bank standoff, local headlines hailed him a hero, but over the following months, he'd started to lose control of his inner beast. He started half-shifting at parties, snapping at his staff, raging at the slightest injustice he witnessed on the street. All the while, he was haunted by nightmares of that little girl's terrified eyes.

He passed through the living room, guided by the scent of coffee and breakfast. In the kitchen, Shane Keenan flipped sausage in a pan while simultaneously stirring batter in a bowl.

“You look busy,” Theo said to his dad. “Need help?”

Shane looked over his shoulder and smiled. “Didn’t I teach you all your cooking skills, kid?”

Theo managed a small laugh. “I picked up some new tricks in Portland, but nobody does breakfast like you.”

Theo had been crashing in his parents’ guest room for the last month, hoping he could somehow suppress his unhinged bear in these familiar mountains. Theo set his duffel bag on the floor and looked around the kitchen. His gaze drifted to a fridge plastered with magnets, new recipes, and photos. One snapshot showed him as a kid clinging to his mother’s hand. Lily had raised him on her own until he was five.

The photo was a reminder that his wild side had been uncontrollable as a little kid. Back then, he’d scared his kindergarten teachers and babysitters with his erratic shifts. Then Shane came back into their lives, and it hadn’t been a smooth transition. Theo still remembered the day he’d run off into the mountains, wild and confused. It had forced his parents to finally confront their own issues.

Lily sipped her coffee and then picked up a chopping knife to finish slicing strawberries for the muffin batter. “I’m glad you’re back on Fate Mountain, Theo,” she said. “We missed having both our kids around.” She offered him a warm smile. “So... any luck on mate.com?”

He shrugged. The last thing he needed was a mate to confuse his already unhinged grizzly. He still feared his beast might lash out at the slightest trigger. The night he’d lost control in a city park had nearly ruined his life. His bear had torn out of him when he’d witnessed a man following a woman in the dark. That had been enough to trigger his beast into an uncontrolled shift. He’d terrorized several groups of humans and ended up tranquilized and arrested.

A scathing newspaper article put an end to the public perception of him as a hero. He didn't lose his job, but he couldn't stand the look of fear in the eyes of his staff or the people who recognized him on the street. He had to change everything after that. His new job at the Fate Mountain Wilderness Academy would be enough to focus on for the foreseeable future. He couldn't have a mate getting in the way of his recovery.

Shane took the strawberries from Lily. He folded them into the batter, poured the mixture into a muffin tin, and slid it into the oven. Shane then turned his attention back to the sausages sizzling on the stove. "If you really want to help," he teased, "you can set the table."

After the table was set and the food was plated, the three of them settled in for breakfast. As they ate, Theo's mind drifted back to a time when his young inner bear believed living wild was better than living by rules he didn't understand. Even after his father had promised he'd always be there for him, Theo had fought the wild stirring within him. He'd struggled with controlling his inner bear through his childhood. But in his teens, he'd been able to finally master his shifts. He hadn't had a problem with this inner beast until the event in the bank.

"So," Lily said, tidying the plates. "You're sure you're happy leaving all your culinary fame and fancy apartment in the city?" The timer chimed, and Lily took the muffins out of the oven.

"I learned a lot in Portland, but it was time to come home. The job at the Fate Mountain Wilderness Academy seems perfect. I'll have my own cabin in the woods, manage all food services for the academy, and help with wilderness tasks when needed."

Lily carefully packed the warm muffins into a container and pressed it into Theo's hands. "We made you these muffins as a housewarming gift."

Theo took the container of muffins, giving his mom's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Thank you, Mom, Dad. Letting me stay here these last few weeks has meant the world to me. I'll be eternally grateful for you letting me crash in your guest room." He grabbed his duffle bag.

"Any time, son," his dad said. His parents ushered him through the living room and out to the porch.

He gave his parents each a hug. Lily reminded him to visit soon, and Shane told him to stay grounded and trust his skills. Their confidence in him felt good.

He drove off, muffins perched on the passenger seat. The winding road led him through dense pines and rocky outcroppings. But the lush forest of his youth couldn't banish the churning sense that his bear was beyond salvation. More than once in the last several weeks, Theo had woken up at dawn, clothes torn and memories scattered. If he couldn't handle his impulses, how could he trust himself with anything?

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Chapter

Two

Cougar shifter Serena Vaughn walked into her motel room and closed the door behind her. She set her single suitcase on the thin carpet. The space was cramped but functional, with dull curtains and a small television on a wooden dresser. It was late afternoon, and the fading sunlight through the window reminded her that she would be starting a new job at Fate Mountain Wilderness Academy in the morning.

She dropped her keys on a table near the bed, then sank onto the edge of the mattress. The room felt still in a way that pressed on her nerves. She had spent years as a traveling paramedic, picking up contracts in different cities and never staying long. It was a lifestyle that kept her free, but tonight, she felt more restless than ever.

She pulled the academy brochure out of her bag. The front cover showed a photo of climbing ropes arranged in neat lines. The print read Paramedic Rescue Training. It was exactly the kind of hands-on, intense environment she loved.

Fate Mountain's reputation for fated mates gnawed at her nerves, a faint echo of fairy-tale endings that once made her roll her eyes as a kid. She had seen a billboard for the famous shifter dating app mate.com on her way into town. She thought of her mother's haunted stare. It reminded her that beasts existed in real life—and sometimes the mate bond was more like a cage.

She flipped the brochure shut and set it aside, deciding she needed something to eat. A quick search on her phone led her to Fate Mountain Diner's online menu. She

phoned in a delivery order for dinner—a double bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a strawberry shake. Twenty minutes later, she heard a knock on the door. The delivery driver handed her a drink cup and a brown paper bag that smelled like heaven.

She thanked the driver, closed the door, and set the bag on the small table. She pulled out her meal and flicked on the television. The local news droned in the background, showing images of Fate Mountain's scenic trails and a farmer's market. Serena popped a fry in her mouth, opened her burger, and took a bite. The cheesy bacon burger slid over her tongue, and she groaned with delight.

She relaxed as she took a long swig of strawberry shake and watched the news anchors banter. Her thoughts began to wander. She thought of her parents' mate bond. Her father, a dragon shifter, had dominated her cougar shifter mother through their unbreakable connection.

He'd bent her mother to his will, leaving her spirit fractured. Serena had grown up watching the exhaustion in her mother's eyes. She couldn't imagine handing her life over to anyone after witnessing that.

By the time she finished her meal, the daylight outside had faded entirely. She cleared the takeout garbage off the table, then flipped channels until she found a rerun of an old detective show. It wasn't that interesting, but it offered a brief distraction to keep her from spiraling.

After a few scenes, she clicked off the TV and decided she needed a hot shower to wash away the sweat of her drive north. In the bathroom, she turned on the hot water and stripped out of her clothes.

A moment later, she stepped into the shower and stood under the warm stream. The motel shampoo smelled faintly of lavender as she squeezed it into her hand. She lathered it into her hair and as she rinsed out the suds, a flutter of sensation ran

through her.

It reminded her just how long it had been since anyone had touched her. Almost six years, she thought, surprised at the number. She'd spent countless nights on the road, no place to call home, no one to hold her. She inhaled and exhaled slowly, reminding herself that she had chosen this path for a reason.

She turned off the tap and stepped out onto the small bathmat, droplets sliding over her muscled curves. She toweled off, slipped into clean pajamas, and combed out her long, dark hair. She returned to the bedroom and settled onto the bed.

On a whim, she reached for her phone, thinking again of the billboard for mate.com. She had avoided the app for years, but the loneliness in her chest nagged at her tonight. Telling herself it was only for curiosity's sake, she searched for the app.

As it downloaded onto her phone, she read the description. It stated that mate.com's questionnaire could pinpoint fated mates with perfect accuracy. When it finished downloading, she opened the app and was asked to start an account. Her hands shook as she entered her details and a few quick answers about her personal preferences.

One question in particular made her smile. "If you were a vegetable, what would you be?" She laughed under her breath.

After a moment of thought, she typed "kale." It was hardy and kept growing through cold spells, a plant known for its resilience despite rough conditions. It reminded her of how she wanted to stay strong in any situation.

She moved on to the next prompts, finishing each answer as honestly as she could manage. Finally, she pressed "submit," her pulse jumping at the thought that an algorithm might link her to her fated mate.

A notification blinked across the screen: 100% Match. Beast Bear. 36. Grizzly Shifter. Chef. Portland, Oregon. His profile showed him in a crisp black chef's coat embroidered with the name Theo.

"Beast Bear," she gasped, eyes narrowing at the broad-shouldered figure in the sleek chef's coat. He stood in front of a sleek, modern kitchen, large windows behind him revealing the city skyline at night. The image looked like a professional headshot. His face was open and friendly, framed by cropped, light brown hair.

He looked successful and grounded in his life, but she glimpsed an undercurrent of danger in his hazel eyes. She closed the app, tossing the phone aside. She wasn't naive. If this "Beast Bear" expected her to roll over for him, he had another thing coming. She didn't mind a bit of danger—her entire career revolved around diving headlong into emergencies—but she refused to tangle with any shifter who might dominate her spirit the way her father had dominated her mother.

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Chapter

Three

Theo Keenan followed the path through the staff housing and onto the main grounds, his bear churning inside him with restless energy. He was still reeling from the mate.com notification he'd received last night. "Congratulations! We've found your fated mate."

His mind kept returning to that single word: mate. For a regular shifter, it would be cause for celebration. But he couldn't forget how easily his beast had nearly destroyed his life once before. Now the idea of showing this woman the beast beneath his skin made his gut clench.

Her profile name was "Medic Girl." She was thirty-three, a cougar shifter, and a traveling paramedic. Her photo was breathtaking. She was standing near the San Francisco Bay, the coastal wind sending strands of her black hair skimming across her cheek. She wore slim-fitting jeans and a lightweight jacket, and the way she angled toward the camera revealed a curvy, athletic frame.

Distracted by the memory, he stopped on the walkway outside the admin building and opened the app on his phone. He scrolled to her photo and took in the look in her brown eyes. She stared straight at the lens with a calm, steady gaze that said, "I fear nothing."

Everything about her called to him, from the slight curve of her smile to the determined tilt of her chin. Even the casual outfit modestly revealed her tantalizing

curves. He wanted to know everything about her—her favorite foods, the music she listened to, why she'd become a paramedic. He'd sent her a text almost as soon as he could open the app. But even after eight hours of waiting, she still hadn't responded.

He pushed open the doors to the admin building, entering a bright, airy lobby. Sunlight poured through large windows, reflecting off polished wood floors. A bulletin board displayed a colorful spread of announcements and schedules. At the far side was a sturdy wood counter.

In his early twenties, Theo had received an advanced Search and Rescue certification at the academy. That was before he'd gone to study culinary arts in Seattle and Portland. Now he'd be working as the head of Food Services for the academy and as an on-call SAR. Since he and his father both had a long history with Search and Rescue on Fate Mountain, the academy had been willing to overlook the park incident. But Theo was well aware that his uncontrolled shifts were a liability waiting to happen.

Theo walked through the double doors into the reception hall. Today was new trainee orientation for the summer course. Theo had been invited to attend so that as head of food services, he understood the trainees' summer model schedules.

Poppy Miller stepped up to a podium on a small stage. Poppy was the academy's head administrator and the woman who had hired him. "Welcome everyone," she began, smiling at the room as the trainees filed in. "Orientation packets with your names on them are stacked on the side tables. Inside, you'll find a campus map, course schedules, and housing assignments. Once everyone is settled in, you'll hear from our course coordinator, Kai Morrow."

After grabbing their packets, trainees filled the rows of seats facing the stage. Poppy stepped down, and Kai took her place behind the podium. Theo sat in the back row, his gaze moving over the gathering crowd. There was a large turnout for the session.

Theo noticed Morgan Delgado scowling at Kai. Morgan was the academy's equipment manager. Theo had met him briefly yesterday when the man had been complaining about gear budgets while Poppy gave him a tour of the cafeteria kitchen.

“Good morning, everyone. Welcome to Fate Mountain Wilderness Training Academy. For the late summer session, we're offering a full range of courses—Backcountry 101, Search & Rescue (SAR) Operations, Rope Climbing I and Rope Rescue I. Plus our Paramedic Integration with our Wilderness First Responder Certification.”

After Kai completed the rundown of the training course certifications, Logan Carter, the lead climbing and rafting instructor, took the podium. Logan was a jaguar shifter who Theo had trained with back in the day.

“Morning everyone,” Logan started. “I'm your climbing and rafting instructor. We have some exciting models this summer. In Rope Climbing I, you'll learn anchor-building, belay systems, and safe edge transitions. You can simultaneously enroll in Rope Rescue I, which covers multi-pitch work and highline systems. Make sure to double check with Kai which track you are on. For the rafting modules, we have White Water II and Water Rescue I. Alright, now let's hear from our Paramedic Integration Coordinator, Alicia Reeves.”

Alicia, a stout woman with dark hair pulled back in a bun, took the stage. “I am thrilled to have so many Paramedic Integration trainees in the course this round. We combine our rescue and wilderness coursework with paramedic response training, which will earn you a Wilderness First Responder Certification.”

Jade Rivers took the podium and gave a rundown of her orienteering classes. Theo's eyes flicked around the room, his mind wandering. He'd taken most of these classes, except the new paramedic integration, when he was in his twenties. As much as he wanted to be interested in what was happening on stage, his mind couldn't stop

spiraling about his mate.

Then he saw her. Medic Girl.

She was scanning her info packet in a chair near the front row. His inner bear sent a surge of adrenaline through his veins. Mate. Mate. Mate. The grizzly within roared. Heat rushed through him, and a trickle of sweat ran down his temple.

For a split second, he felt himself losing control. Fur bristled along his arms. He clenched his fists, and his claws scraped under the chair. He tried to remind himself to stay calm, but he could barely contain himself through the rest of the orientation. When it was complete, Kai invited the trainees to introduce themselves.

Finally regaining a sense of calm, Theo gathered his courage and approached Medic Girl. She looked up, and their eyes locked. “It’s you. Medic Girl. I’m Theo Keenan. Beast Bear.” He offered her his hand. She hesitated, then took it. An electric current ran up his arm and through his entire body. His inner bear roared with need. “I sent you a message on mate.com last night,” he said, voice rough.

A swirl of conflicting emotions danced in her gaze as she pulled her hand away. “Theo... My fated mate... I’m Serena.” She trailed off, her eyes going glassy.

His chest tightened. Don’t drive her away. Don’t shift, he practically chanted in his head. But the beast in him wanted to grab her hand again, desperate to kiss her.

“What brings you to Fate Mountain Wilderness Academy, Serena? I just started as head cook and on-call rescue crew,” he blurted out.

“I’m here for the Paramedic Rescue Training.”

Before either of them could delve further, Alicia Reeves, the Paramedic Training

supervisor, stepped over to greet Serena and welcome her to paramedic training.

When Alicia moved on, Serena turned back to him, glancing around the hall. “I know we connected on the app, but I’m not sure if this is the best time. I signed up on a whim. I didn’t expect...”

Theo felt a pang of desperation. “I understand. The academy is intense.”

She gave a small nod. “I came here for paramedic training, not...” She let the sentence trail off again, but he got the message. The mate bond was not something she was eager to explore.

Logan Carter took the floor for a moment and announced that anyone curious about the climbing tower could join him outside for a short tour. Theo wanted to invite Serena to explore the grounds together but worried he would seem overeager. She held his glance, then offered a polite smile.

“I’ll see you around, maybe,” she said. Her voice wavered, and he picked up on the tension in her tone. Before he could reply, she stepped toward the exit.

Her retreating figure left a hollow ache in his gut. He knew he should let her walk away. But the primal part of him, the part he couldn’t tame, ached to claim her as his own. He clenched his fists, resolved to keep his wild side under control. But a snarling voice inside him whispered that if he lost her now, he’d remain a beast in the shadows forever.

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Chapter

Four

Serena hefted her backpack and looked up at the towering climbing wall. It stood starkly against the bright morning sky. Half a dozen trainees gathered in a loose circle around Logan Carter, the academy's lead climbing instructor. Travis Li, a young trainee she'd met yesterday, knelt on the hard-packed dirt, practicing a figure-eight knot on a neatly coiled rope. He glanced up, grinning wide when he saw Serena, proudly holding up his finished work.

Logan raised his voice to catch everyone's attention. "Welcome to Rope Rescue I. Today we focus on fundamentals: harness safety, belaying, and top-rope climbing."

Logan passed out harnesses and then demonstrated how to put them on, threading and double-backing the waist belt, then locking each carabiner. Two trainees tried mimicking his steps, fumbling a little.

Logan turned to the group. "Always do a buddy check," he said, gesturing for two trainees to inspect each other's belts and carabiners. "Skipping that step might cost a life." He caught Serena's eye. "Same principle as paramedic gear checks, right?"

She nodded. "Exactly. If we skip verifying our ambulance equipment, we might discover a missing defibrillator battery mid-call. A single oversight can be fatal."

Alicia Reeves stepped forward. "For Paramedic Integration, we'll adapt these rope skills for real scenarios. That means hauling injured patients on a litter or rappelling

in with a medical pack. Weight balance becomes critical.”

Alicia held up a set of compact mechanical devices. “These are ascenders. If a paramedic needs to reach an injured hiker perched above, this can help you bypass a blocked route. Each tug slides you higher up the rope, and it locks to prevent slipping back.”

Alicia demonstrated with smooth, practiced motions. Serena watched, fascinated by how the mechanism latched onto the rope. She imagined hauling a trauma kit while inching upward along the wall.

Alicia pointed to a staff member at the top of the wall who leaned back in a controlled rappel. “With extra gear, your center of gravity shifts. If you panic mid-rappel, you risk dropping equipment—and possibly your patient.”

Serena’s pulse quickened at the demonstration. She recalled frantic city calls in narrow stairwells, but never open air beneath her feet. Sensing her tension, Alicia offered a reassuring smile. “Respect for heights is healthy. Overconfidence kills.”

Logan explained how top-rope setups gave trainees a forgiving margin for error, unlike real field rescues where anchors might be improvised. One trainee clipped in and began ascending while another acted as belayer, managing rope tension below. The trainee’s nervous laugh as she inched upward mirrored Serena’s own excitement.

Serena stepped up to the wall next, her heart thrumming as she double-checked her harness clips and chalked her palms. Travis, who’d been assigned as her buddy, stood at the base, belay device secured. He gave her a reassuring nod.

Serena started up the wall slowly, testing each foothold before shifting her weight. With every pull of her arms and push of her legs, she gained confidence. Below, Travis kept the rope taut but flexible, calling out occasional tips when she hesitated.

“Left foot on the green hold, Serena! There you go!”

Each time she inched higher, the tension of the rope in Travis’s capable hands reminded her she wasn’t alone in this climb. A surge of appreciation welled up—this was teamwork in its purest form, and it ignited that same calm focus she relied on when tending to patients under pressure. Step by step, her nerves eased, replaced by a quiet thrill of accomplishment.

Pausing halfway to catch her breath, Serena looked down to see Travis maintaining a perfect belay stance, his gaze tracking her every move. When she made the final push and tapped the anchor at the crest, a wave of triumph rippled through her. She glanced down, meeting Travis’s eyes. In that moment, with her muscles burning and the mountain air filling her lungs, she felt exhilarated, like she was exactly where she needed to be.

After about an hour of top-rope practice and belay drills, they progressed to a short rappel practice, guided by the calm yet firm voices of Logan and Alicia. The staff set up a designated rappel lane on the right side of the wall, complete with an overhead anchor and a thick rope threaded through a solid belay device.

A few rubber mats lay at the bottom to cushion the final step-off. One by one, the trainees stepped to the edge, some blanching at the abrupt drop. Others, too eager, bounced too hard against the wall, turning the exercise into a clumsy pendulum.

When Serena’s turn came, her heart hammered as she approached the ledge. The sun was high enough now that it cast a mild glare across the top, and the sudden exposure made her legs tingle. Alicia clipped Serena’s harness into the rappel rope, reminding her to center her weight and keep her descent hand firmly on the rope behind her hip. “Your right hand controls everything,” Alicia said quietly, tapping Serena’s gloved palm. “If you let go or grip too loosely, you risk a freefall—so keep that friction.”

Her pulse thrummed as she tested her first foothold. The thought of finding her mate here at the academy flashed through her mind, and her legs wobbled. Theo's beast might be as overbearing as her father, and she was no one's captive. Yet she couldn't silence her inner cougar's desire for a mate.

Serena inhaled, leaning back until the rope took her full weight. The harness dug into her waist and thighs, unfamiliar pressure points that felt both reassuring and restrictive. She forced her eyes down, spotting Logan at the base, offering her a nod. Around her, the hiss of another trainee's rope provided a steady soundtrack. "Deep breath," Alicia reminded.

Lowering herself inch by inch, Serena marveled at how simple motions could feel so monumental. Every slight slackening of her hand let the rope feed through the device, sending a tremor of adrenaline up her arms. Her boots squeaked against the climbing wall's panels, searching for footholds as she walked backward. The first few steps felt shaky, and she bounced, smacking her left knee. She gritted her teeth and paused, adjusting her stance.

"You're doing fine," Alicia called from above, voice firm yet encouraging.

Serena swallowed, focusing on her descent hand. She locked it fully to halt her motion, then released tension little by little. The rope slid again, more controlled this time. Her feet found a good angle, and she began a steadier rhythm—bend the knees, ease off with the brake hand, take a measured backward step. Despite the tension in her shoulders, a flicker of confidence bloomed.

Roughly halfway down, she dared to glance at her surroundings. The late morning light bathed the field, and she caught glimpses of the other trainees practicing knots or sipping water. Her earlier fear shifted into a cautious thrill. If she could handle this controlled environment, she could someday manage a real wilderness rescue.

Finally, the rubber mats grew larger in her vision. She flexed her right hand more firmly, slowing to an almost halt, then leaned her legs against the wall to land softly. Logan stepped in to steady her. “Nice job,” he said, giving her harness a quick check. “You had a shaky start, but you adapted. That’s what matters.”

Serena exhaled as a wave of relief and pride washed over her. Her limbs felt light, buzzing with the aftershock of adrenaline. She glanced up at Alicia, who offered a thumbs up from the top. She unclipped from the rope and stepped aside.

Some trainees froze at the edge, breathing hard, while others over-bounced off the wall. Logan and Alicia circled among them, adjusting harness loops, coaching hand positions, and offering a “Well done!” to those who landed softly.

After everyone finished, Logan projected his voice over the clank of gear. “That’s all for now. Great work, everyone. Rope Rescue I continues tomorrow, same time.”

Serena walked away from the climbing wall with stiff legs and a fluttery sense of accomplishment. She felt the pleasant ache of hard work in her shoulders. Her stomach growled as she neared the cafeteria building, and she shifted her daypack on her shoulder with a weary sigh.

Her phone vibrated inside the pack. She stopped and pulled out her phone. Theo’s mate.com username lit up the screen. He had sent a friendly message, inviting her to a picnic lunch. He said he was done with his food prep and had a few hours off. The text mentioned that he saw her at the climbing wall and that she deserved something special after all that effort.

Her heart gave a small thump. She had told herself she would keep her distance, but the invitation made her inner cougar stir with restless energy. She hesitated, staring at the phone with her thumbs poised above the keyboard. Her stomach rumbled again, reminding her she was too hungry to think straight. She read his words once more,

feeling both flattered and apprehensive. He was suggesting they get to know each other, and part of her wanted to run in the opposite direction. Another part of her was already itching to accept.

She took a breath and typed a short reply. She paused, then deleted a few words, frowning at how uncertain she felt. In the end, she settled on the simplest truth. “Sounds good. I’m starving. Where should we meet?” She added a small smiley face before hitting send. A rush of something like relief coursed through her. It felt good to say yes, even if it left her oddly vulnerable.

Theo’s answer arrived almost immediately. He told her to meet him in the meadow by the big oak tree near the field pavilion. She imagined the spot, picturing the lush grass. Her cheeks warmed as she thought about sharing a picnic lunch there with him. At the same time, she couldn’t help feeling like she was walking into a prison sentence.

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Chapter

Five

Serena followed a gently winding path to the edge of the meadow. In the distance, she spotted a grand oak tree. Theo knelt on a picnic blanket in a cool patch of shade under the canopy. Sunbeams slipped through the leaves, dancing across his face in shifting speckles of light. As she crossed the field, she inhaled the aroma of sweet clover, mingling with the scent of multicolored wildflowers.

As she approached, she noticed a wicker basket beside him. “Hey,” he said, standing. “Thank you for coming.”

“I was on my way to lunch when you messaged me. I figured... why not?” She gave him a slight smile.

Theo rose to greet her, his gaze intense—pupils dilating in a way that made Serena’s inner cougar growl. Though he wore a warm smile, she caught a hint of restlessness in his stance, like he was bracing for something.

Theo offered her a seat, opening the wicker basket. He pulled out containers that held fresh salads with mixed greens, crisp cucumbers, and sliced cherry tomatoes. Theo then retrieved two hearty sandwiches layered with roast beef and melted cheese. He arranged it all neatly on the picnic blanket.

She settled across from him as birds sang in the tree branches above. “So, your profile said you lived in Portland?”

“I just moved home to Fate Mountain,” Theo said. “Hadn’t updated the profile yet.”

She saw a flicker of something intense in his eyes. Before she even took a bite of her lunch, her inner cougar screamed.

Mate. Mate. Mate.

The words rumbled through her, coiling low in her belly and making her skin tingle with longing. Instinct told her that this man was hers, whispering that he belonged to her the way her claws and fangs did. Her heart thumped hard, torn between the sudden rush of desire and her fear of connection.

His pupils flickered from hazel to something darker—almost black around the rims—and his canines looked just a fraction too sharp when he spoke. Her pulse thudded in her ears, and for a fleeting moment, the entire meadow seemed to fade into the background. She realized he was about to move closer, and she found herself leaning in too, compelled by an unmistakable spark that felt undeniably real.

Desire surged through her in an unstoppable wave, making every ounce of caution vanish under the raw need to be near him. He hesitated for a heartbeat, then bridged the distance, pressing his lips gently against hers before slowly deepening the kiss. A bolt of electricity shot down her spine, making every nerve tingle.

She let out a soft, involuntary sound as he slipped one hand around her waist, drawing her closer. The lingering brush of his tongue against her lower lip sparked a flash of arousal deep in her belly. Her inner cougar roared in approval, a primal surge that made her toes curl and her breath hitch in her throat.

But the moment his lips shifted to her neck, something changed. His grip on her waist tightened; a low rumble reverberated against her collarbone. His hot breath fanned across her skin, sending a shiver down her spine. A sudden scrape of teeth grazed the

sensitive spot at the crook of her neck. The slight pressure made her heart lurch. She felt his nails dig into her hip, lengthening as though claws were emerging.

Her breath caught. One second, she'd been lost in the taste of him—now she realized he was very close to breaking skin. So close to taking the mating bite, binding her to him forever. “Theo, stop!” she gasped, forcing her palms against his chest. She shoved him back, heart pounding. The primal fire in his eyes flickered, equal parts longing and savagery.

Panting, Theo recoiled, stumbling backward. His eyes still gleamed with predatory intensity. “Go,” he growled, his voice rough. He raked a hand through his hair, as though physically battling his bear from taking over entirely. “Please go before I do something I’ll regret.”

She blinked, shock rippling through her. “This was a mistake,” she sniped, voice shaking. She stood on unsteady legs and stumbled away, pulse roaring in her ears. The last thing she saw before she fled was Theo hunched on the blanket, eyes squeezed shut in torment, his fists white-knuckled with the effort to hold back the beast inside him.

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Chapter

Six

Theo stepped into the academy's kitchen, forcing a smile he didn't feel. After what happened with Serena, he couldn't shake the sense that he was a doomed, cursed monster. Every moment of the failed date replayed in his head. From his hunger to claim her, to her startled retreat.

He called his staff together for a quick review of the dinner plan. Several cooks and assistants gathered around the stainless-steel prep counters. He outlined the menu. Despite his calm tone, it felt like he was playing the gracious host while a feral creature lurked inside, ready to snarl at the slightest provocation.

When he finished speaking, a sous-chef asked for clarification on the spaghetti sauce. Theo started to answer, then felt a sudden surge of agitation. The memory of Serena's distressed face came rushing back. His inner bear snarled inside his mind. He paused and drew in a deep breath. His voice nearly cracked when he finished his explanation.

The line cook beside him dropped a pan, and a low growl caught in Theo's throat before he stifled it. The staff looked on warily, and he realized they must see a flicker of the untamed power he tried so hard to hide. He realized in that moment that he was on the edge of losing control.

He managed to mutter an excuse about needing a break, then headed out the back door. Outside, he leaned against the wall and tried to slow his breathing. The memory of Serena's alarmed face played over and over, like a haunted melody. She hadn't

even eaten her lunch. A wave of regret and heartbreak coursed through him. The bear inside him roared, flooding his veins with restless energy.

Before he could pull himself back, the shift began. His muscles tensed, and fur sprouted along his arms. The world blurred for a moment as bones and tendons reformed in a flash of raw power. When his vision refocused, he was on all fours.

The kitchen and the staff were forgotten in a rush of feral emotion. A deep, ragged snarl tore from his throat as he thundered into the forest. The last rays of sunlight painted the pine trees in gold, but he barely registered the beauty. All he could feel was the frenzied need to escape his own torment.

With each lunge of his massive paws, pine needles and loose soil scattered. Branches snapped under his weight; low-hanging limbs cracked against his shoulders. He roared again, a raw, savage sound that echoed through the woods like a living storm. It felt like retreating into the only place where a beast truly belonged—deep in the shadows.

He wanted to outrun the shame and longing that gnawed at him. Adrenaline flooded his veins, urging him to move faster, to tear through every obstacle in his path, as if speed and destruction could purge the fury inside him.

He churned up the undergrowth, muzzle damp with exertion, breath snarling between bared teeth. For a moment, he lost himself entirely, consumed by a wild fury that turned the forest into a blur of greens and golds. Only the rhythmic burn in his muscles reminded him that he was still real, still alive—and still caught in the grip of a beast he couldn't tame.

He had no idea how long he ran through the forest, as the sun set behind the mountain. A sudden jolt of awareness made him slow. He smelled fear. His ears twitched as he heard anxious voices. Ahead, two hikers stood off the path in the

fading twilight.

Theo realized they were lost. He lumbered closer, aware that his massive bear shape might terrify them. They glanced in his direction and froze, fear scenting the air. His first instinct was to run deeper into the forest—hide from the panic in their eyes—yet a sliver of clarity pierced the haze of wild emotion. They were vulnerable, stranded, and his conscience wouldn't let him abandon them.

He let out a huff, backing off and searching for cover behind a wide tree. His chest heaved, adrenaline still hammering through his veins. Leaning against the rough bark, he wrestled with every rapid breath, forcing himself to remember why he needed to shift back.

For several agonizing moments, his resolve to help overpowered the instinct to flee. Gritting his teeth, he clung to the thought of guiding them to safety. Slowly, painfully, the rush of fur receded, and bones and muscles reshaped. He had to brace one hand against the ground as his limbs shrank back to human proportions. His entire body shuddered with the effort of reining in his beast.

Once the transformation settled, he called out to the lost hikers. “Hi there. Are you lost? I work at Fate Mountain Wilderness Academy. I’m a shifter. I was out here in bear form.”

“You’re from the academy?” one said. “Thank goodness. We got lost just before sundown. The trail markers must have been mislabeled.”

Theo felt a stab of guilt, thinking about the time. He knew dinner service was well underway. “I’ll guide you back. You can follow me.”

“Thank you so much,” the hikers said.

He crouched behind the tree again and let his bear form roll across his skin. Within moments, he was a powerful grizzly once more. He knew he looked like a terrifying monster to humans. But when he revealed himself, they gladly followed him back down the trail.

He led them through the woods, navigating by scent and memory, until the academy's outer lights came into view. A sense of urgency nagged at him. Dinner service was in progress, and he had abandoned his station.

Soon, they emerged from the tree line. The hikers thanked him, chattering excitedly as they made their way to the administrative building. He rushed back to his cabin, changed, and ducked back into the kitchen. His eyes swept the room, expecting chaos. Instead, the staff had kept things rolling without him.

He stood frozen for a moment, torn between relief and guilt. He might have done a good deed by helping those hikers, but in the end, he'd proved his beast side was a liability—pulling him away from the job he was hired to do.

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Chapter

Seven

Serena stepped onto the training field, trying to shake off the lingering unease from her terrible date with Theo. Theo's teeth had grazed her pulse point. If he'd managed to bite her, it could have locked her into a mate bond without her consent.

She shook her head, trying to focus on what had brought her to the academy. It wasn't to get trapped into a doomed relationship like her parents. Day two of Rope Rescue I was about to begin. She gripped her small daypack, mentally running through the scenarios outlined in her training packet.

Morgan Delgado, the equipment manager, was arguing with a junior instructor at the base of the tower. "If you read these logs," he said, voice taut with anger, "you can see the exact place where the gear was flagged. Yet no one took action. That is unacceptable."

A few trainees passing by exchanged uneasy glances. Logan Carter emerged from behind a canvas tent and walked over to Morgan. "We can talk about the rope logs. Let's not turn this into a shouting match before training even starts."

"Talk?" Morgan repeated, waving his folder again. "I have been talking for weeks. We're cutting corners on equipment, ignoring flagged ropes, and you want to have a polite conversation? A disaster is looming if we continue this penny-pinching."

Logan sighed. "I hear you... Recruitment is down. Talk to Poppy about the funding

issues.”

Morgan interrupted. “Logan, you are the climbing instructor, you need to take real steps to fix this.” He stomped off, leaving a hush in his wake.

Logan cleared his throat and gestured to the trainees gathered near the tower. “Everyone,” he said, projecting his voice so it carried across the field, “let’s have a quick briefing. Day one was about fundamentals. Day two will be more advanced. I need everyone focused. Harness checks, belay commands, and stable anchor setups remain vital.”

Serena noticed some glances among the trainees, and she could sense they felt on edge. Alicia, her paramedic instructor, waved to Serena and two other paramedic trainees.

Once they gathered, Alicia spoke in a low voice. “We’ll be rotating roles between belayer, rescuer, and on-site medic. In a real scenario, you’ll need to be prepared to handle injuries mid-wall. And don’t hesitate to call for assistance if you need it.”

Serena nodded. “Understood,” she said.

The group dispersed, and Serena paired with another trainee for a warm-up climb. She belayed without issue, the rope slipping neatly through her hands as her partner scaled the tower. Across the way, Logan coached a team on tying knots, emphasizing how critical it was to secure them properly under load.

Travis Li climbed to a designated ledge where a dummy had been placed to mimic an injured climber. As he shifted his weight onto the rope to secure the dummy, a sharp snapping sound rang out. The rope near his waist frayed alarmingly, leaving strands nearly severed. Travis let out a startled yell, clinging to the wall with white-knuckled hands. Serena’s stomach dropped.

Logan's voice tore through the air. "Backup line now!" he commanded. "Everybody stay calm."

Logan worked with swift efficiency, tying a figure-eight and anchoring it to a stable point, while Alicia and another trainee braced the line from below. Travis, though trembling, managed to shift his weight onto the backup rope. Within seconds, they lowered him gently to the grass.

Alicia crouched next to him. "Any pain?" she pressed. "Shoulder strain? Ankle twist?"

Travis shook his head, visibly shaken. "I think I'm just a little bruised," he stammered. He lifted his gaze to the tower. "The rope felt fine a second ago. Then it just snapped."

Serena followed his line of sight and saw the end of the rope dangling in the breeze. Her breath caught at how close Travis had come to a serious fall.

Course coordinator Kai Morrow stepped onto the training field. "What happened here?" He glanced around, looking for answers.

"We're trying to figure that out," Logan said.

Alicia ushered everyone to the base of the tower and then unhooked the damaged line. Alicia and Logan laid the rope out on the grass. Serena hovered beside them, her heart still pounding. She studied the tear in the rope, noticing how clean and precise it seemed.

Logan's face went pale. "This isn't normal wear and tear. Friction doesn't do this," he said, pointing to the torn fibers. "Normal wear leaves frays along a length. This is almost like it was cut in a single spot."

Alicia nodded gravely. “I agree,” she said. “This looks deliberate.”

Kai folded his arms. “Didn’t Morgan check this rope?”

Logan sighed, glancing at Alicia. “Morgan had a meltdown this morning,” he murmured, lowering his voice. “He’s concerned about budget cuts. Maybe he’s slacking on the job.”

The tension in the air thickened. Logan turned to the group. “No more climbing today,” he announced, raising his hands to signal the end of training. “We are canceling the final scenario. I want a full rope inspection across the board before we attempt anything else.”

Alicia confirmed that Travis was only rattled and not physically injured. Morgan appeared at the edge of the field, glaring daggers at Logan. “I warned you,” Morgan mumbled under his breath.

Logan glared back. With the day’s training abruptly cut short, Serena picked up her daypack from the grass. As Morgan stomped off, the crowd dispersed, and Serena’s heart still thudded harder than it should.

She blamed it on the near-miss with the rope—though part of her knew she was still rattled from the previous day. She pictured the fierce desire in Theo’s eyes, and the sudden terror that he might claim her against her will. Her mind churned with questions, and her heart ached with fear.

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Chapter

Eight

Theo paused in the corridor outside Poppy Miller's office, the morning sun spilling in through tall windows. His stomach twisted at the memory of everything that had happened yesterday. He'd terrified Serena, run wild into the forest, and abandoned the kitchen for hours.

He half expected a formal reprimand—or even to be fired. I deserve it, he thought. He exhaled and tapped lightly on the door, bracing for the worst. Inside, the office was modest yet orderly, with a sturdy wooden desk, a bookshelf, and a waiting guest chair. Poppy Miller, head of the academy's administration, looked up as he entered.

"Please, have a seat," she said. Her tone was businesslike but not unkind. She waited until he settled into the chair across from her before she spoke again. "I wanted to talk to you about your rescue last night. You guided two lost hikers back after dark, which may very well have saved them from serious harm." A gentle smile curved her lips. "That was commendable, Theo."

The word commendable cut through the knot in his chest. For a moment, relief flickered inside him. Poppy's expression turned more serious. "Yet in doing so, you left the kitchen unattended for several hours."

Theo felt heat crawl up his neck. "I... yes, ma'am," he managed. His heart pounded as she continued.

She lowered her voice. “I’m aware of the incident in Portland. The meltdown in a public park?” A trace of concern touched her features. “That can’t happen here, Theo. You’re in charge of the kitchen, but you’re also essential to our SAR team. If you can’t handle both, we need to know sooner rather than later.”

Every muscle in Theo’s body tensed, shame pooling in his chest. I’m not fit for polite company. The idea lodged in his mind like a splinter he couldn’t pull free.

“I... understand your worry,” he said, voice heavy. “I don’t mean to abandon my responsibilities. It’s just—” He struggled with words, seeing flashes of himself charging through the woods in a half-frenzied state.

Poppy folded her hands on the desk. “I’m not judging you, Theo, but the academy needs safety and reliability. We can’t afford repeated episodes. Do you understand?”

He nodded mutely, shame churning inside him. He’d promised himself he’d never let the beast loose again. Yet he’d failed twice since coming to the academy. “I’m trying. I am. I admit I lost control. I just met my mate at the academy, and it’s a lot.”

Poppy’s eyes widened slightly. She wasn’t a shifter, but she’d worked at Fate Mountain Academy long enough to know the significance of a fated mate. “I see. So the emotional turbulence from that bond is contributing to your stress?”

Theo exhaled, a shaky laugh escaping his throat. “You could say that.” He thought bitterly of how his inner grizzly had terrified his fated mate.

Poppy’s face softened. “I’m no expert on mate bonds, but I can imagine the intensity. Still, you have to understand our position. For everyone’s safety—including yours—we need you stable. Otherwise, you or your mate have to go.”

She opened a folder on her desk. “Officially, I have to document that you left your

post without notice and nearly lost control. However, given the circumstances, I'm willing to treat this as a warning—provided it doesn't happen again.”

Theo left the office feeling both grateful and hollow. Poppy hadn't fired him or stripped him of responsibilities, yet his mistakes loomed over him like a thundercloud. He walked through the hallway, ignoring a few curious glances from passing trainees. His fists clenched at his sides, each step echoing with the knowledge that he'd terrified his mate, lost himself to the bear, and risked his position in one day.

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Chapter

Nine

Serena rose from her narrow dorm bed and rubbed her eyes. Early sunlight filtered through the thin curtains, glowing on a desk cluttered with notes on rescue procedures and wilderness routes. She dressed in a sturdy jacket and hiking pants, then checked her phone. She half-hoped to see a message from Theo, even though she couldn't admit it to herself when she didn't find one. Instead, she saw a new academy email. She squinted at the subject line: "Orienteering I Session Starts at 8 AM."

She stared at the clock on her nightstand. It showed half past eight. She frowned, recalling that this class was supposed to begin at nine. Worry nudged her. She pressed her lips together and decided she would skip breakfast. She grabbed her backpack and hurried out into the dorm hallway. Students passed by, a few chatting about schedule confusion, but she had no time to investigate further. She took the stairs two at a time, boots thumping on the worn steps, then pushed through the exit door into the crisp morning air.

At the staging area, Jade Rivers, the instructor, stood near a small cluster of trainees. Jade wore cargo pants, a warm fleece, and had a compass dangling from a lanyard around her neck. A few trainees looked uneasy, each holding printouts or phone screens that likely showed the same email Serena had read. Jade's expression darkened when she saw Serena approach.

"Did you get that email too?" Jade asked. She drummed her fingers on a stack of laminated maps.

Serena nodded, breath short from her rushed walk. “Yes, it said eight. I thought class started at nine.”

A tall trainee with a puzzled face stepped forward, phone in hand. “We arrived thinking we were late, but there’s no sign of the main group. Jade said they left an hour ago.”

Serena glanced at Jade, who ran a hand through her hair. “Admin told me a bunch of them already departed,” Jade said. “They must have trusted that email. This makes no sense. The official schedule was always nine.”

Serena observed the confusion in the trainees’ eyes. She noticed a row of stacked boxes near the shed, the usual place for orientation gear. Some boxes were open, gear gone. The group that left must have taken it.

Jade let out a low sigh. “I was going to brief everyone at nine about a landslide on the planned route. Now they’re out there with no idea the path is blocked.”

Serena felt a hint of dread. “They might be in real trouble if they try to push through.”

Jade’s radio crackled. A faint voice echoed through the static. “Trainee... near landslide... ankle... problem.” Then silence.

Jade’s eyes hardened. “I’m canceling this session,” she said. “I’ll radio Administration and let them know we have a possible injury out there.” She keyed her radio and spoke in measured tones, informing Admin of the crisis. Then she turned to the remaining trainees. “Go back to campus. Stay put until further notice.”

Serena stepped closer to Jade, gripping the straps of her backpack. “I have my first-aid kit. I can help.”

“Great,” Jade answered, scanning the worried faces. “Follow me. We’ll head to the route they should have taken.”

They set off on the forest trail, the path winding among tall pines and thick undergrowth. The canopy let in scattered rays of light. The air felt damp, and the soft rustle of branches gave Serena a sense of unease. Jade walked briskly, map in hand. She muttered about sabotage in the academy’s scheduling system, then shook her head. “Maybe I’m just stressed,” she said.

Serena had no response, only a deepening concern that too many odd mistakes had plagued them recently. As they climbed, uneven ground forced them to move in single file. Fallen branches and slippery soil hinted at a recent landslide.

At last, they reached a clearing where the soil looked disturbed. Clumps of uprooted grass and scattered rocks indicated the landslide’s aftermath. In the distance, they saw a cluster of trainees near a slope. One young man sat on the ground, clutching his ankle, while others waved, relief obvious in their faces when they spotted Jade and Serena.

Serena knelt next to the injured trainee. “What happened?” she asked, pulling her paramedic kit free.

He winced, short brown hair plastered to his forehead. “I tripped. My foot sank into loose rubble. My ankle twisted.”

Serena gently checked the joint, pressing lightly around the swollen area. “Feels like a severe sprain.” She pulled out bandages and a small splint. “Hold still. I’ll wrap it. Let me know if it hurts more.”

He grimaced but nodded. The other trainees hovered around, concern etched on their features. Jade stepped aside, scanning the slope. Loose gravel made the area risky.

She advised everyone to move back from the edge.

Serena finished securing the ankle. “Keep weight off it if you can.”

Jade helped lift the trainee. “We’ll take it slow.” She eyed the rest of the group. “Follow me, single file. Be careful. The ground’s unstable.”

They retraced their steps, guiding the injured trainee down the safest route they could find. Serena kept a hand under his elbow, Jade on his other side. The walk back felt long, but eventually the pines thinned as they neared campus.

When they reached the main building, Jade grabbed her radio. “I need Alicia here for a sprained ankle. We’re by the main entrance.” A crackle of static signaled acknowledgment. Alicia arrived soon after. She praised Serena’s splinting, then assisted with moving the trainee to the medic bay.

Jade paused next to Serena. “I’m going to find Poppy and report this,” she said. She ran a hand over her face, frustration plain. “That email fiasco... I can’t ignore this.” She hurried off, determined.

Serena watched her go, mind racing through the day’s events. She followed Alicia and the trainee into the medic bay, double-checking her bandaging and ensuring he was settled on a padded bench. Once she was satisfied he was in capable hands, she left.

Back in the corridor, she felt a weight deep in her chest. The suspicious email that changed the schedule, the repeated accidents around the academy, and the near miss with the landslide... it all seemed bigger than a simple mistake. She walked toward her dorm, unsettled by the thought that someone might be purposefully undermining the school.

Chapter

Ten

Theo entered the meeting room in the admin building. He glanced around, sensing the tense silence blanketing the space. Poppy Miller stood near the far end of the large table, speaking quietly with Kai Morrow. Logan Carter leaned against the wall beside Jade Rivers. Alicia Reeves sat rigidly in a chair, her expression grave. Morgan grumbled beside her, arms crossed. Their collective demeanor left no doubt about the seriousness of the meeting.

Theo took a seat, trying to ignore the tightening knot in his stomach. He had expected some reaction to recent events but seeing everyone assembled made the situation feel dire. He caught Logan's eye and received a brief nod in return. Poppy sat at the head of the table, clearing her throat to gain everyone's attention. Her gaze swept over each face, lingering briefly on Theo.

She exhaled deeply. "I've called this staff meeting today because we have serious concerns about campus safety," Poppy began. Her voice was steady but firm. "Several incidents have happened lately, incidents we can no longer dismiss as isolated. The mismarked trails, the cut rope at the climbing wall, and the recent scheduling chaos that ended with an injury."

Kai frowned, nodding solemnly in agreement. Theo felt the weight of the moment settle heavily on his shoulders. Poppy continued, her tone tightening further. "These are no longer simple mistakes. We must establish stronger safety protocols."

She turned to Alicia Reeves, motioning for her to speak. Alicia sat forward. Theo saw the worry etched deep in the lines of her face.

“As medical coordinator,” Alicia said, her voice resonant, “I’ve seen the dangerous consequences of these incidents firsthand.” Alicia paused briefly, letting her words resonate through the room. “The rope incident at the climbing wall could have killed someone. And a single email caused an injury. These issues must stop.”

Jade Rivers spoke next, her frustration evident. “Communication failures are causing serious risks. The recent scheduling confusion meant participants missed my hazard briefing. They went onto a dangerous trail unprepared. A sprained ankle could have easily turned into something much worse.” Jade looked around, eyes sharp and direct. “We need clear accountability and effective communication. This kind of oversight is unacceptable.”

Poppy gave Jade an approving nod before turning her attention to Theo. He shifted uneasily in his seat. “Theo,” Poppy began carefully, “while we acknowledge your quick response to the missing hikers as commendable, we must address your absence from the kitchen shift that day. Your position on SAR requires reliability. We need to know where you are and trust you to fulfill your responsibilities if you’re called.”

Theo’s heart sank. The room grew silent, and a flush crept up his neck. Shame and frustration mingled. He nodded firmly, accepting the reminder. “Yes, ma’am. You can trust me.”

Poppy nodded once more, signaling the meeting’s end. Chairs scraped as staff members stood and began quietly discussing their next steps. Theo lingered in his chair, his chest tight and jaw tense. Logan approached him, gently guiding him aside for a private conversation.

“Listen, Theo,” he began quietly. “We’re behind you. The shifters at the academy

respect you. Your dad has a long history with SAR. And you were an amazing addition to the team when you were younger. But patience wears thin when incidents pile up.”

Theo rubbed his face, exhaling. “I know, Logan. It’s just—I’m trying to manage everything. Coming back here was supposed to help. Then I found out Serena is my mate. I tried to take her on a date, and my beast came out. It’s been... a lot.”

Logan nodded sympathetically. “I get it. But with everything happening around us, any personal slip-ups stand out. You need to stabilize yourself.”

“Thanks, Logan,” Theo said quietly. “I will.”

Logan squeezed Theo’s shoulder in support. “I have faith in you, Theo. But we can’t afford any more incidents.”

Chapter

Eleven

Serena walked into the cafeteria at midday, still feeling the tension from the rescue mission that morning. She picked up a tray and stepped into the line, barely noticing the options on display. She absently grabbed a few items: a salad, a corndog, and a cold drink.

At the end of the line, she scanned the room. She saw an empty spot near the window and decided to claim it, hoping a moment of solitude would quiet her mind. She placed her tray down and sank onto the seat, inhaling a calming breath as she tried to focus on her food.

Her heart skipped when she saw Theo weaving through the tables. His broad shoulders and intense gaze made him look like a creature caught in a space too small for him. As if the world couldn't contain something so primal and wild. Her inner cougar stirred with desire, clamoring to get closer to her mate.

“May I sit here?” Theo asked softly.

Serena cleared her throat, nodding in reply. The urge to touch him was overwhelming. She reminded herself to stay composed as he settled across from her.

Theo began, his voice low, “I wanted to apologize for what happened in the meadow. I take full responsibility for losing control.” He hesitated, glancing at her to see if she was comfortable talking.

Her inner cougar urged her to jump in his lap, yet she managed to stay in her seat. She forced herself to remember how his bear had nearly claimed her.

“There’s a beast inside me that I’ve never fully contained. I lose control sometimes...” He paused, studying her expression. “I almost did that with you. It’s something I’m working on.”

Serena tried to ignore the roar of her inner cougar, which insisted that he was hers and that no barrier should stand between them. “I understand,” she said quietly. “We both have our... issues.”

“I thought maybe we could try to hang out again. Maybe in public this time? My parents own the Fate Mountain Diner, and they make a mean burger.”

“Mmm. I’ve had their burgers. They are good. I didn’t know that was your family’s restaurant.”

“Yeah. My dad is a chef too. He was pretty famous at one time but decided to settle down in Fate Mountain.”

“That’s cool,” she said, picking at her lunch.

“Since we’re both here at the academy, it seems pointless to keep avoiding each other.”

There was no way of avoiding Theo unless she canceled the rest of her training and left. She knew it was a risk to spend time with him. But she didn’t know what other choice she had unless she dropped out and lost her investment.

She sighed and then narrowed her brows. “You’ve got a point. I guess it’s better for us to at least get to know each other.”

“I’ve got the night off tonight. Do you want to meet at the diner around seven?”

“Sounds good,” she said.

Theo grinned, though she could see the apprehension in his eyes. She felt a swirl of fear in her chest about this out-of-control grizzly. Her father always used his inner dragon as an excuse for how he treated her mother. Serena swore she’d never get trapped with a mate who did the same.

Chapter

Twelve

Theo sat in a booth by a large window in Fate Mountain Diner. It was just past seven, and the dinner rush had thinned slightly. One of the waitresses smiled at him, sensing he was waiting for someone special. He checked his phone one last time, thinking Serena might have sent him a text telling him she'd changed her mind.

Then headlights swept across the window. The car parked and Serena stepped out. She wore blue jeans and a zip-up jacket, her thick black hair falling softly around her shoulders. A twinge of anticipation stirred in his chest as she approached the diner's door.

When she entered, she paused, taking in the warm lamplight and the faint scent of coffee and grilled onions. She caught sight of him and walked over, shoulders relaxing.

"You're here," she said, giving him a small smile. Serena slid into the booth and reached for the laminated menu, glancing over the classic diner offerings. A warm glow lit the pages, reflecting in Serena's eyes as she studied the burger section.

"I'm in the mood for a jalapeno burger tonight. A little walk on the wild side," Theo said.

Serena flipped a page, then nodded. "I think I'll get a bacon cheeseburger. I had it my first night in Fate Mountain. I figure, why mess with a good thing?"

The sound of muted chatter filled the diner around them, while the faint hiss of a fryer in the kitchen hinted at fresh fries in the making.

The waitress approached. “Ready to order?” Serena set the menu down and gave the waitress her order. The server jotted it down, then turned to Theo. “And you?”

He handed her the menus and told her what he wanted. The waitress flashed a quick grin. “Great choices. Anything else?” They both shook their heads, and the waitress stepped away, menus tucked under her arm. Serena leaned back in the booth, resting her hands on the table.

Theo leaned forward. “How was your day? I heard you were on a rescue earlier.”

Her shoulders tensed. “It was a mess. The sabotage, or whatever it was, changed an orienteering session’s schedule. People left early, walked straight into a landslide zone. I ended up treating a sprained ankle.”

He frowned. “Feels like every day the academy has a new problem.”

The waitress returned, setting down two frosty shakes topped with whipped cream and a bright red cherry. “Burgers will be out soon,” she said with a smile before hurrying back to the kitchen.

Theo took a sip of his shake, savoring the cool sweetness. Serena drew on her straw, her eyes fluttering shut for a moment at the taste. “So good,” she murmured. She met his gaze and exhaled. “I really needed to get away from all that for a while. This is nice.”

The waitress reappeared with two plates of burgers and golden fries. The smell of grilled beef and melted cheese rose in a warm wave, making Serena’s mouth water. She picked up the burger, took a bite, and let out a soft moan of approval.

“This is better than I remember from my hotel room,” she said with a faint grin.

Theo smiled at her reaction. “I’m glad you like it.” He lifted his own burger, taking a bite. The savory, spicy flavor hit just right.

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “After you told me about your famous dad, I looked you up online. Seems like you were famous in the local restaurant scene in Portland yourself. You even had a write-up about rescuing hostages in a bank robbery.”

He set his burger down. “I suppose you read the article about how I got arrested in a Portland park.”

“I missed that one.” She took a sip of chocolate shake, watching him intently. “What happened. How did you get arrested in the park?”

Theo revealed his story in a burst. “I’d been losing my grip on my bear since the bank robbery. It was an issue I had in childhood that I’d thought I’d overcome a long time ago. After months of barely holding it together, I lost control when I saw what looked like a stalker in the park. I shifted and chased down what turned out to be a married couple and then several other humans. I was tranquilized and arrested. Charged with criminal threat. The papers officially stripped me of the hero status they’d given me just months before.”

She watched him carefully. “Wow. That’s a lot to process. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

“I’m dealing with it,” he said, wanting to change the subject. “Your pictures looked like they were taken in San Francisco. Is that where you’re from?”

“I’m from Las Vegas. But after I left home and got paramedic training, I roamed

around a lot. I was in San Francisco when I found the paramedic-integration course at the academy. It sounded like a new challenge. I figured, why not? At this point, I don't want to lose my investment."

Theo grabbed a fry, swirling it in ketchup. "Do you have any siblings? What are your parents like?"

"I'm an only child," she said. "Thankfully, I'm the only one who was subjected to my parents' horror show of a marriage."

"Why do you call it that?"

Serena set down her fork, her eyes going distant. He knew he'd hit a nerve. He wanted to reach across the table and take her hand, but he held back.

"My father is a rich and powerful dragon shifter. My mom is a cougar shifter like me. But she and I couldn't be any more different. She's..." Serena looked down at her lap, her face falling. When she glanced back up at Theo, her eyes were shining. She shook her head and wiped her face with her napkin. "I don't want to say my mother was weak. It wasn't her fault. My father... he used the mate bond to control her. Even if she'd wanted to get away, I doubt she could have."

"Did he...hurt her?" Theo asked, his heart constricting.

Serena looked away again, her face falling. He didn't want to push this subject. It felt too raw. Too painful. Serena looked back at him, her lips a hard line.

"Not exactly. He didn't have to. He just sucked the life out of her with his constant demands and commands. He never let her have a moment of peace. Her entire existence had to revolve around serving him, focusing on him, making his priorities the only thing that mattered. It made me sick."

She took a deep breath before going on. “From the time I was a little girl, I knew there was something wrong with their dynamic. I left home as soon as I could. I got a scholarship for an EMT training course when I was seventeen. My mother’s cousin lived in the same city and offered to let me stay with her, so I left. And never looked back. I’ve only seen my mother a few times in the last fifteen years. The last time I talked to her, it was all still the same. I couldn’t even have a ten-minute phone conversation with her without my father dominating the entire situation.”

“Serena. I’m so sorry. No wonder you’re hesitant to form a mate bond.”

“Well, now you know how messed up my past is. You have the chance to run.” She gave a sardonic laugh.

“I’d never think badly of you because of your father.” On impulse, he reached across the table and squeezed her hand briefly. “I just want you to know, I’m nothing like that. I could never...”

“I didn’t say you were,” she said, folding her hands in her lap. “It’s the fear. The disgust. When I see mates, all I can see is my parents’ toxic dynamic. Even when I know it’s not that way for most shifters.”

“It makes perfect sense why you’d be hesitant to mate. Thank you for sharing that with me.”

The waitress returned with the bill. She cleared the plates and gave them each a grateful nod. Stella, Theo’s sister and the manager of Fate Mountain Diner, walked through the door, spotted him, and strode toward their booth. She was in her mid-twenties with dark blonde hair tied back into a bun. She wore a simple blouse and slacks.

“Theo,” she said, stopping by the table. “I had no idea you were here tonight.” She

glanced at the bill. "I hope you two enjoyed the food."

Serena shifted in her seat, looking between Theo and the newcomer. Theo stood halfway, an awkward pride tugging at his posture. "Stella, this is Serena," he said, gesturing with an open palm. "Serena, this is my sister, Stella. She runs the diner now." He paused, gathering his nerve. "And Serena is my mate."

Stella's eyes widened. "Your mate? Since when?" She looked from Theo to Serena with clear surprise. "You haven't told the family?"

Theo rubbed the back of his neck. "It's recent."

Stella put a hand on her hip. "You should've told us. Mom and Dad will flip. You know how they get with big news like this." She turned to Serena. "I'm sorry we didn't know sooner. I'd love to have you both over for our family barbecue on Friday night. That is, if you're free."

Theo angled his head toward Serena, letting her take the lead. Serena looked to him, then back at Stella. "That sounds nice," she said, picking up on Stella's earnest tone. "I'd like to meet your family."

Stella's face lit up. "Perfect. I'll text Theo the time and details. Don't stand us up." She reached down, lifted the bill from the edge of the table. "No charge tonight. I'll mark it as manager's treat."

She slid the bill into a pocket. "I'm so excited for you two to come to the barbecue." With that, she turned and walked off, weaving around a busboy clearing a nearby table.

Theo exhaled, easing back into his seat. "My dear little sister." He glanced at Serena, unsure if the impromptu invitation was too much. "I hope you didn't feel pressured to

accept.”

Serena gave a faint grin. “I think it’ll be fun. Your sister is lovely. She makes me feel like I can trust you.”

Theo dropped the cash he’d brought for the meal onto the table for a tip. Serena stood, gathering her jacket. He led her toward the diner’s entrance, stepping out into the cool evening air. The parking lot lights cast a dim yellow glow across the asphalt. She paused near her car, turning to face him.

“Thanks, Theo,” she said. “This was great.”

He watched her climb into her car and drive off, the headlights cutting through the night. His inner grizzly rumbled, but a sense of satisfaction settled into his veins. He’d managed a successful date with Serena, and they’d really opened up to each other. It was the first step in the right direction.

Chapter

Thirteen

Theo parked in front of his parents' house and glanced at Serena. He could tell she felt nervous about meeting his parents. "You ready?" he asked, giving her an encouraging smile.

"I'm looking forward to it," she said, though her voice was slightly shaky.

They climbed out of the car and followed the walkway around the house. Theo caught the scent of grilling meat wafting through the air. They circled around to the back deck and found Shane Keenan at the grill. Lily was arranging bowls on a wooden picnic table. At the other end of the deck stood a chiminea and a stack of firewood. The yard was rimmed with flowerbeds near the fence, and the tall pines beyond cast cool shade.

"Theo!" Lily called out, setting down a dish. She walked over and gave him a hug. "You must be Serena. It's so nice to meet you." Lily reached out and took Serena's hand, giving it a warm shake. "I've been dying to meet you since Stella told us she spotted you two at the diner. Theo, how dare you keep her from us for a single day?"

"Mom," Theo said under his breath.

Shane turned from the grill, spatula in hand. Smoke curled from a variety of meats. "It's good to see you, son," he said. "And your lovely new mate."

“Dad...” He shot Theo a sideways grin. “Serena and I are just getting to know each other. No pressure.”

Stella appeared in the sliding door from the kitchen, carrying a bag of hamburger buns. “There you are,” she said to Theo. Then she shot Serena a bright smile.

“It’s good to see you, Stella,” Serena said, smiling at his sister.

“Are my parents demanding to know if you’ve picked out baby names yet?”

Serena snorted, and Theo groaned.

“Dinner’s ready!” Shane announced, turning to them with a platter full of burgers, sausages, steak, and chicken.

The picnic table was loaded with side dishes: potato salad, corn on the cob, fruit slices, and a pitcher of iced tea. Everyone gathered at the table. Theo watched Serena sitting across from him, beside his sister. She turned to him and smiled.

Lily handed a platter of steaming corn on the cob across the table, then turned to Theo with a curious smile. “How’s the wilderness school, dear? And your new cooking position? Shane and I are dying to know how it’s all going.”

Theo paused for a moment, arranging the food on his plate. He felt Serena glance his way, as if sensing the guarded tension in his posture. “It’s been good,” he said simply, trying to sound upbeat. “The academy has a lot of moving parts, but the kitchen menu is pretty simple.”

Shane leaned in, elbows on the table. “That must be a change from those Portland restaurants, huh?”

Theo nodded. “Very different pace,” he admitted.

“Are you managing all right?” Lily asked gently.

He forced a small smile, stabbing the potato salad with his fork. “Yeah, it’s manageable,” he said. He pushed back the thought of nearly losing control again during today’s hectic lunch rush. A swirl of dread tightened in his chest, but he kept his face neutral, not wanting to worry his mother.

Stella leaned forward, resting her elbows on the wooden picnic table. The glow of the nearby chiminea lit the smile on her face. The evening air carried the scent of pine and smoke. “So, Serena,” she said. “Where did you work before coming here?”

“I work as a paramedic in different cities,” Serena said, her tone calm. “I go where contracts take me. It’s always changing.”

Stella’s eyes glimmered with interest. “So you’re used to packing up and hitting the road?”

Serena nodded, running a thumb over a knot in the table’s wood grain. “I enjoy the independence of it. I spend a few months in one location, then move on to the next. It lets me see a lot of places. But I realized I wanted something more specialized. Fate Mountain Wilderness Academy’s paramedic-integration program seemed like the right challenge.”

Lily took a thoughtful sip of iced tea, then nodded. “I’m so happy you found your way here.”

Stella eyed Theo with a mischievous grin. “Hey, big brother,” she said in a conspiratorial tone. “Do you remember that day when you were seventeen and I was ten, and I sneaked into your room to borrow your hoodie?”

Theo let out a groan, rolling his eyes. “Why are you bringing this up now?”

Stella pounced on his reaction, turning to Serena with a delighted laugh. “I had the genius idea to hide in Theo’s closet, waiting for him to come back from football practice. He had just taken off his gear, sweaty and sore, and I jumped out wearing his favorite black hoodie.”

“Why would you do that?” Serena asked, amused despite herself.

“Because I knew he was obsessed with that hoodie,” Stella replied. “And I wanted to see him freak out.” She gestured toward Theo with her fork. “And freak out he did. I think you practically clawed the ceiling, right?”

Theo sighed. “That might have happened,” he admitted, picking at a piece of cornbread on his plate. “I’d just walked a few miles home from practice, my arms felt like lead. Then you popped up in my sweatshirt. Creeped me out.”

Stella smirked. “He turned so pale I thought he’d pass out. Then he chased me around the living room until Dad yelled at us to cut it out.”

Lily, listening from the other side of the table, chuckled softly. “You two gave me quite the show that day. I remember Shane nearly dropped the kettle trying to figure out why you were both shrieking.”

Theo’s cheeks reddened, and he shot Serena a fondly exasperated glance. “I’ve never lived that down. Stella reminds me every chance she gets.”

Stella tapped her napkin to her lips and shrugged. “It’s my solemn duty as the younger sibling. Gotta keep you humble.”

Lily cleared her throat, offering a gentle smile as she tried to include Serena more

deeply in the conversation. “So, Serena,” Lily ventured, “do your folks live far away? We’d love to get to know them if things keep going well between you and Theo.”

Serena’s shoulders went rigid, her grip tightening on her fork. She paused, carefully choosing her words. “They’re... not in the picture right now,” she finally said, voice subdued.

The soft clink of silverware on plates was the only noise for a moment. Lily’s eyes flickered with concern. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear,” she said gently. “I didn’t mean to pry. I just thought?—”

“It’s okay,” Serena interrupted with a tight smile. “Really. We’re just... not close. Let’s put it that way.”

The hush that followed felt heavier than the evening air. Shane, sensing the tension, cleared his throat. “We understand,” he said quietly, cutting into a piece of steak. “Families can be complicated.”

As dusk settled, the sun’s final rays cast a mellow glow across the yard. They finished their main course, leaning back in their chairs and enjoying the warmth of the fire. Lily cleared away a few plates, and moments later, Shane returned from the kitchen carrying a tray of homemade lemon bars with sorbet and fresh berries.

“Oh my gosh,” Serena breathed, eyes widening at the sight. “Did you make these?”

Shane set the tray at the center of the table, his grin broad. “I sure did. My specialty—tangy and sweet, perfect for a warm night. Dig in, everyone!”

They passed around the dessert. Once everyone was savoring the sweet treats, Lily glanced at Shane before turning back to Theo and Serena. “So,” she began, her tone cheerful, “we’ve got a bit of a surprise for you two—sort of a fated mate match gift,

if you will.”

Theo raised an eyebrow, swallowing a bite of lemon bar. “What? That’s not a thing.”

“Well, it is now,” Lily said with a laugh, waving her hand. “I just made it up, but it sounds nice, doesn’t it?”

Before Theo could respond, Shane produced an envelope from beneath the tray, sliding it toward Theo and Serena. “We wanted to give you both something special,” he said. “It’s a gift certificate to Fate Mountain Lodge—dinner for two, a candlelight massage, and a night in the presidential suite. All on us.”

Theo stared at the envelope as though it might bite. “That’s... wow, it’s too much, Dad. We can’t accept that.” He opened the envelope anyway, glimpsing the elegant gold lettering and glossy brochures inside. “Seriously, this is way over the top.”

Shane chuckled, setting down his fork. “Believe me, Levi gave it to me for a fraction of the price. He insisted, actually.”

Theo glanced at Serena, a wave of nervousness flashing in his eyes. The mention of a two-bedroom suite on the brochure made his stomach flip. Did it imply they’d share a suite? Would she even want to go?

Serena shifted, pressing her lips together as she turned the glossy booklet in her hands. The pictures showed a lavish suite with two separate bedrooms, a private balcony, and a panoramic view of the mountains. Her cheeks colored faintly as she realized the implication. “Thank you,” she said, looking up at both Lily and Shane. “This is really generous. I—wow.”

Theo cleared his throat, setting the envelope down. “We appreciate it,” he managed, his gaze flicking between his parents and Serena. “I’m just not sure... it’s a lot.”

“Oh, hush,” Lily said, waving off his concern. “You two deserve a little pampering. No pressure on how you use it, or when. But maybe it’ll be a chance for you to relax and... talk.”

Shane’s eyes gleamed with gentle encouragement. “At least go enjoy the dinner. The lodge’s restaurant is top-notch. Think of it as an extended date night.”

A flustered warmth spread through Theo’s chest. He was put on the spot, yes, but he also couldn’t deny a hint of excitement at the thought of sharing such a luxurious experience with Serena.

“Thank you both,” Serena said again, tapping the brochure with her fingertip. She shot Theo a quick, uncertain smile. “I guess we’ll have to figure out when to use it.”

After dessert, they said their goodbyes. Lily asked Serena to visit again soon, and Stella teased Theo by whispering “Don’t forget the baby names!” The pair escaped with flushed cheeks and faint laughs. Once they climbed into his car, the brochures still in Serena’s lap, Theo stared at the steering wheel, dumbfounded. He could have purchased an extravagant night out for Serena. Money wasn’t the issue, it was the assumption his parents had made with their gift.

“Well,” he said, voice tinged with nerves. “That was... something. That gift certificate...”

Serena looked down at the glossy gift brochures, exhaling slowly. “It’s a beautiful gift,” she said, a hint of a smile creeping onto her face. “I guess we’ll have to figure it out.”

Chapter

Fourteen

Serena lay on the small bed in her dorm, staring at the ceiling. The dim light of the bedside lamp cast soft shadows across the walls. She thought about the jokes and warm smiles at Theo's family dinner, yet her mind kept straying to the memories of her own parents. She tugged the blanket higher, hoping comfort would come. Instead, the clock on her phone confirmed it was nearly midnight, and she was still wide awake.

She switched off the lamp and tried to settle. Thoughts of her father intruded, the old dread creeping back. That was when her phone buzzed on the nightstand. The screen glowed. It read "Mom." She stiffened, unsure if she should answer.

A surge of instinct told her to pick up. She pressed accept and placed the phone to her ear. "Hello?" she said in a hushed voice.

Her mother's shaky breath filtered through the line. "Serena," came the strained reply. "I... I hope I am not disturbing you. I have to tell you something... I need to get it out."

Serena braced for the echo of her father in the background, but there was only silence. "Mom?" she asked, her voice tight with worry. "What is it?"

Her mother swallowed audibly. "I left your father a week ago. He's not taking it well. But I have my own place now."

“Mom... I... I’m so proud of you. What made you finally decide to go?” Serena tightened her grip on the phone as her eyes burned.

Her mother’s breath hitched. “I just... Couldn’t take it anymore. I saved up enough money for a deposit on an apartment. And I got a job in a grocery store nearby. If I could do everything over, I would have left a long time ago. You deserved so much better than what I gave you.” Serena’s chest ached at the unexpected surge of emotion. “Take care of yourself. I’m going to let you go. I’ll text you my new address.”

Before Serena could respond, the call ended. She wanted to tell her mom to be careful. Serena pictured her mother in a new apartment, working at a grocery store. She set her phone aside and sank back against the pillows. Her mind whirled with images of her father controlling every aspect of her childhood.

Serena stared at the ceiling for a long time. When she finally drifted into a fitful sleep, she dreamed she was in the house where she grew up. The hallways were dark. Her father’s voice boomed from the shadows. Every instinct told her to flee.

His towering figure appeared, half-shifted into a dragon, scales reflecting the faint light. He barked orders, belittling her and demanding her obedience. At first, she trembled like she always had, but then some strength within her flared. She stepped forward and told him he no longer held power over her. She shouted that he could never force her to submit again.

She saw her mother crouched behind him, frightened and small. Dream-Serena placed herself between them. Her own cougar spirit roared to life, rippling through her limbs. Her body shifted, fur bristling, until she stood on four paws, glaring at the enormous dragon. His roar tapered off as if stunned. She advanced until he staggered back. In one final rush, the looming shape that had terrified her for so long seemed to shrink before her eyes.

She woke with a gasp, heart pounding and sweat dampening her neck. For a moment, fear flickered. Then relief swept in. She understood that the father she had known was only powerful because she believed he was unbeatable. But he wasn't. In that realization, she felt a sense of release. She was free to choose for herself.

Chapter

Fifteen

Theo noticed Serena gazing out the window as they drove up the winding mountain road to Fate Mountain Lodge.

“What made you decide you were ready to use the gift certificates?” he asked, anticipation rushing through him.

“I had a dream after my mother called me last night. I finally feel like I’m free of my past.”

She did not elaborate, and he chose not to push the subject. He was just happy she had already decided to join him for the date his parents had planned. His inner bear grumbled within. But with every moment he spent with Serena, the beast inside him seemed to mellow. Theo could already feel his control beginning to return to him.

They turned onto a carefully maintained driveway that led to Fate Mountain Lodge. The building sprawled atop a ridge, perched above a pristine alpine lake that reflected the remaining sunlight. At first glance, the lodge exuded rustic charm, all hand-hewn logs and natural stone accents.

Massive picture windows caught the rays of dusk, shining with a soft orange glow. As they parked, he spotted a stone-paved walkway winding through patches of flowers. It ended at a grand, arched doorway, with wooden carvings of bears and mountain panoramas that hinted at the lodge’s shifter-friendly heritage.

In the lobby, vaulted ceilings and exposed timber beams rose overhead. A massive stone fireplace dominated one wall, its hearth large enough to ward off even the coldest nights. Overstuffed leather sofas and plush rugs arranged in small conversation areas invited guests to settle in.

Theo guided Serena through the lobby and into the grand dining room. Tall panoramic windows framed a breathtaking view of the lake and the pine-studded ridges beyond. The host checked their reservation and ushered them to a polished wood table. Overhead, wrought-iron chandeliers cast a soft glow, emphasizing the warm hues of the décor. Each table had a discreetly placed candle, giving the room a romantic ambience.

Fate Mountain Lodge was the first upscale restaurant Theo had been introduced to as a kid, and it was one of his biggest inspirations to become a chef. So much had changed, yet so much remained the same since he'd left home.

Once Serena and Theo settled into their seats, a server in a crisp black apron approached, offering two leather-bound menus.

“Good evening,” he began, voice smooth and confident. “My name is Mason, and I’ll be taking care of you tonight. If I may, I’d love to share our specials. To start, we have a smoked salmon chowder, slow-simmered in a creamy base with fresh herbs from the lodge’s own greenhouse. For the main course, Chef’s highlight is a pan-seared steak medallion, lightly drizzled with a juniper-berry reduction, served alongside roasted root vegetables.”

Mason’s gaze flicked from Theo to Serena, gauging their interest. “We also have a vegetarian option. A wild mushroom risotto infused with garlic and thyme, topped with shaved pecorino. If you’re looking for something sweet to end your meal, our pastry chef created a seasonal berry tart. The crust is buttery and crisp, layered with pastry cream and the sweetest berries from nearby farms.”

He paused to let the description sink in, then added, “Please take your time deciding. If you have any questions or if you’re in the mood for a wine pairing, just let me know.” With a courteous nod, he stepped back, letting them peruse the menus.

Serena glanced over the menu with curious eyes. She lightly drummed her fingers on the cover before leaning toward Theo. “The pan-seared steak medallion is tempting, but I’m also looking at that honey-glazed salmon. I wish I could try everything.”

Theo nodded, tapping his own menu thoughtfully. “That braised lamb keeps jumping out at me. But I’ve never said no to a good steak. The juniper-berry reduction is a nice touch.”

Mason returned, pen poised above his order pad. “Have you folks decided?”

Serena cleared her throat. “I’ll start with the smoked salmon chowder, and for my main, I’ll have the pan-seared steak medallion. And I absolutely want to save room for your seasonal berry tart.”

Theo handed over his menu. “I’ll have the same. Do you have a wine you’d recommend?”

Mason offered a thoughtful nod. “A Pinot Noir would pair beautifully with the juniper notes in the sauce.”

Theo grinned. “That sounds perfect.”

“Wonderful choices,” Mason said, beaming at them both. “I’ll be back with your wine.”

Serena took a sip of water and slathered butter on a piece of crusty French bread in a basket on the table. “This is so nice... after being on the road and living in the

dorms.”

The waiter returned and poured them each a glass of Pinot Noir. Theo lifted his glass, meeting her eyes with a hint of a smile. “Cheers to enjoying ourselves.”

“Thank you for setting this up for us on such short notice.” She tapped her glass to his and took a sip.

They began to swap stories about local trails they wanted to hike. “The North Ridge Trail is tough,” Theo remarked, swirling his wine. “But they say the view at the summit’s worth every step.”

Serena nodded. “I was hoping to build stamina for the advanced rescue modules in the fall. Although, with everything happening at the academy...” Her voice trailed off, a flicker of worry clouding her features.

Theo set his glass down, noticing the way her shoulders tensed. “I’m trying not to dwell on that,” he admitted. “Whatever’s going on, I refuse to let it ruin tonight. Let’s just enjoy our dinner.”

She exhaled slowly. “You’re right,” she murmured, managing a small laugh.

The waiter returned with two steaming bowls of salmon chowder, the aroma of smoked fish and fresh herbs drifting around them. He set one bowl gently before each of them, the creamy surface shimmering in the candlelight. Theo stirred the chowder, catching flecks of pink salmon and diced potatoes, then lifted a spoonful to his lips. The rich flavors of velvety cream, dill, and sea salt burst across his tongue.

“You know how I told you my mother called me last night?” Serena said, after taking a bite of chowder.

Theo could tell that she was about to share something personal. “Yeah.” He held his breath, hoping for her to go on.

“My mother left my father last week.”

“She left him?”

“I told you their bond was complicated.” The thought of her father frightening and intimidating Serena as a child sent his inner grizzly into a rage. “My mother... Without my father, she’s free.”

“I understand, Serena. You don’t have to explain.” Theo clenched his fist, attempting to keep his claws from descending.

“Ever since she called me, and after the dream I had last night, I just feel like I’ve been liberated.”

The waiter soon appeared with their main courses perched on a polished serving tray. He set each plate before them. The sizzle of still-searing edges met Theo’s ears, and the aromatic juniper-berry reduction wafted upward.

Mason offered a quick grin. “Your steak medallions, cooked medium-rare, and the roasted vegetables on the side. May I bring anything else?”

Serena’s eyes swept over the tender cut of meat, glistening under the restaurant’s soft lighting. “It looks amazing,” she said, smile widening.

Theo nodded at the perfectly arranged food. “Everything’s great, Mason. We’re good for now.”

“Enjoy,” the waiter replied with a friendly dip of his head, stepping away.

Serena sliced into the steak. She glanced up at Theo, who was doing the same. Their eyes met, and a shared anticipation sparked. After that first bite, Serena closed her eyes, savoring the smoky richness balanced by the subtle tang of juniper.

She exhaled in delight, murmuring, “I’ll never tire of perfectly cooked steak.”

Theo’s brow arched in approval. “I’d say the kitchen outdid themselves tonight.”

Candles flickered, and soft conversation filled the dining room. Outside the panoramic windows, the lake shimmered under the moon’s ascent. The clink of cutlery and the hush of discreet waitstaff carried on around them, but it felt like a bubble of privacy enclosed their table.

After they finished their dinner, the waiter returned with two delicate berry tarts. The buttery crusts were crowned by plump, juicy berries glistening with a light glaze. Mason set one dessert before Serena and the other in front of Theo, giving an approving nod. “Here we are. The seasonal berry tarts, fresh from the pastry chef.”

“They’re gorgeous,” she murmured, inhaling the sweet aroma of ripe fruit.

Mason smiled, offering them a quick bow of his head before disappearing into the hum of the dining room. Theo took a slow bite. The tart’s crisp pastry yielded to a creamy layer beneath the glossy berries.

“Oh, that’s heavenly,” Serena said.

“It is. It’s almost as nice as seeing you smile.”

“You’re corny,” she said, taking another bite of tart.

“It’s true. Every day I know you, I feel like I’m becoming a better bear. All I want is

for you to feel free, to feel happy. This little getaway, it's giving us the chance to see each other away from the stress at the academy. To connect in new ways. To relax. This is everything for me, right now."

"I know what you mean," she said, taking her final bite of tart. "It's been hard to manage the bond in the middle of the chaos. That's part of why I agreed to come here tonight. We deserve the chance to see where things go. To write our own story."

After the waiter returned to settle the bill, Theo checked his watch. "Since our massage reservation isn't for fifteen minutes, I was thinking... I'd love to show you something special here at Fate Mountain Lodge."

Chapter

Sixteen

A soft humidity greeted them, wrapping Serena in a gentle warmth that made the air feel almost velvety against her skin. Overhead, glass panels revealed slivers of the night sky. The gentle trickle of a miniature waterfall provided a soothing soundtrack, its cascading water splashing into a pool ringed with smooth stones.

Towering ferns and tropical palms stretched upward, their leaves rustling softly whenever a stray breeze found its way inside. Vibrant orchids clung to patches of mossy bark, their vivid petals catching Serena's eye at every turn.

The pathway meandered through the lush interior. Each turn revealed more exotic botanicals and impossibly colored flowers in full bloom. A waterfall resonated like rain in the distance. It felt like paradise.

"Oh, wow," Serena breathed. Warm, fragrant air enveloped them. "I had no idea something like this was hiding inside a mountain lodge."

Theo grinned. "It's one of my favorite spots. Peaceful, don't you think?"

A sudden flurry of squawks made Serena jump. High in the branches of a potted tree perched several parrots, their brightly colored feathers standing out against the deep greens. The nearest one bobbed its head and spoke in a clear voice. "Looking lovely! Looking lovely!"

Another piped up, flapping its wings. “Such a pretty pair!”

Serena’s cheeks flushed, and she laughed. “They’re quite talkative.”

Theo chuckled, tilting his head to address the birds. “They’re famously flirty, too. Don’t be surprised if they start giving us love advice.”

On cue, one parrot gave a playful whistle. “Sweet hearts! Sweet hearts!” it squawked, as if blessing them as a couple.

“It’s adorable,” Serena said, taking a few steps closer so she could see the parrots hopping from branch to branch.

“They are the descendants of a pair that belonged to Juliette and Levi Blackthorn when they first got together.”

Serena smiled, feeling her heart flutter. The sweet perfume of orchids drifted around them, and something about the moment—maybe the wine, maybe the gentle hush of the waterfall—nudged her to be bold. She turned to him, and before she knew it, her hands were sliding up the lapels of his jacket.

A spark of realization flashed across Theo’s face, and he bent his head, capturing her mouth in a sudden, heated kiss. For a moment, all she could sense was the warmth of his lips, the rush of his breath. The pounding of her own heartbeat drowned out the parrots’ chatter, and the greenhouse air turned even headier. She tasted the faint hint of wine on his tongue, felt his hand press gently at the small of her back, urging her closer.

When they finally broke apart, Serena’s pulse thundered in her ears. She looked up into his eyes, breathless and a little lightheaded. “I... I guess we should get to our appointment,” she managed, though her voice held more than a note of reluctance.

He let out a soft laugh, resting his forehead against hers. “Yeah. But that was worth a little delay.”

She threaded her fingers through his, and they walked together toward the exit. Even as they left the moment behind, Serena couldn’t shake the lingering sweetness of that kiss—or the promise that it hinted at. They walked out of the atrium hand in hand toward an elevator tucked discreetly beside the lodge’s main staircase.

They stepped inside after the elevator doors slid open. Theo pressed a button, giving her a reassuring wink. When they reached the basement, they stepped into a softly lit corridor. Warm sconces lined the walls, and plush carpet muted their footsteps. They were met by two spa attendants, dressed in earth-toned uniforms.

“Good evening,” said one the woman. “Welcome to our Candlelight Massage service. We’ve been expecting you.”

She beckoned them to follow. “I’ll show you to your changing rooms,” she said, leading them around a corner to a softly lit alcove.

They stopped at a pair of doors marked with discreet signs. “Ladies,” the attendant said with a gentle nod to Serena, “and Gentlemen,” she added for Theo. “Inside, you’ll find robes and slippers waiting on the bench. Feel free to leave your belongings in the lockers provided.”

Serena slipped inside the small but elegant dressing room, inhaling the faint aroma of lavender. A cushioned bench stood against one wall, and on it lay a folded plush robe embroidered with the lodge’s name, along with soft terry slippers. The locker door stood ajar, inviting her to store her clothes and handbag. She traced her fingertips along the robe’s fluffy sleeve, absorbing the moment—this was more luxurious than anything she’d experienced in a while.

Across the wall, a large mirror reflected her wide-eyed look of anticipation. She exhaled, letting go of her lingering nerves, then quickly changed out of her clothes. As she slipped into the robe, the fabric was warm and comforting against her skin, making her shoulders relax.

Outside, the soft murmur of trickling water and muted chime music underscored the spa's calm. Once dressed in the robe and slippers, she stepped back into the corridor. She found Theo outside the men's changing area.

The spa attendant reappeared, guiding them toward frosted-glass doors further down the corridor. "Your Candlelight Massage awaits."

The attendant led them into a spacious chamber. Flickering candles lined a low shelf, their warm glow dancing over walls painted in serene shades of blue and gray. Moonlight streamed through enormous windows that overlooked the rippling waters of Fate Lake.

Set at the center of the room were two massage tables, draped in plush white linens. Near each table stood a neatly arranged collection of hot stones, black and smooth. A mix of sandalwood and jasmine scented the air, and Serena felt her shoulders loosen just from the soothing fragrance alone.

"Whenever you're ready," whispered a soft-spoken masseuse. Another masseuse by the second table mirrored the invitation with a kind smile. Serena and Theo exchanged a glance, and they moved toward their respective tables parted by a privacy screen. The attendants left momentarily for them to get situated on their tables.

Serena slipped off her robe and settled onto the massage table, lying face down beneath a warm sheet. She could faintly hear Theo doing the same beside her. Every brush of cool air against her skin heightened her senses, while the hush of the spa

magnified her awareness of his presence.

Moments later, as the masseuse poured oil onto her skin, Serena caught the faint aroma of almond and castor oil. The first smooth stone pressed against the muscles of her back, and a deep sigh escaped her lips. The stone's warmth seemed to melt away tension she hadn't even realized she was carrying. She let her eyes drift shut, fully conscious of Theo's table only a few steps away. The knowledge that he was right there in this shared moment made her heart flutter.

She could sense the flow of the masseuse's practiced hands gliding stones over her shoulders, down her arms, and across her lower back in a slow, rhythmic pattern. With each shift of heated stone, Serena felt her inner cougar relax in response. Across the gently lit space, she heard the soft hiss of Theo inhaling, presumably feeling a similar release of tension under his masseuse's careful work.

At one point, the masseuses invited them to turn over so they could place stones along their fronts and shoulders. Serena caught Theo's gaze across the dimly lit room, the moonlight catching the glint in his eyes. In that unspoken exchange, she felt the weight of her past doubts slip away, replaced by a slow certainty that what lay between them could be safe, comforting, and profound.

Under the enticing aroma of sandalwood and jasmine, and the glow of moonlight washing through the glass, Serena allowed her mind to float. She felt the press of the stones across her collarbones, the gentle heat seeping through her skin. Her cougar purred contentedly in her chest.

When the masseuses finally removed the last stones and stepped back, letting the warmth linger on her skin, Serena opened her eyes. The candlelit room felt charged with a new closeness. She turned her head, meeting Theo's gaze. He wore a blissful expression, and for a moment, they simply looked at one another—breathless and entirely at ease.

She couldn't recall the last time she'd let herself relax this completely. The sense of kinship with Theo intensified, as though all the barriers between them had melted away with her stress. For the first time, Serena felt she could truly connect to Theo. With her mate.

Chapter

Seventeen

Serena settled on the couch in the living room of the suite, heart still light from the spa's lingering magic. She leaned back against the cushions, gazing at the bouquet of red roses Theo had bought for her. He carried over a bottle of champagne, icy condensation sliding down its sleek surface.

"Shall we?" he asked quietly, glancing at her with a teasing grin.

She nodded, a soft laugh escaping her throat. "Absolutely."

He popped the bottle, muffling the cork's release with a towel. Then, filling two glasses, he handed one to her, the gentle fizz dancing at the rim. They clinked a toast, and Serena sipped the cool, crisp bubbles that crackled on her tongue.

The atmosphere felt quietly electric, each moment heightened by the glimmer of moonlight through the balcony doors. They danced across Theo's features, illuminating the curve of his mouth when he smiled at her. She felt an unfamiliar confidence growing inside her. For the first time in forever, she felt safe to lean into a connection.

Her inner cougar stirred with an insistent hum of longing that pulsed through her veins. For years, she had kept that restless feline hidden behind caution and walls of fear. Every instinct within her urged her to close the distance, to claim and be claimed. The intensity of it both thrilled and overwhelmed her, lighting a fire in her

chest.

She set her glass on the coffee table, turned to him, and cupped his jaw. Theo's lips parted. Encouraged by the warmth in his eyes, she leaned in and pressed her mouth to his. The taste of champagne lingered on his lips, adding sweetness to his kiss.

Theo responded with a low hum, his hand sliding around her waist. The heat from their connection radiated through her body. When they finally parted, Serena took a deep breath. "I guess the massage did wonders for my nerves."

Theo's voice sounded equally affected. "Me too."

She couldn't help but smile, tangling her fingers with his. In that moment, she felt safer and more open than she had in a long time. Prodded on by her inner cougar, she climbed into Theo's lap, straddling him. "I'm not ready for claiming," she said, looking him in the eye.

"I understand. I won't bite you. I swear it."

Without hesitation, she pressed her lips firmly to his, her tongue sweeping through them to taste his mouth. His responding groan vibrated against her, and she thrilled at the warmth of his hands grasping her waist. Each flick of his tongue fueled the pulsing desire coiling in her belly, and the air around them seemed to shimmer with intensity.

She could feel him growing hard beneath her and moisture gathered between her thighs. Serena's desire deepened. Heart hammering, she seized the hem of her sweater, tugging it up and over her head.

Theo's gaze grazed across her bare skin and the satiny fabric of her bra. He drank in the sight of her, a low groan rumbling in his throat. She could almost feel his pulse in

the heated space between them. “You’re gorgeous,” he murmured, voice husky with desire.

She inhaled, exhilaration filling her body. Seeing the hunger in Theo’s expression made her pussy ache. With reverent hands, he cupped her breasts over the smooth fabric, thumbs brushing over her nipples. Electricity darted along her nerves, each pass of his thumbs sending a rush of sensation to her core.

Every inch of her skin buzzed with sensuality, and she reveled in the certainty that, in this moment, both her body and her inner cougar wanted the same thing: to let down her barriers and surrender to this raging desire.

Serena felt a fierce surge of hunger. She thrust her tongue into Theo’s mouth again, plunging deeper, feeding on his taste with unrestrained heat. With each slow roll of her hips, she felt him growing harder beneath her. The pressure of his cock made her pussy ache with need.

A ragged sound escaped Theo’s throat. He slid his hands down the curve of her waist, then gripped her ass, pulling her against him. Theo’s fingers worked deftly at the clasp of her bra. He slipped the straps down her shoulders, and the cool air grazed her newly exposed flesh.

Theo’s gaze turned molten, a soft growl rumbling deep in his throat. He leaned in, wrapping his lips around one nipple, coaxing it to hardness with each warm pull. Serena’s head fell back, her spine curving as a wave of pleasure washed through her. His tongue flicked over the sensitive peak, sending fresh sparks of desire flooding her veins. His free hand splayed across her back, anchoring her in place against him.

Serena reached down between them and deftly slid the zipper of Theo’s pants open. She eased his length free, heat rolling through her as her palm wrapped around him. She stroked him slowly, taking in the soft hitches of his breath and the tension coiling

in his muscles. Each pass of her hand ignited a deeper surge of need.

Her inner cougar yowled to feel him. “I want you... inside me.” The confession trembled through her. She could see the hunger in his gaze, mirroring her own.

Theo’s grip on her tightened, his fingers pressing into the soft curve of her ass. With a sudden burst of purpose, he stood, taking her with him. Serena wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulse wild in her ears. His strength sent a flush of exhilaration through her body, and she let out a breathless laugh as he carried her to the bedroom.

Chapter

Eighteen

Theo lowered Serena onto the bed, the soft duvet cradling her back. She kicked out of her shoes and her pulse throbbed with urgency. Theo's hands slid around the waist of her jeans and he pulled them down. A flush spread across her cheeks, and a breath caught in her throat. Every nerve ending seemed to be on alert, her inner cougar purring with anticipation.

She caught Theo's gaze. "Are you sure your beast is under control?" she asked, a sudden fear tightening in her gut.

"I won't claim you unless you ask for me to. I swear on my life."

A fresh wave of excitement coursed through Serena as Theo moved between her thighs. His gaze flicked up to her in a final, silent request for permission. She answered by threading her fingers through his hair, guiding him closer to her aching need. Her pulse throbbed in her ears as she felt the first brush of his tongue on her inner thigh.

He continued upward, peppering soft, openmouthed kisses along her skin. A trembling exhale escaped her when his mouth finally found her clit, the press of his lips and tongue an instant jolt of pleasure. Her inner cougar roared. She tilted her hips as he licked her swollen bud. Every languid stroke of his tongue, every gentle suck, kindled the growing desire in her core.

It had been six long years since she had dared to trust anyone like this—six years of keeping walls firmly in place, of never allowing herself to be vulnerable enough to feel the kind of connection she now shared with Theo.

She'd nearly forgotten the potent thrill of allowing someone to give her pleasure. Serena couldn't hold back the low moan that rolled through her. She bucked her hips in time with Theo's rhythm, urging him deeper.

When he slipped a careful finger inside her, her head tipped back, and a throaty gasp broke free. She gripped the sheets at her sides, knuckles whitening as a current of sensation spiraled through her. His warm mouth and skillful hands guided her toward the brink.

Then the tension shattered, she gasped his name, pleasure crashing over her in a wave of ecstasy. Her thighs pressed around him, body quivering as she surrendered to the blinding surge of release.

She looked down to find Theo gazing up at her, his own breathing ragged, devotion shining in his eyes. A flush of heat colored her cheeks. But she felt no shame in her climax. Reaching for him, she guided him up so their lips could meet in a slow, grateful kiss. She could taste herself on his lips. And it made her want to feel him inside her even more.

With a slight tilt of her chin, she slid her hands down to the waistband of his pants. Theo stood back and eased his pants down over his hips. Her cheeks heated when he pushed off his pants and underwear, baring his body to her eyes. She drank in the smooth lines of him, the taut muscles of his stomach, and his stiff, throbbing cock.

He reached into the side table drawer and removed a small foil packet. A shared look passed between them. She was on the pill, but she appreciated him putting on a condom. Theo tore the packet open and rolled the sheath down over his length.

His lips curved into a smile, the kind that hinted at the primal hunger simmering beneath his controlled exterior. He hovered above her, his forearms braced beside her shoulders, the heat of his body radiating against her skin like a furnace. Her entire being ached for him. His dark eyes locked onto hers, and she saw the beast lurking just beneath the surface.

The thick head of his cock brushed against her entrance, teasing her with the barest of pressure. She gasped, her body trembling with the promise of what was to come. He lingered there, testing her readiness, the anticipation almost unbearable. Her inner walls clenched, desperate to be filled, to feel him stretch her open.

He pressed forward, the blunt tip of him parting her folds with a delicious, burning ache. She felt every inch as he slid into her. Her breath hitched, and her nails dug into his back as she took him in, feeling every ridge of his cock against her slick walls. Her body instinctively clenched around him, drawing him deeper, reveling in the velvety heat of his length filling her completely.

Theo paused, his hips flush against hers, letting her adjust to the fullness of him. She could feel the throb of his cock inside her, potent and insistent, the heat of him radiating through her core. He kissed her, deep and consuming, their tongues tangling in a dance that left her breathless. His hands roamed over her body, and his lips trailed down her neck.

As he began to move, the first slow thrust pulled a moan from her lips. His cock rubbed against her g-spot. The sound she made spurred him on, his measured pace turning bolder, each deliberate stroke a revelation. Her hands roamed down the sculpted planes of his back, feeling the hard flex of his muscles as he moved above her. The power in each thrust left her gasping for air, her legs wrapping around his waist.

The slick sound of their bodies coming together filled the room, a symphony of lust

and desire. Serena's inner muscles tightened around him in desperate waves, the coil of pleasure in her core winding tighter with every thrust. She clung to him as the ache inside her grew, threatening to consume her entirely.

Her climax crashed over her like a tidal wave, her body convulsing around him as wave after wave of pleasure tore through her. She cried out, her nails scoring his skin as she clung to him, lost in the sheer, blinding ecstasy of it. Theo thrust into her one last time, his own release following hers as he spilled inside her, filling her with the hot rush of heat.

As they came down from the cloud of ecstasy, they held each other in the soft glow of the lamplight. Serena laid her head against Theo's chest, listening to the wild rhythm of his heart. Her body still pulsed with a wet ache, making her want more.

She'd let herself feel for the first time in so long. With her mate. A man who had his own demons. Tonight, they'd overcome their demons together. He'd maintained his control. She'd let go of hers. As she brushed her hand over his muscled chest, Serena felt her connection to Theo unfurling like a rose. Blooming into something transcendent and timeless. She just hoped she wasn't making a mistake.

Chapter

Nineteen

Theo woke up to pale sunlight edging through the suite's large windows. His head felt clearer than it had in months. He lay there for a moment, body half-buried in the cozy bedding, letting the memories of last night drift back over him: the warmth of Serena in his arms, the way her eyes lit with trust when she finally let him in, the calm that had washed over him after they'd made love.

He turned onto his side, gazing at Serena. Her dark lashes fluttered against her cheeks. Pale sunlight fell across her skin, making her look soft and vulnerable in a way he wasn't used to seeing her.

He remembered all the human women who'd thrown themselves at him in Portland, how hollow those encounters had felt. Never once had he come out of those nights feeling like this—like he could die happy, having tasted something so real.

The memory of how she'd moaned and trembled in his arms filled him with a fierce desire. She blinked awake, taking in her surroundings with a slightly confused expression. Catching sight of him, Serena smiled. "Good morning," he said quietly, his voice still rough with sleep. "How are you?"

She gave a small nod. "I'm good. Last night was amazing."

"Last night was the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced."

Serena giggled and ran her hand up his thigh. An alert chimed from his phone on the bedside table. With a sigh, he snagged it. The honeymoon was over—time to face reality again. “I have a message from the academy,” he said, scanning the text. “There’s a White Water session in an hour, and they’re short-handed a lifeguard. They need me to step in.”

Serena sat up, her easy warmth vanishing behind a sense of purpose. “We should get going then,” she replied, tossing the covers aside. The weight of the threat that hung over the academy came rushing back.

The morning air was clear and crisp when Theo arrived at the creek only an hour after leaving Fate Mountain Lodge. The natural rapids would give trainees a chance to practice real-white water techniques.

He’d gathered his lifeguard equipment: throw-bags and a lifeguard float. He strode along the banks of the creek, pausing to watch Logan Carter, who stood in a raft shouting instructions at a group of trainees.

Several inflatable rafts dotted the water’s edge, their bright colors standing out against the dark green pines. He stationed himself near a cluster of lifejackets, scanning them for anything unusual. He glanced around, half expecting to see a missing buckle or broken strap, but everything seemed intact.

Two trainees stepped into a bright orange canoe at the calmer bend of the creek, following the plan to practice gentle paddle strokes before tackling rougher water. Theo watched them push off from shore, trying to gauge their skill levels. They seemed steady at first, but then, without warning, the canoe jerked violently to one side. The hull tipped and both trainees plunged into the current. Shouts erupted from the bank.

Theo’s eyes zeroed in on the swirl of water. One trainee surfaced, sputtering and

coughing, while the other vanished below. A burst of rage and fear seared through him. His bear pushed against his self-control, demanding he shift. Instead, he let his shifter strength course through his muscles.

He sprinted to the creek's edge. "Tie a rope around me," he yelled to the nearest staff member. They hurriedly looped the rope around his waist, securing it with a firm knot. The rest of the staff scrambled to form an anchor line, and Theo plunged into the rushing water.

The current slammed against him, cold and forceful, but he powered forward with broad strokes, body fueled by a strength no ordinary human could match. The staff behind him gripped the rope, eyes wide at the sight of Theo propelling himself through the turbulent creek. He spotted the trainee, hands flailing helplessly.

"Hold on!" Theo called, voice muffled by the churning water. He reached the trainee in a few swift strokes. Water roared around them, and gravel scraped at Theo's legs, but he ignored the pain and seized the young man's arm. Gasping, the trainee clutched Theo's lifeguard float, his eyes wild with panic.

Theo secured the trainee on the float, feeling the rope around his own waist go taut. The staff on shore pulled in unison, fighting the raging creek. Theo pressed his boots against the rocky bottom and heaved with all his might. His muscles burned, but he refused to yield to the current.

The rope jerked, and Theo kicked hard, using his powerful legs to gain ground. They lurched toward the shallows, coughing and sputtering as the staff hauled them closer. When they reached waist-deep water, Theo lifted the young man out of the water, his supernatural strength carrying him to the rocky bank.

Serena and Alicia rushed forward with med packs. Serena draped a towel over the trainee's trembling shoulders, and Alicia began a quick evaluation. Theo took a

moment to breathe. Relief washed over him, but the day was not done yet. The canoe still bobbed in the current, creating a potential hazard for others who might paddle that stretch.

Theo got to his feet, ignoring the wet gravel clinging to his shoes. He waded into the creek again, fastening one end of a rope around a stable boulder. Water splashed high against his waist, but he gritted his teeth and held strong. Reaching the canoe, he looped the rope around the hull, then began tugging it toward the bank. The current buffeted him, threatening to sweep him downstream.

By the time he secured the canoe on the rocky shore, he was beginning to feel the burn. He pushed soaked hair from his eyes and knelt to inspect the undercarriage. Something looked off. He ran his hand along the stabilizing bar that should have held firm under normal stress. A couple of screws were missing entirely. He stared at the empty holes, anger stirring in his gut. This was no accident. The canoe had been sabotaged.

A low voice behind him made him glance over his shoulder. Logan's eyes scanned the same missing screws. "That bar was fine yesterday," Logan muttered, shaking his head. "No way it just popped loose."

Theo's jaw tightened as the memory of other so-called accidents rushed back. "Someone is doing this on purpose," he said, voice low. "They nearly drowned that kid today."

Instructors and trainees gathered, murmuring in hushed voices. Theo exchanged a grave look with Logan, the two of them aware that the academy was not safe. Alicia finished her initial examination of the trainee and stood. "He's a bit bruised, and he swallowed a lot of water, but I think he will be all right," she said.

Relief flickered across Serena's features. The bystanders exhaled in unison, though

the tension was far from gone. Theo leaned into Logan. “We have to figure out who is doing this,” he said, gesturing to the canoe. “Next time, it might not end this well.”

Chapter

Twenty

Theo stepped into the meeting room in the admin building, bracing for the tension he knew was waiting inside. Poppy Miller stood at the head of the long table. Morgan Delgado hovered by the wall, arms crossed, his scowl daring anyone to challenge him. Kai lingered near Poppy's chair, wearing that polite, oh-so-helpful expression that made Theo's skin crawl.

Poppy cleared her throat, lifting the folded letter. "The board has issued a new directive," she began, voice taut. "They're alarmed by these so-called accidents."

That statement sent a ripple through the staff. Theo glanced around, noting furrowed brows and anxious murmurs. Poppy tapped the logs on the table, frustration edging her tone. "We've also got scheduling anomalies—logs showing staff completing tasks they swear they never touched. I've spoken with the board, and they want a structured investigation."

Morgan raked a hand over his face. "If leadership had funded my budget requests," he ground out, "we wouldn't be stuck with cheap, outdated gear."

Staffers exchanged uneasy glances. Theo stepped forward. "We almost had a drowning yesterday. Whether it's old gear or something else, we need answers."

Poppy inhaled and turned a page of logs, her pen drumming on the table. "Before we jump to conclusions, let me share the board's second directive." She held up the

folder. “They’ve ordered that we form an Incident Response Team. This team will have full access to logs, sign-out histories, even potential camera feeds once we get them installed. We’re stepping up security measures effective immediately.”

Logan Carter spoke up from across the room. “Good. Because new trainees are panicking. If we don’t contain this, we won’t have any students in the fall session.”

Poppy continued reluctantly. “That being said, the board has suspended overnight modules until we conduct a full investigation. I know it’s drastic, but the board and our insurance reps are adamant. We have inspectors arriving this week. If we fail that check, we lose coverage and will have to cancel the charity climb.”

Multiple people grumbled. Poppy took a deep breath before continuing. “Starting today, no one touches any gear without two staff members signing off. That’s non-negotiable.” She eyed the staff. “If you see anything suspicious, you report it to me or the Incident Response Team.”

Morgan sneered, looking ready to snap. Kai placed a gentle hand on Poppy’s stack of documents. “I can help coordinate the Incident Response Team,” he offered. “The logs, sign-out sheets, official statements—all in one place.”

Poppy pressed her lips together. “We’ll talk about that later,” she said, then raised her voice to address the room. “We reconvene in forty-eight hours. I want a progress report from each department.” Poppy looked around the room, shoulders squared. “Meeting adjourned. Let’s figure this out before it destroys our academy.”

Chapter

Twenty-One

Theo walked across the gravel lot. He paused in front of the gear warehouse door to read a fresh sign that said all gear must be signed out by two staff members. At least the board was doing something. Inside, groups of instructors and trainees stood around, speaking in low voices about the new sign-out procedure.

A posted sheet referenced the Incident Response Team. Someone raised their voice. He looked up and found Morgan Delgado clutching a folder, his posture vibrating with anger. He spoke at a volume that bounced off the tall ceiling.

“If you think some flimsy sign-out sheet is going to end these problems, you’re deluding yourselves,” Morgan fumed, waving the folder. “The real issue is outdated gear. How many times do I have to say it?”

A cluster of staff stood around him. Some nodded, murmuring that maybe Morgan had a point. Others regarded him with open suspicion, recalling rumors that he might be creating problems to force the academy into funding his requests. Morgan rattled off a list of items he believed should be replaced, jabbing the folder as if it were a weapon.

A staffer near Theo whispered, “He’s so dramatic. Maybe he wants us to think he’s innocent.”

Theo spotted Kai standing a few steps away from Morgan, wearing a calm

expression. “Let’s double-check these logs, please,” Kai said, voice gentle. “Every piece of gear has to be signed out by two staffers now. The board is counting on us to follow the rules.”

Morgan slammed the side of the shelf with the palm of his hand. “Rules? You want to fix this place, you start with the budget. Stop patching old ropes and calling it safe.”

Theo headed to a row of shelves holding large coolers and sealed cartons of dried food. He needed them to prepare for the charity climb this weekend, and the new log procedure meant he had to sign them out properly.

His eyes caught a sudden movement near the back: Kai had crouched behind a tall stack of coiled lines. Theo frowned. The man appeared to be fiddling with something on the lower shelf. Before Theo could move closer, Kai rose quickly, a load-bearing anchor kit in his hand. Kai slipped the metal case into his rucksack, glancing around to ensure no one else noticed.

Theo froze, unsure whether to call Kai out then and there. Kai was heading the Incident Response Team and acting as Poppy’s right hand man. While Theo was on thin ice from the shifting incident.

Morgan’s rant grew louder. “You want to accuse me?” he sneered, voice trembling. “Fine. Then give me the budget to replace the trash we keep calling equipment. Maybe then you won’t have trainees nearly dying in canoes.”

Kai was now straightening a row of harnesses, as though he had done nothing out of the ordinary. Theo clenched his jaw and turned back to the cooler, wrestling it down onto a dolly. He then grabbed a carton of vacuum-packed rations. He heard a staffer at a small desk call out, “Theo, did you sign that out under the new system?”

Theo forced a smile. “Yeah, of course. Let me just...” He scribbled his name on the

clipboard on the desk. He then handed it to the staffer for a second signature.

“Just remember I warned you when the next accident happens,” Morgan sniped before leaving the room.

Theo exhaled, feeling frustration well up inside him. Before Theo could decide on a plan, Kai moved toward the back of the warehouse with the rucksack, slipping out of sight.

Theo thought about shouting after him, but maybe Kai had logged out the anchor kit. He adjusted his grip on the dolly handle and maneuvered the cooler out of the warehouse. The new sign-out rule was supposed to fix things at the academy, but the entire place felt ready to implode.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

Serena stood by the bulletin board in the medic bay, reading about the new sign out protocols. “I can’t believe how tense it is lately,” Alicia said, her voice low.

Serena was about to reply when the radio on the nearby desk sputtered. Logan Carter’s voice, sharp with urgency, cut through the static: a trainee on a steep mountainside had slipped on loose rocks, fallen hard on a shoulder, and might have dislocated it.

“That’s serious,” Serena said, turning away from the bulletin board. She shot a look at Alicia. “We need the advanced med kits.”

Alicia nodded and Serena followed her briskly down the hall to the locked supply room. It was locked with a scanner pad. New rules stated two staff members were required to unlock the closet.

Alicia scanned the corridor, tension flitting across her face. Jade Rivers appeared. She noticed their anxious faces and headed over. “What’s happening?” Jade asked.

“Steep fall, possible shoulder dislocation,” Alicia said, gesturing at the locked door. “We need the advanced kits, but I need a second staff member to open the closet.”

Jade quickly flashed her ID badge at the pad. The three of them stepped inside the supply closet. Bright overhead lights lit up rows of medical cabinets. Alicia made a

beeline for the cabinet labeled “Advanced Kits.” She pulled the door open, then froze.

“They’re gone,” she said, voice tight. “All of the advanced kits are missing.”

Serena blinked. “There were ten in there yesterday,” Serena said, stepping closer to peer inside. Confusion rippled through them all.

“We’ll have to manage with basic supplies,” Alicia said, grabbing two basic kits. “We need to get out there now.”

They completed the sign out procedures and rushed outside. Serena and Alicia piled into the waiting van, and Jade revved the engine. Gravel crunched under the tires as they sped away from the campus. A tense quiet settled in, broken only by the radio crackling with updates from Logan.

They arrived at the mountain trail, biting cold hitting them as they hopped out. The path was steep, dotted with loose rocks, and ended near a rocky outcrop. After hiking up the trail they found the trainee leaning against a large boulder, pale and clutching his shoulder. Logan stood beside him, spotting them on arrival.

Coming up to the trainee, Serena dropped beside him and rummaged through the small first-aid kit. “Just hang on,” she said, trying to sound calm. She could see the obvious deformity of a dislocated shoulder, and she worried about neck involvement. Alicia crouched on the trainee’s other side and dug out what little analgesics they had.

“If we’d had the advanced kits,” Serena muttered, “we’d have sedation and better stabilizers for a dislocation like this.”

Alicia set her jaw. “We’ll do what we can.” She carefully positioned the trainee’s arm to reduce pain and braced the shoulder with a makeshift sling from spare bandages.

Serena supported the trainee's head and neck, following basic spine precautions.

Logan crouched beside them, expression dark. "The load bearing anchor failed. A couple of components were cracked when I checked it."

Serena's breath caught. "A failed anchor kit?"

Logan nodded, running a hand over his face. "If the anchor had been stable, the rope would not have slipped at that critical moment."

Alicia's jaw tightened. "And the advanced med kits were nowhere to be found in the medic bay," she added, glancing at Serena. "Someone cleared them out."

An uneasy hush fell over them as they continued tending to the trainee. Serena finished wrapping the man's shoulder. The four of them helped the trainee to his feet, supporting him as they all headed carefully back along the trail.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

Serena stepped into Theo's cabin, took off her backpack, and set it on a chair by the door. "I'm glad you came over," Theo said, his heart thrumming. "Have a seat. I made tea."

Serena glanced around, taking in the space. "Tea sounds great," she said.

He moved to the small kitchen, grabbed two mugs, and then handed one to Serena. He settled beside her on the sofa, and she sipped the tea with a contented sigh. Serena then shifted on the couch as though uneasy about something.

"I feel grimy," she said, an apologetic note in her voice. "Long day and all. I wish I could stand in the shower for an hour right now. The limit on the dorm showers is seven minutes. But they were still full all evening."

"Feel free to use mine. Take all the time you need."

A flicker of excitement crossed her features, then she gave a small nod. "I'd hoped you'd say that. I brought a change of clothes in my backpack."

After they finished their tea, he showed her to the cabin's small bathroom. Serena turned on the water and smiled at him. "Want to join me?"

Steam billowed from behind the shower curtain. He answered with a tilt of his head,

quickly stepping out of his clothes. Serena stripped from her sweaty clothing with a giggle and hopped into the shower. Theo was right behind her with a wide grin.

Warm water cascaded down her hair and over her breasts. Theo's eyes were glued to Serena as she worked the shampoo through her hair, her fingers sliding through the long, dark strands like they were made of silk.

Her tits bounced slightly with each motion, the nipples hard and pebbled from the cool air. He couldn't help but imagine wrapping his lips around them, sucking until she moaned his name.

She rinsed the suds free, tugging him under the spray with her. Theo leaned in, pressing a kiss to her lips. Her fingers grazed down his abdomen. He was so hard it hurt. Her hands moved lower, and he sucked in a sharp breath as her fingers wrapped around his cock.

Her hand moved slowly, teasingly, up and down his length, and he couldn't stop the low moan that escaped his lips. She was driving him wild, her touch sending waves of pleasure crashing through him.

He dropped to his knees like a man possessed, the porcelain hard against his shins, but he didn't care. She stood there with her thighs parted, her pussy already glistening and swollen, just waiting for him. He buried his face between her thighs, his tongue diving into her as though it were the last meal he would ever have.

Her cunt was heaven—warm, wet, and tasting of pure life. He lapped at her like a starving animal, his tongue dragging in broad strokes up her slit before zeroing in on her clit. That little bud was hard and begging for attention, and he gave it everything he had. He flicked it, then slowed down to suck it into his mouth, savoring the way she gasped and ground against his face.

“Oh, Theo—” she moaned, her hands tangling in his hair, pulling roughly as if to keep him exactly where he was. Good luck getting him to stop—he had no intention of moving until she screamed his name and her knees buckled.

He slid two fingers inside her, curling them up to find that spot that made her shiver. She was so tight around him, her walls clenching like she wanted to milk his fingers dry. He pumped them in and out, fucking her with his hand while his tongue worked relentless circles over her clit.

Her moans grew louder, more desperate, and he felt her thighs trembling. She was close—so close. He sucked her clit into his mouth, applying just enough pressure to send her over the edge.

“Oh God, oh fuck—” she cried out, her hips jerking against his face as she came. Her pussy pulsed around his fingers, her juices mixing with the shower water and running down his chin. He kept licking her through it, drawing out every last shuddering wave of her orgasm until she was panting and slumping against the wall.

He pulled back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as he looked up at her. Her chest heaved, her skin flushed from head to toe, and she gazed down at him like he had just hung the moon.

“Time to get out of the shower,” he growled, standing up and pulling her into a rough kiss. “Because I’m not done with you yet.”

Her eyes darkened, and she smirked. “Good,” she purred. “Because I’m not done with you either.”

They made their way to the small bedroom, the only light coming from a dim lamp, illuminating the queen-sized bed. Serena stood near the edge of the bed, her wet body taut with anticipation. Theo’s gaze raked over her, taking in every inch of her perfect

form.

Her body was a work of art. And she had the kind of ass that made a man want to drop to his knees and worship it. She caught his eye, beckoning him to come to her as she turned and bent over the bed. She gripped the mattress and arched her back, presenting her glorious ass to him like an offering.

Theo's breath hitched as he grabbed a condom from the nightstand, his fingers trembling slightly as he ripped open the packet and rolled the latex down his throbbing length. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her, the way her ass cheeks parted just enough to give him a glimpse of her tight, wet pussy.

He stepped closer, his hands settling on her hips, the heat of her skin searing through his palms. He squeezed gently, feeling the way her muscles tensed under his touch, and then he ran his hands up her sides, tracing the curve of her waist before sliding them back down to grip her hips again.

"Serena," he growled, his voice rough with need. "You have no idea what I want to do to you right now."

"I think I do," she gasped, laughing and tossing her head.

She pushed her ass back toward him, inviting him closer. Theo didn't need any more encouragement. He guided his cock to her entrance, the tip brushing against her slick folds as he lined himself up. The first thrust was slow, deliberate. It made her gasp and arch her back even more. He sank into her inch by inch, her tight walls clamping down around him like a vice.

"You're so perfect," he muttered under his breath, his eyes squeezing shut as he fought to keep control.

She was so fucking tight, so hot and wet, her cunt felt like heaven wrapped around his dick. He pulled back slightly before thrusting into her again, harder this time, the sound of skin slapping against skin filling the room. Serena let out a long, drawn-out moan, her hips rocking back to meet him with every thrust.

Theo's bear was ravenous. The beast inside him snarled, clawing at his control, demanding more, deeper, harder. Theo's hands tightened on her hips as he picked up the pace, his cock plunging into her with a rhythm that had her gasping for breath. He could feel her walls fluttering around him, could hear the way her moans grew louder and more desperate with every stroke.

Her ass jiggled with every brutal thrust, and she arched her back just enough to give him a view of her perfect tits bouncing beneath her. He leaned forward, hand snaking around to cup her breast, her nipple hard and begging for attention. He pinched it between his thumb and forefinger, rolling it roughly. The choked moan that ripped from her throat was music to his ears.

"Theo—" she gasped, her voice breaking on his name.

Her pussy clenched around him, her walls fluttering and squeezing his cock in a spasmodic rhythm. He gritted his teeth, his hips snapping forward with a force that had her crying out, her fingers scrambling for purchase on the sheets beneath them. She whimpered, her ass grinding back against him as if she couldn't help herself. "Yes—yes—Theo!"

Her body went rigid beneath him, her back arching as her orgasm crashed over her like a tidal wave. Her pussy clamped down on his cock like it was trying to milk him dry, her moans turning into desperate, broken sobs as she came. Theo's control snapped, his hips stuttering as he buried himself to the hilt and emptied himself inside her with a roar that shook the walls.

When he finally pulled out of her, they were both sweaty, trembling, and utterly spent. He collapsed beside her, his chest heaving as he dragged her limp body against his. “Wow,” he muttered, his voice rough and gravelly. “We’re all dirty again.”

She let out a laugh, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on his chest. “Worth it,” she murmured. Theo couldn’t agree more.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

The soft clink of pans and the sizzle of bacon drifted through the crack in the bedroom door. Theo hummed a familiar tune in the kitchen. “Are you up? Breakfast will be ready soon,” he called.

Serena swung her legs over the bed and said, “I’ll be out in a minute.” She then closed the bedroom door to get dressed. She walked over to her backpack on the floor by the bed. As she reached for her shirt, she noticed a glint of metal on the floor.

She leaned closer and discovered several pieces of metal under the bed. She examined them because the parts looked like something she vaguely recognized. She realized the pieces under Theo’s bed looked a lot like parts of an anchor kit. Her pulse quickened when she remembered Logan mentioning the damaged anchor components from the mountain climbing accident.

Her stomach knotted. Why would these be here? She fought the immediate stab of suspicion. Theo was probably using the parts to repair or build something. Serena inhaled slowly and then snapped several photographs of them to research later. She dressed quickly and made her way into the kitchen.

Theo stood at the stove wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt. He glanced over his shoulder and offered a broad smile. “Morning,” he said, sliding scrambled eggs on to a plate next to a few strips of bacon. “I thought we could use a good meal before heading out for the day.”

Serena smiled back. “Looks good,” she replied, settling at the small table. The chair squeaked as she sat, and she curled her fingers around the steaming mug of coffee he had placed for her. She sipped the delicious brew, trying not to think about the bolts on the floor. Theo sat opposite her, taking in her expression with mild concern.

“Everything okay?”

She paused. “Just worried. Yesterday was tough.” After a few bites, Serena set her fork down. “I have rope training in ten minutes. I should get going soon.”

They finished in silence. When she rose to gather her belongings, Theo stepped over and gave her a gentle hug. She rested her cheek briefly against his chest. A wave of longing and confusion washed over her. She wanted to trust him. She wanted to believe in love.

“Thanks for breakfast,” she said, pulling away. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

Theo nodded, looking puzzled. “Yeah. I’ll text you later.”

With her backpack slung over her shoulder, she stepped out onto the small porch. The crisp mountain air hit her, and she took a deep breath. Sunlight filtered through the tall pines, casting dancing shadows on the ground. Her mind reeled, but she told herself she owed Theo the benefit of the doubt.

As Serena walked onto the gravel path that led toward the academy grounds, she vowed she’d never ignore red flags and fall into a mate trap like her mother. Whether her suspicions were a misunderstanding, or it all pointed to something far darker, she intended to find out the truth.

Serena stepped into her dorm room later that evening. All through her day of training, her thoughts fixated on the strange metal pieces she’d spotted at Theo’s cabin. Her

mind warred with itself and her contrasting impressions of the man who was her mate. At times he could be tender, loving, and kind. At other times, he was unhinged, unbridled, and half crazed.

Serena dropped her backpack next to the bed. Crossing to her small desk, she powered on her laptop. She navigated to the academy's internal resource portal and opened PDF manuals from the Rope Rescue courses. Next, she flipped to a section in her binder titled "Equipment Specs." A printed diagram displayed the components of a standard anchor kit, complete with bolts, washers, and metal connectors.

Her breath caught in her throat as she examined the photos she'd taken. She moved to a new page in the digital manual, stopping at a high-resolution illustration of a specialized load-bearing anchor kit. Each part was labeled with care. Her heart began to pound when she noticed that the indentations, the slight ridges—everything matched the pieces in her photos.

She opened the staff updates on her screen, scanning for any mention of that incident. Within moments, she found a brief bulletin titled "Specialized Kit #47A—Unaccounted For."

Skimming the text, Serena discovered that one went missing sometime before the climb. The brand name and part numbers on the missing kit were identical to the ones in Theo's room.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

Theo left his cabin just after sunrise. The morning light brushed the treetops, and a slight breeze carried the scent of pine through the academy grounds. The insurance inspectors were due at any moment, and tension filled the air. Serena had seemed distant when she left yesterday morning, and they'd barely spoken since. He tried to reassure himself as he walked. He wanted everything to run smoothly when the inspectors arrived.

He entered the cafeteria kitchen and checked the counters and sinks. He glanced at the overhead lights and the walk-in cooler, making sure the space looked spotless. His staff worked quietly in the background, prepping breakfast for the academy trainees. They did not speak much; everyone understood how important this inspection was. Theo forced a calm expression onto his face, though his shoulders felt tight with anxiety.

At 10:15 am, the insurance inspectors stepped into the kitchen. The man wore a well-fitted suit and carried a sleek tablet. The woman, also in a dark suit, clutched a clipboard covered with neat rows of printed forms. They introduced themselves as Norris and Emerson. Theo greeted them with a polite nod and offered to show them around the kitchen area.

The inspectors wasted no time in checking every detail. They asked about food storage and daily menus. They looked inside the pantry and asked Theo to explain his safety logs for perishables. He kept his answers precise, hoping his professionalism

would shine through. Although the tension in the room never broke, he felt relieved to see the inspectors jotting small notes rather than glaring at him.

They turned to the sinks and tested the water temperature. Emerson asked about hygiene protocols, so Theo described how the staff disinfected all surfaces and kept track of cleaning schedules. His stomach was in knots, yet he maintained an outward calm. He reminded himself that this was his domain. He knew the kitchen inside and out.

When they finished in the main preparation area, the inspectors exchanged a few words with each other in low voices. Then Norris cleared his throat and said they needed to examine every place where equipment or supplies might be stored. Theo led them through a narrow corridor to a small supply closet that only he had access to. He unlocked the door and flicked on the light overhead. The inspectors followed and began scanning the shelves. Theo explained that the supply closet was used for non-perishable backups. He expected them to find little of note, perhaps only receipts and a few boxes of dried goods.

Emerson knelt near the back corner. She paused, frowned, and reached into the shadows behind a spare folding chair. She tugged and pulled out a bulky plastic container covered in a thin layer of dust. Norris moved closer with his tablet raised. Theo's pulse spiked when he recognized the label on the container. It read "Advanced Medical Kit"—the same type that had mysteriously vanished from the medic bay.

Emerson opened the container and found several smaller units inside. Norris' eyebrows rose, and he recorded images on his tablet. Theo stood frozen, disbelief pounding in his chest. He had never seen those kits in this supply closet before. His voice caught in his throat before he managed to speak.

Norris and Emerson exchanged a glance, then Norris pulled out his phone and dialed a number. "Ms. Miller," he said into the phone. "We're inspecting the kitchen and

uncovered something in the supply closet that requires your immediate attention. Can you come over, please? Yes... yes, the small one near the end of the corridor. Thank you.”

A tense hush settled in the narrow space as they waited. Theo’s heart hammered, each second dragging as the inspectors flipped through their notes without speaking. The scratch of pen against paper felt impossibly loud in the cramped closet.

“I had no idea those were here,” he said. “Someone must have planted them while I was out.” He heard how frantic he sounded. The inspectors glanced at each other. They jotted down more notes without commenting.

Finally, multiple pairs of brisk and purposeful footsteps approached. Poppy Miller rushed into the hall and entered the supply closet. Kai Morrow followed close behind, his expression grim. Their gazes fell on the med kits. Poppy’s voice came out sharper than Theo had ever heard it.

“Care to explain why these missing kits are hidden in your supply closet?” she asked. She looked both alarmed and furious. Theo felt heat crawl up his neck.

“I’ve never seen them before,” he said. “You have to believe me. They were not here when I last checked this room.” He turned to Kai. Kai wore a serious, almost pained look that left Theo unsettled. Poppy exhaled, then took a step closer to the container. She shook her head in disappointment.

“I gave you a chance,” she said. “You said you had everything under control after that day in the forest.” Theo winced at the memory of losing control in his grizzly form. He had been trying so hard to prove he was stable.

“I’ve been compiling the evidence for the Incident Response Team,” Kai said. “This is not looking good, Theo.”

Theo felt a flash of anger. He clenched his fists at his sides and forced himself to speak calmly. “I rescue people,” he said. “I saved a trainee from drowning. SAR is in my blood.” He turned to Kai, voice rising. “I saw you take an anchor kit out of the gear warehouse. That was right before the climbing accident.”

Kai drew back with a startled expression. He denied it at once. “I never took anything. Perhaps we should search your cabin. These med kits in your supply closet warrant further investigation.” He pointed at the container. Poppy threw up her hands, uncertain. She looked from Theo to Kai, searching for some clue on who to believe.

The two insurance inspectors glanced at each other. Norris spoke in a firm voice. “We need to document everything. If we can’t account for these missing safety items, the academy’s coverage may be void. That would mean shutting everything down until further notice.”

Poppy’s stance stiffened. She folded her arms and fixed her gaze on Theo. “Kai might have a point. If you are innocent, then there is no harm in us checking your cabin.”

Theo’s mouth went dry. A cold dread washed over him at the thought that someone could have planted something else in his cabin. He imagined the inspectors poking around, and he wondered if this was exactly what the saboteur wanted.

Poppy nodded at Kai. “Let’s head to Theo’s cabin. We won’t find anything if you have nothing to hide.”

Chapter

Twenty-Six

Theo led the group up the narrow path to his cabin. Poppy followed a few steps behind, her features set in a serious expression. Kai trailed her, face calm in a way that put Theo on edge. The insurance inspectors brought up the rear. Theo exhaled slowly, trying to keep control of the dread churning inside him.

When they reached the cabin, Theo opened the door and stepped in. Without pausing, the inspectors moved through the small living area, opening cupboards and lifting cushions. Theo stood near the couch and watched as they disappeared into his bedroom. His inner bear grumbled, but he willed himself to maintain control. Kai looked down on him, wearing a smug expression. Poppy stood by the bedroom door with her arms folded.

“Could you all come in here, please?” Emerson called from the back of the cabin.

Theo followed Poppy into the room. They found Norris crouched on the floor near his bed. The inspector was holding several metal pieces in his hands.

“These appear to match the missing anchor kit components,” Norris said. He turned to Emerson, who nodded in agreement.

Theo blinked, shock coursing through him. “I’ve never seen those before,” he said, stepping closer. “I swear, someone must have hidden them here.” His voice sounded shaky in his own ears.

Poppy's gaze shifted to Kai, then back to Theo. Kai arched an eyebrow as if curious.

Theo took a breath. "I saw you, Kai. I saw you take an anchor kit from the gear warehouse right before that climbing accident." He pointed a finger in Kai's direction. "I am not lying."

Kai's expression tightened. "There is nothing in the logs showing I ever signed out an anchor kit," he said. "Whatever you think you saw, you are mistaken."

Theo wanted to snap at him, but Poppy stepped between them. Her jaw was tense. "Theo, I gave you a chance. Since you arrived, the academy has been plagued with incidents. Now these anchor parts turn up in your cabin." She paused, her tone brittle. "You're fired."

Theo felt his heart pound. "I didn't take those parts or the med kits," he said. "This is a setup."

Poppy's tone remained cold. "Consider yourself lucky I'm not having you arrested." She glanced at the inspectors, who were busy taking notes. "But I do intend to involve the authorities immediately."

Norris cleared his throat. "This issue must be put to rest, or the charity climb will have to be canceled," he said. "The risk to our coverage is too high."

Kai raised a brow. "The academy is already on thin ice. If we don't solve this quickly, the entire place could be shut down."

Theo lifted a hand in frustration. "Then look at Kai," he said. "He is behind all of this."

"Enough," Poppy said, voice firm. "We have to resolve this before the charity climb,

or there will be no academy left.” She turned to Theo, her gaze unyielding. “You have an hour to gather your things and leave. I will not say it again. The police will be contacting you.”

Theo stood frozen, the weight of her words pressing down on him. He looked at the anchor kit parts in the inspector’s hands and felt fury and disbelief swirl inside him. The unfairness of it stung like a festering wound.

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

Serena hesitated for a moment as she watched Theo take a duffel bag to his car. Her mind reeled with questions. When she reached the porch, she found Theo leaning against the frame, his shoulders slumped. “What happened?” she asked, though part of her already knew.

Theo turned his gaze to her. For a moment, he looked too exhausted to answer. Finally, he spoke. “They fired me,” he said. “They think I’m behind all the sabotage.”

Serena’s stomach twisted. “Fired you? Why?”

He swallowed hard. “They found the missing medical kits in a kitchen supply closet. I never saw them in there,” he said, his expression tight. “They decided to inspect my cabin and found anchor kit parts under my bed.”

Serena’s eyes widened. “I saw them yesterday. I know they are from the anchor kit that went missing.”

He clenched his fists. “You saw them and didn’t tell me?” His anger simmered, and she noticed his eyes darkening. “Someone set me up. If you’d told me, I could have done something sooner.”

She raised her hands in a placating gesture. “I didn’t know what to think. I was shocked.”

His gaze flickered with hurt. “You think I did this? I’ve been framed. How can you not see that?” His voice rose, and fur began to ripple down his arm. His posture grew rigid, as though he was fighting to keep from shifting.

Serena pulse raced. “Theo, calm down. You’re losing control.”

He took a shaky breath. “I need you to believe me. Someone wants me out of the academy. I’d never hurt anyone here.”

She felt torn between pity and fear. She thought of her father’s imposing rage whenever he felt challenged. Theo wasn’t her father, yet the threat in his stance made her instinctively recoil. “I need to go. We can talk about this later.”

He stepped forward, reaching for her. “Please. Don’t go. You have to believe me.”

Her heart thundered as she realized she’d backed into a wall. Memories of her father loomed large in her mind, fueling her panic. “I can’t...” she whispered. “I can’t be around you when you’re like this.”

She skirted around him and rushed away, nearly stumbling on the porch steps. Theo called her name, but she couldn’t bring herself to look back. All she could see was the danger that flickered in his eyes. Tears blurred her vision. She felt foolish for letting her guard down so quickly.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Serena's pace was frantic, and her shoulders looked stiff with anxiety. Theo's thoughts churned with panic as he caught up to her. He reached out with half-shifted fingers that had already begun to extend into claws.

His grip was far too firm, and he felt the tips bite into her flesh. Blood welled up beneath his clawed fingertips, painting faint red streaks on her skin. She hissed in pain and whirled around, tears streaming down her cheeks. She tore free from his grasp and glared at him.

"Don't you ever touch me again," she said, her voice shaking. "Don't speak to me. We're done."

Shock and horror coiled through his entire body. The finality in her words slammed into him like a physical blow, and his mind reeled at the thought of losing her forever. He opened his mouth to speak, but his throat burned, and no sound escaped.

It was as though someone had stolen every breath from his lungs, leaving him adrift and desperate. His inner bear raged beneath his skin, demanding he do something, anything, to keep her from walking away. Yet he stood there, hollow and motionless, unable to stop the heartbreak that now consumed him.

He took a shaky step closer, voice quavering with heartbreak. "Please, Serena," he pleaded, "I'm begging you. Please don't leave me like this. I need you..."

His words came out in a broken whisper, tears threatening at the corners of his eyes. He stood there trembling, every fiber of his being focused on that plea, hoping she would see the truth in his eyes before it was too late.

She let out a shaky breath, grasping her bleeding shoulder. “No, Theo,” she whispered, “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t stand all this anger and confusion. I’m sorry.”

She turned and walked away, the crunch of gravel sounding painfully final. “Serena,” he moaned.

Desperation gnawed at him. He had already lost his job and every shred of trust from the academy. Now he faced the reality that Serena wanted nothing more to do with him. His bear stirred in the pit of his stomach, fueled by the devastation he felt. He tried to keep it under control, but heartbreak and rage merged into a single wave of emotion he couldn’t contain.

A strangled roar tore from his throat. It echoed through the clearing, sending birds fluttering into the sky. In that instant, his body convulsed. Fur erupted across his arms, and his hands morphed into massive paws. There was no chance to hold it back. His mind teetered, caught between human thought and animal instinct.

He lost all human awareness the moment his paws hit the ground. His ears rang with the sound of his own labored breath. He lunged away and tore into the forest. Branches and thorns raked across his thick fur, but he felt nothing beyond the raging need to run and destroy.

He charged through the undergrowth, chest heaving with wild fury. A sudden movement near his paws caught his attention, and he spotted a cottontail rabbit bolting for the cover of a fallen log.

He threw his weight forward, muscles bunching as his powerful form collided with the terrified creature. The rabbit let out a high-pitched squeal and tried to twist free, but his claws pinned it to the ground before it could escape. Its frantic kicks scuffed the earth, scattering leaves and dirt.

Theo felt a jagged rush of triumph at its helpless struggle. His jaws closed over the rabbit's back, and he bit down hard, warm blood flooding his mouth. He tore into the fur and flesh with brutal, animalistic force, the taste of fresh kill igniting a dark hunger within him.

With each desperate twitch of the dying rabbit, he felt himself slip further into the beast. Every rip of sinew and every ragged breath fed the savage frenzy that seized him. The hot spatter of blood across his muzzle drove him deeper into a raw, primal state that shattered any last trace of his humanity.

Adrenaline pounded through his veins, and he continued his mad dash through the woods as the day faded into dusk. He felt no pain, only a dull ache of loss buried in the animalistic frenzy. Each step took him higher into the mountains, where the air grew colder.

By the time full night fell, his limbs trembled from exhaustion. He stumbled across a shallow cave near a rocky outcrop. The entrance was low and dark, but it offered enough shelter to satisfy his instinct to hide.

He stepped inside and collapsed against the cold stone, fur still bristling. A heavy, haunted feeling pressed on his mind. Some corner of his consciousness recalled the life he had known only hours ago. As the moonlight slipped into the cave, he closed his eyes, uncertain if he would ever be able to reclaim the man he had been before.

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

The next morning, Serena spotted a police officer walking into the administration building as she passed. Her eyes were gritty from crying, and her bandaged shoulder still ached from Theo's claws. Inside the medic bay, Alicia stood by a small counter, reviewing supply lists.

"You look like you barely slept," Alicia said, looking up from the clipboard. "I'm surprised you came in at all after what happened with Theo."

Serena set her bag down and forced a wan smile. "There's too much to think about," she said. "Not sleeping made more sense than tossing and turning."

They spent the morning tending to a few trainees who came in with minor sprains or bruises. Serena tried to force her mind onto medical protocols, but her thoughts roamed to Theo.

Midway through their shift, Alicia guided Serena to a quieter corner of the bay. "I want you to hear it from me before the rumors get out of hand," she said, voice hushed. "The police didn't find Theo's prints on any of the gear they found in Theo's supply closet or cabin."

Serena's heart gave a sudden jolt. "So... he's not wanted for the sabotage?" she asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Alicia shook her head. “They aren’t treating him as a prime suspect at the moment. But the academy staff... you know how they are. They think he orchestrated everything and somehow wore gloves or wiped the prints. Their minds are made up. You saw how he lost control. That made people assume the worst.”

Serena gripped the edge of the counter. “I can’t help but feel I’m partially responsible. I saw those parts before the inspectors found them. I knew they were from an anchor kit. I should have said something.”

Alicia gave her a sympathetic look, eyes full of concern. “He’s your mate,” she said. “I’m sure it’s not easy to reconcile that with what happened.”

Serena felt tears threaten again, but she blinked them back. She spent the rest of the day staring at the clock between treating minor ailments and organizing supplies. Her mind spun with guilt for doubting Theo, anger at his wildness, and confusion about the evidence. She questioned her own judgment. She told herself she had promised never to let anyone control her or threaten her. Yet maybe she was the one who misread the situation. She hated how torn she felt.

At the end of her shift, Serena wiped down a table, her motions mechanical and her focus somewhere far away. Her phone rang abruptly, jarring her. She picked it up, seeing her mother’s name on the screen. Immediately, her stomach tightened.

“Mom?” she answered hesitantly. Her mother’s breathing came in rapid gasps.

“Serena,” her mother began. “Your father... there was an accident.” Her voice broke on the last word, and a wave of static filled the brief silence. “He’s in the hospital. The doctors say he might not... he’s in critical condition, Serena.”

Serena’s hand flew to her mouth. Her father’s image, tall and commanding, rose in her mind. “How... what happened?” Her voice sounded small in her own ears.

“They said he crashed,” her mother said, voice trembling. “He was flying, and something went wrong. He fell from a great height. The doctors... they aren’t sure if he’ll last the night.”

Serena leaned against the wall, her breath stolen by this new wave of dread. The events of the last day had already stretched her to breaking. Now she felt the floor spinning under her feet. “Mom... I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Come if you can,” her mother whispered, trying not to break down. “It would help me to have you here. I know things haven’t been easy, but I had to tell you.”

The call ended soon after. Serena stood there, staring at the phone as tears ran hot down her cheeks. In less than twenty-four hours, she had gone from the hope of a mate bond to the horror of a savage meltdown, and now to the news that her toxic father could be dying. She swallowed hard, trying to steady her breathing. Alicia came around the corner, eyes widening with concern.

“Serena,” Alicia said gently, “are you alright?”

Serena lowered the phone, feeling numb. “My father,” she managed, voice cracking. “He... he’s in critical condition. My mother needs me... I need to figure out... oh god.”

Alicia rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Do whatever you have to do,” she said softly. “I’ll cover for you here. Family is family. You should go to her.”

Nodding, Serena tried to piece together what her next step should be. Her gaze flicked to the window, where twilight tinged the horizon. She thought of Theo somewhere out in the woods, lost in a frenzy.

Chapter

Thirty

After the plane touched down in Sacramento, Serena moved through the busy terminal in a fog of anxiety. Her mother's texts guided her to the hospital where her father had been taken. The fluorescent lights in the lobby buzzed overhead as she hurried through automatic doors. The sharp, sterile smell of antiseptic filled her lungs, and she spotted her mother, Grace Vaughn, pacing at the far end of a corridor.

She had never seen her mother look so disheveled. Strands of hair stuck to her damp forehead, and her eyes were red from crying. The moment their gazes met, her mother burst into fresh tears, rushing forward to wrap her arms around Serena.

Through the small window in the door, she could see machines attached to her father, tubes and wires connected to his body. He looked smaller than she remembered, as if the hospital bed had swallowed up the powerful man who once towered over her.

Her mother sank onto a nearby chair, motioning for Serena to join her. "I only left him three weeks ago," she said, her voice trembling. "It took me so long to find the courage. I'd hoped he could get help. I'd hoped things would be different."

Serena frowned, remembering her father's fierce anger whenever he felt challenged. "What happened?" she asked softly.

Grace lowered her head, black hair with a streak of white falling over her face. "They think he lost control of his dragon. But I don't think it was an accident. He was a

broken man who never had a chance. His father... did horrible things to him. He was never a whole person. I kept hoping that if I loved him enough, he'd change."

Serena said nothing for a moment. She recalled her own childhood and the constant tension in the house. "I used to think you stayed because you agreed with how he ran our lives. But it was never that simple, was it?"

Her mother's eyes brimmed with tears. "No. I stayed because I was afraid to be alone, and I thought leaving would make things worse. Now I see that maybe we were both already lost."

Serena stared at the still form of her father through the glass, trying to reconcile the terrifying figure who once ruled her childhood with the frail shape in the bed. "I don't know what to feel," she admitted. "He was so cruel. But watching him like this..."

Her mother reached for her hand. "I understand. I feel the same. Anger and pity and guilt, all twisted together."

They spent the night in the harsh glow of fluorescent lights, sipping lukewarm coffee from paper cups. Nurses bustled in and out of his room, offering updates that never gave much hope. Serena felt the minutes drag, her mind wandering to Fate Mountain and the heartbreak she left behind.

At three in the morning, the beeping from her father's monitors changed. Serena jerked awake as flashing lights filled the room. Nurses and doctors rushed in with crash carts, calling for more help. Alarms screeched, and her mother stood, gripping Serena's arm with trembling hands.

They watched from outside the room, hearts pounding as the medical team fought to keep him alive. Serena's mind flooded with horrible memories. But in that moment, she found herself holding her mother's hand, tears streaming down both their faces.

The doctor emerged, face grim, and quietly shook his head. “We did everything we could,” he said. “I’m very sorry.”

Serena felt a strange hollowness open inside her chest. She stepped closer to the open door, staring at her father’s body. Her mother broke down, clutching Serena’s shoulder with a desperate sob.

Serena pressed her palm to the glass. Her cheeks were wet with tears she barely felt. Anger and regret twisted in her gut, as if she were both mourning and shaking with rage. She wondered if her father had chosen this, if he had finally given up after tearing their family apart. She could not decide if she was relieved or horrified.

They walked in to see him one final time. Her father’s features were slack, free of the anger that once lingered in every line of his face. Serena’s throat closed up. She placed a trembling hand on her mother’s arm, uncertain what to say or feel.

When they left the hospital room, Serena realized nothing would ever be the same. The man who dominated her childhood was gone, slipping away in a final spiral of anguish. She felt no clean sense of closure, only the turmoil of unresolved pain. She wondered if she should hate him, pity him, or both.

Outside in the corridor, her mother slumped into a chair, tears still shining on her cheeks. Serena sat beside her, resting a hand gently on her mother’s knee. They said nothing, just stared at the drab hospital floor.

She glanced at the dim emergency lights illuminating the hallway and realized she had no idea how to grieve this. All she knew was that something vital had ended. Her world had changed. And when she finally stood, helping her mother gather her coat, she felt every step echo with the loss she could not yet name.

Chapter

Thirty-One

Theo woke up naked in a cave, the taste of blood on his lips. His entire body trembled from cold and exhaustion. When he lifted a shaky hand to his face, he flinched at the sight of dried blood streaking his arm and chest. Memories of the previous night flickered in broken fragments. He remembered running into the forest, and the savage clarity of a predator's hunger.

He tried to piece together how he had ended up here, curled against the rock with no clothes and no sense of time. A dull ache weighed on his chest as he recalled the fury that had consumed him. He had lost himself to the bear, and now the shame settled in like a slow, heavy current.

Pushing himself upright, he pressed his back against the damp cave wall. A shiver coursed through him. He was alone. No comforting voice, no warm blanket, only the echo of his own ragged breathing in the dim light.

He shut his eyes, and in that moment, he saw Serena's tear-filled gaze. He remembered how she had looked at him with terror when he grabbed her. The realization made his stomach twist. He had lost control, and she had responded to his rage with fear.

A fleeting image of his father's reassuring presence drifted through his head, along with his mother's smiling face. But the thought of explaining how he had become a monster in the forest, how everyone at the academy believed he was sabotaging them,

sent a burst of shame racing through his veins. He couldn't bring himself to face them. He felt he had let them down in every possible way.

He remembered the triumphant look in Kai's eyes when the missing kits were discovered. He relived Poppy's disappointment, the way she seemed convinced of his guilt. The more he thought about it, the more betrayal weighed on him. None of them believed him. They had all turned away, leaving him adrift with nowhere to turn. Part of him wanted to prove his innocence, but a deeper part whispered that no one would listen. He felt unmoored, stuck between fury and despair.

He drew in a shaky breath and considered the logical choice: get his car. He'd use the spare key he had under the frame. Put on his clothes, beg his parents for help, maybe hide out in the guest room until he figured out who was framing him.

Yet he knew that meant answering for the missing gear and for the savage part of him that had destroyed any chance of trust. He squeezed his eyes shut, pushing the thought away. Guilt knotted in his chest, and anger simmered beneath it. He could not bear to see his family's disappointment.

Before he could reach any decision, a deep shudder wracked his frame. Something black and sorrowful tensed inside him, awakening the beast that lurked under his skin. His chest felt tight as his breathing went ragged. Every instinct urged him to flee, to destroy, to silence the pounding in his mind. His bear, traumatized and raging, clawed at his consciousness. He had only seconds to sense the coming shift, to feel a flicker of panic for what was about to happen.

He let out a strangled cry as his arms convulsed. Fur sprouted in a dense wave, and his bones contorted with a sickening crack. His vision hazed with red. One instant he was human, crouched in shame against the cave wall, and the next, he was a snarling beast. The cool clarity of his human mind slipped away, leaving only raw impulse.

He rose on all fours, shaking his massive head. A guttural growl echoed against the cave walls. He might have willed himself to reach out for help, now he felt only the dizzying pull of the forest. He launched out of the cave, claws scraping the rock with each powerful stride. The daylight seemed too bright, stabbing his eyes, fueling his confusion.

Branches whipped at his thick fur as he plunged deeper into the woods. His growls became a single chorus of pain and anger. He no longer spared a thought for his parents, for Serena, or for his own innocence. All that remained was the pounding of his heart and the need to escape every shred of memory.

Chapter

Thirty-Two

Serena spent the next few days moving between a cramped funeral home and Grace's new apartment. Paperwork seemed never-ending. She felt an odd mix of duty and relief as she arranged for a simple service.

When the day arrived, clouds drifted over the Sacramento skyline, casting the small funeral home in soft, muted light. Bouquets lined the walls, but not very many people came. Most people who had known her father had drifted away over the years, repelled by his reputation or intimidated by his temper. There were a few who seemed there purely for his money and legacy as a dragon. Serena knew she needed to protect her mom from them.

Serena sat beside her mother at the front during the service. She felt grief for the life he could have led, the father he could have been. Once the service ended, they left the chapel. The quiet ceremony had marked the close of a dark chapter in both their lives.

Later that afternoon, they returned to the old family house. Serena paused in the foyer, taking in the faded wallpaper and dusty furniture. It was the same house where she had grown up, but it felt so foreign.

“We can decide what to keep and what to throw away.”

They spent a few hours sorting through photographs and personal effects. Serena found a crayon drawing she'd made of her family, back when she was too young to

recognize how broken they were. She set the drawing aside, uncertain how she felt about preserving it.

They uncovered a worn journal of her father's from his adolescence, pages filled with angry scribbles and cryptic references to nightmares. Her mother frowned, running her fingers over the battered cover.

"He was never truly free of what happened to him," she murmured. "I thought I owed him something for what he had been through. I never wanted to drag you down into all of this."

The afternoon sun streamed through the windows, highlighting dust motes that swirled in the air. Serena lifted her gaze. "I won't carry his darkness anymore," she said. "It ends here."

Her mother reached for her hand. "Let's get out of here for today," her mother said. "Thank you for helping me, Serena. I hope you can forgive me someday."

Serena stood and wrapped her mother in a hug. "I'm just glad we have a chance to move forward."

As Grace locked the door, Serena felt a flicker of conviction burning deep in her chest. She'd survived her father's legacy of anger. Now, she was free to choose her own path.

Chapter

Thirty-Three

Serena lay on the couch in her mother's cramped new apartment, staring up at the shadows dancing across the ceiling. The night felt unbearably still. Her mother, exhausted by the funeral and going through the old house, had gone to bed an hour ago. Now Serena felt both worn down and oddly awake, as if her mind refused to let her rest.

She thought of the large house where she had grown up, and how different this little apartment was. She felt safer here than she ever had in her old home, but her father's funeral had left her emotions tangled.

A sudden buzz shattered the silence. She jumped, fumbling to grab her phone from the armrest. Alicia's name flashed on the screen, and Serena's heart gave a small leap. She settled back onto the couch cushions and answered.

"Hey," she said. "Is everything okay?"

Alicia's response carried a subdued excitement. "I'm sorry to call this late, Serena, but I thought you'd want to know. The academy is moving forward with the charity climb. The inspectors finally approved our safety measures."

Serena sat up straighter. "That's... good news, I think," she managed. She chewed on her lower lip, dread coiling in her stomach as she wondered how everything else at the academy was faring. "So the sabotage issues... are they resolved?"

Alicia sighed. “Honestly, no one’s been caught. But we haven’t had any further accidents since Theo left. The police are still investigating, but the academy leadership decided we can’t stay on hold forever.”

Theo’s name triggered a spike of worry and guilt in Serena’s chest. She cleared her throat. “Have you talked to him?”

“No one’s seen him,” Alicia said softly. “He ran off into the woods, and his car is still here. The staff is just... well, people are saying this proves he was behind everything. The police haven’t confirmed it, but they do want to bring him in for questioning.”

Serena’s mind whirled with conflicting emotions. She felt relief that no new incidents had endangered trainees, but the fact that Theo’s disappearance might be interpreted as an admission of guilt made her uneasy.

“I wish...” She did not finish the thought, letting the words trail off. “So, the charity climb is definitely happening?”

“It is,” Alicia confirmed, her tone turning purposeful. “Which is why I need you, Serena. You’re the best paramedic we have. The academy is short-staffed, and you know how critical it is to have a well-coordinated medic team on-site. I was hoping you’d come back.”

Serena hugged a throw-pillow and swallowed, feeling the familiar tug of responsibility. “Alright. Let me think about it,” she said quietly. “I’ll get back to you in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Alicia replied, relief seeping into her tone. “Whatever you decide, I appreciate that you’re even considering it. And, Serena... if you do come back, we’ll figure out how to handle the rest. We miss you around here.”

After saying their goodbyes, Serena ended the call and set the phone on the couch. Outside the small apartment window, city lights glimmered faintly against the dark sky. The idea of returning to Fate Mountain made her heart clench. Still, the academy needed her skills. And Serena had always gone where she was most needed.

Chapter

Thirty-Four

Theo woke in the forest, blinking at the fractured sunlight leaking through the canopy. His mouth felt dry, and his muscles ached as he lifted himself from the leaf-strewn ground. Another night had vanished into the haze of his bear's wild frenzy. He glanced down at his human body and took in the ragged scrapes and bruises on his skin.

For a long while, he sat beneath a pines, trying to think rationally. He had to accept that he had become a fugitive. The evidence stacked against him made him look like a saboteur. Despite the bitterness, a firm decision grew in his mind. He was done running. He would return to the academy and face whatever awaited him, even if that meant handing himself over to the police.

The thought of walking up to the gates in his battered, naked human form made him cringe. He considered shifting back into his bear. It felt safer. He could move quietly through the woods that led to the campus.

He exhaled a shaky breath, pushing the hair from his forehead, then let the bear rise. The shift was a slow burn this time, almost delicate after the frenzied nights that had come before. Fur rolled over his arms and back, muscles expanded, and his hands morphed into heavy paws.

His heart pounded as he lumbered closer to the academy. Would they chase him down if he emerged? He thought of Serena, and how she once looked at him like he

was the worst kind of monster. Through a thicket, he spotted colorful flags fluttering in the breeze. It was the charity climb route, snaking along a rocky trail. He approached slowly, staying hidden behind thick foliage.

Movement caught his eye. A lone figure crouched near a stack of ropes at the top of a climbing wall. Theo peered closer, shifting his weight. It was Kai. Theo felt a rush of anger. Kai was tampering with something, possibly cutting or loosening the ropes.

Theo's fury ignited. Kai was the true saboteur. This was the man who had turned the academy against him, who had probably planted evidence in Theo's office and cabin, then pointed the blame on him. A surge of vindication made Theo want to roar, to charge and end the deception once and for all.

He nearly burst out of the trees. Then he forced himself to remain still. If he attacked, Kai would only accuse him of being violent. Theo's plan suddenly changed. He had to expose Kai beyond all doubt. If Theo did not act carefully, Kai would slither away from justice.

Theo thought of his phone. It was still in his car, abandoned when he ran off into the forest. A plan formed in his mind. He would retrieve his phone and capture photos of Kai in the act. That evidence would be undeniable.

Sometime later, he stumbled naked onto the staff parking lot where he had left his car days ago. There was no one around, but anxiety knotted his stomach. He spotted his car and grabbed the spare key from the secret compartment under the front door. He yanked open the trunk and pulled on some clothes from his duffel bag.

Relief washed over him when he spotted his phone lying on the passenger seat. He snatched it up, checking it for battery life. It still had just enough charge. He forced down a spike of adrenaline and started back through the woods.

When he returned, Kai was nowhere to be seen. The rope Kai had tampered with sat coiled where it had been left. He stepped closer. These ropes could cause a serious accident if left unchecked.

He snapped a few photos, knowing he needed to alert Logan. Theo's chest tightened. He stood with his phone clutched in his hand, faced with the task of somehow proving that Kai was the saboteur.

Chapter

Thirty-Five

Serena pulled up to Fate Mountain Wilderness Academy in the early afternoon. She stared out the window at the familiar sight of the main building and the adjoining training fields. She started down the walkway, glancing at a group of trainees practicing knots on the lawn. Memories of Theo and the accidents gnawed at her. She tried to push them away as she headed toward the medic bay.

Inside, Alicia was waiting. The room smelled of disinfectant and stale coffee. The moment Alicia saw Serena, her eyes widened.

“Thank goodness you’re here,” Alicia said. “I was starting to worry you might not come back in time.”

Serena felt a pang of guilt. The last few days had been a whirlwind, and she still felt the weight of her father’s funeral clinging to her. “I had to help my mother with funeral arrangements,” she said. “How are things... here?”

“Not great,” she admitted. “The police still want to question Theo. We’ve got new security cameras on the grounds, and they picked up him coming to his car, twice, yesterday.”

“Twice?”

“He came out of the forest, naked. Got inside the car somehow. Changed. And took

off with his cell phone. He then came back an hour later.”

“No one stopped him?”

“We didn’t have a full-time security guard watching the feeds. But now Poppy is having one start tomorrow.”

Serena inhaled sharply, a mixture of worry and anger bubbling up inside her. She couldn’t shake her lingering feelings for Theo. It was hard for her to imagine what it must be like for him, running wild in the woods like a beast. But the memory of his half-shifted rage made her skin crawl. How was she supposed to reconcile these conflicting feelings? She gripped the edge of a desk, her knuckles white.

Alicia noticed her tension. “I’m sorry. It’s going around campus that you’re his mate,” she said gently. “I wish I had better news. The academy leadership seems convinced he was behind the sabotage, and the police are still investigating. There have been no new incidents since he left, which doesn’t help his case.”

Serena swallowed, her throat dry. “I just... I can’t believe it,” she said. Before the stolen supplies were found in Theo’s rooms, Serena had been falling in love with him. The things they’d done together had lit a fire inside her cougar that she couldn’t ignore. She felt a wave of exhaustion. “What exactly do you need me to do tomorrow at the charity climb?”

“We need a medic presence at each checkpoint. You’ll also be on call for any emergencies. The climb is a big deal, and we can’t afford any mistakes.”

Serena nodded, scanning the list of tasks. She could sense her own grief and confusion lurking in the back of her mind, but she had a duty to fulfill here. “Alright,” she said, drawing in a shaky breath.

After leaving the medic bay, Serena navigated the busy corridors to her old dorm room. She passed groups of trainees chatting excitedly about the upcoming climb. A few shot her curious glances, and she guessed they knew about Theo and her. She stiffened, not stopping until she reached her dorm.

Inside, the room looked much as she had left it. A single bed, a desk scattered with notes, and a desk chair. She set down her suitcase and let out a long sigh. She stood at the window and gazed out at the pine forest in the distance. It was approaching dusk outside, and the sky had turned a muted gray. She could sense Theo's presence somewhere out in the trees. She shivered, torn between fear and a longing to know if he was alright.

Chapter

Thirty-Six

Theo parked his car on a narrow logging road not far from the academy grounds. Tall pines loomed overhead, and thick brush hid his vehicle. The sun had dipped below the horizon, casting the clearing in twilight. He rested his palms on the steering wheel, feeling the weight of the evening settle over him. Time was running out. The charity climb was tomorrow.

He thought of how Kai had turned the academy against him. Gritting his teeth, he ran through his plan to gather evidence against Kai. At dawn, he would hike through the woods to the academy, find a place to observe Kai's movements, and record the evidence he needed to clear his name.

A sense of urgency coiled in his stomach. If he failed, he didn't have a backup plan. He would remain the academy's scapegoat. Any chance of having a normal life and reconciling with Serena would vanish. He picked up his phone. It was fully charged from his car, but he had no cell service in this location. He would send Serena and Logan the photos of Kai's sabotage as soon as he had a signal.

The mate bond tugged at his chest with surprising intensity, as if his inner grizzly sensed her presence. He squeezed his eyes shut, memories of Serena's tear-streaked face assaulting him. The terrified child in the bank ran through his mind. He had become the monster he hated. Guilt flared, mingled with sorrow and a fierce hope that he could regain her trust.

Chapter

Thirty-Seven

Serena lay in her narrow dorm bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling as the hours ticked by. Her thoughts ran in tight circles, replaying the funeral for her father, the fear and guilt she felt about Theo, and the murmur of scandal that still rippled through the academy. She couldn't rest with so many worries pressing on her. After another agonizing minute, she pushed back the covers and slipped on a pair of sweats, heart pounding with a restlessness that wouldn't let her stay still.

She crept outside, careful not to alert the other students. The campus was quiet as she moved toward the forest. Serena stripped out of her clothing and let her cougar form emerge in the dark chill. The shift came more easily than usual, driven by the tumult of her emotions.

She padded forward, breathing in the damp scent of moss and earth. Moving through the woods helped calm the storm raging in her mind. Crickets chirped in the distance, and the cool breeze fluttered along her whiskers.

She heard a low voice in the darkness. The words were almost swallowed by the night, but something about their hushed urgency caught her attention. She lowered her body, muscles tense, and she stalked toward the sound. She crouched behind thick ferns near a tent set up for tomorrow's climb. Kai stood in the moonlight; his phone clutched to his ear.

Kai murmured about a "final diversion" for the event. He sounded smug as he said,

“All eyes are on Theo now.” The blood rushed in Serena’s ears when she heard Theo’s name. Kai continued, voice dripping with satisfaction. “He ran off into the woods, just as I’d anticipated he would. It’s perfect. No one will suspect me tomorrow. Everyone will think it was him.”

Her mind spun, fury and relief colliding in her chest. Theo was innocent, which meant all her doubts about him had been wrong. A wave of guilt rose inside her when she remembered how frightened she had been of him. Her cougar flared at the realization of Kai’s treachery. Her entire being roiled with anger and deep regret for having doubted Theo.

She felt a sudden tug in her soul, as if an unseen thread connected her to Theo’s presence somewhere out in the darkness. The mate bond pulsed inside her, and her cougar ached to run to him. She almost followed that instinct. But another thought crashed in. The charity climb was tomorrow, and Kai posed a real danger if his sabotage continued unchecked.

Chapter

Thirty-Eight

Serena woke early on the day of the charity climb. She tugged on her medic uniform, trying to calm her racing thoughts. The memory of Kai's voice haunted her. He'd sounded so pleased with this plan to frame Theo. Serena had to make sure Poppy understood the danger Kai posed to the entire academy.

Out on the grounds, staff members carried harnesses and ropes, while volunteers sorted through piles of food and water for the climbers. Trainees stood laughing and chatting in small clusters. Instead of sharing their excitement, dread gnawed at Serena's gut. She inhaled and forced herself to focus.

Inside the admin building, Serena found Poppy's office door slightly ajar. Poppy sat at her desk, scanning a stack of documents. She looked up when Serena entered and raised an eyebrow in polite acknowledgment. "I need to tell you something," Serena said.

Poppy gestured for her to continue. Serena drew a deep breath and explained how she'd overheard Kai talking on the phone. She revealed the gist of his conversation—his smug admission that he'd been framing Theo all along, and his intent to sabotage the climb. Her throat felt dry as she forced out each word. She mentioned her father's funeral and how she'd slipped away the previous night in her cougar form. She told her that being a cougar allowed her to hear Kai's phone call from where she was hidden.

Poppy listened without expression, though a growing coolness settled over her features. Once Serena finished, Poppy leaned back in her chair and regarded her with a dispassionate gaze.

“Serena,” she said, her voice carefully measured, “are you certain? You mentioned being in cougar form. Shifting can alter perception, especially in times of emotional stress like the death of a parent. Maybe you misheard. We both know your mate bond with Theo has complicated matters.”

Serena’s cheeks burned. “I know what I heard. Kai talked about pinning everything on Theo. He said no one would suspect him today. I promise you, I’m not confused.”

Poppy folded her arms. “Theo has already lost control more than once. The entire academy watched his outbursts. I don’t think you’re lying to me, but I wonder if your loyalty to your mate is coloring your interpretation of Kai’s words.”

Serena stepped forward, hands tightening at her sides. “I’m doing my job as a medic. I only want to keep everyone safe. Kai is the one behind the sabotage, not Theo.”

Poppy’s expression darkened. “I need more than your word, especially when it comes from the mate of a man who’s caused this school so much trouble. If you persist in making accusations without evidence, I’ll have to remove you from the medic team for the climb. We can’t afford rumors that undermine staff cohesion.”

Serena’s heart pounded. “You can’t do that,” she insisted, trying not to let anger seep into her voice. “I’m the best-trained medic you have. We need every person ready in case anything goes wrong out there.”

Poppy stood, lifting the climb rosters with a decisive snap of her wrist. “There’s nothing more to discuss. Go meet your coordinator at the staging area. If you continue stirring up trouble, I’ll have you expelled.”

Serena realized there was no use arguing further. She left the office, feeling raw and defeated. For a brief moment, she was tempted to walk away from the entire event, but she forced that thought aside. There were too many people counting on the medic team today.

While she crossed the lawn toward the staging area, her phone buzzed. She glanced down to see Theo's name. Her fingers trembled as she opened the message. Attached were photos of ropes and anchor bolts—the gear clearly tampered with. The text read, “Kai is rigging the lines. I also sent these to Logan.”

Serena's breath caught. She stared at the images, her mind racing. Now she had proof. But that proof had come from Theo, and Poppy wouldn't believe anything he said. Participants were arriving in the parking lot and headed to the staging area. She had to do something; the charity climb could turn deadly at any moment.

Chapter

Thirty-Nine

Theo pressed into the forest, weaving through brambles that snagged at his clothes. The smell of damp leaves and resin drifted in the air. He reached a slight rise where his cell phone finally picked up a bar of service. He sent the pictures of the tampered rope to Serena and Logan, typing with urgent speed. He tapped out a quick message that explained he had proof Kai had sabotaged the climbing gear. His only hope was that they would check their phones before anyone started climbing.

Holding the phone against his chest, he continued deeper into the trees. He avoided established trails, knowing staff or even the police might be patrolling. His nerves jangled at every snapping twig. A strong part of him wanted to shift into bear form and storm the campus, then roar the truth for everyone to hear. He forced himself to stay calm. He needed more photos, not a display that would only confirm their worst suspicions.

Theo's phone buzzed in his hand, and he nearly dropped it when he saw Serena's name glow on the screen.

I got your photos. I believe you. I heard Kai on the phone last night. He was bragging to someone about how nobody suspects him. Theo, I know he's behind all this.

Theo's breath caught as relief flooded him. She believed him.

Serena. Thank you. You have no idea how much I needed to hear that. I'm in the

woods by the climb route. I'm staying hidden. I have to catch him messing with the gear.

I tried telling Poppy, but she brushed me off. She won't believe me without hard evidence.

Anger thrummed in Theo's chest, but he forced himself to stay calm.

We'll fix this, I promise. I sent the photos to Logan too, so he knows. Hopefully he'll see them in time.

I'll talk to him. Be careful, Theo. There's a new security detail here. If they catch you, you won't be able to gather evidence.

Theo's heart pounded. Every instinct roared at him to run to her, but he pushed the urge down.

I'm not leaving till I catch him. Stay safe. We'll expose him together.

I'll do what I can on my end.

From behind a cluster of young spruce, Theo had a clear view of the starting area for the charity climb. Tents and bright flags stood in carefully ordered rows. Staff moved about, loading rope and anchor kits into bins. Volunteers carried water jugs and taped directional arrows to the trees. Theo's heart pounded as he tried to spot Kai among them.

He finally spotted Serena and Logan moving along a line of ropes. They were swapping out sabotaged gear. His chest ached at the sight of Serena. She moved with determined focus, her dark hair pulled back in a quick ponytail. He wondered if she felt him watching.

He ducked when a security guard glanced in his direction. Flattening himself against the brush, he waited until the man walked away. If he was seen, he'd be escorted off campus before he had enough proof to implicate Kai.

Skirting around the outer edge of the climb route, Theo slid behind a fallen log. The bark felt damp and smelled of rot, but it gave him cover. He crawled along it until he reached a vantage point near some large rocks. From there, he could see the ropes leading up the first leg of the climb.

He looked for a hiding spot where he could stay concealed for hours if he had to. He found a small hollow in the brush where tall ferns and thorny vines formed a natural screen. It was close enough to the anchors that he could capture images on his phone if Kai dared to tamper with them again.

Theo settled into position, blood thumping in his ears. The morning chill seeped through his jacket, but he hardly felt it. He had one goal now: watch, wait, and catch Kai. If he succeeded, everyone would see the truth. If he failed, no one would ever trust him again. He slowed his breathing, phone clutched in his hands, and promised himself he would not budge until he had the evidence he needed.

Chapter

Forty

Serena hurried beside Logan, her boots crunching on the gravel as they crossed the staging area for the charity climb. The early light stretched over the grounds, as staff worked with tight efficiency. Everyone looked serious, as though expecting the worst. She and Logan had a handful of ropes slung over their shoulders and a list of stations they needed to inspect.

She couldn't shake the heaviness in her chest. She kept replaying the moment she realized Theo was innocent. Now guilt gnawed at her for not believing him sooner. As they made their way to the first station, Logan shot her a sidelong glance.

"You know, I never believed Theo was behind all this," he said, lifting a coil of rope higher on his shoulder. "Kai was always too much of a suck-up. He's the type to smile at you while plotting how to get ahead."

Serena hesitated, looking at Logan's serious expression. "You're saying you suspected Kai from the start?"

Logan nodded. "I've seen too many guys like him. Talks a good game, wants to impress everyone who outranks him, but there's something shifty in his eyes." He blew out a breath. "As a shifter, I take the mate bond seriously. I know how powerful it is. Theo's been having a rough time with his bear, but I knew it wouldn't make him sabotage the whole academy."

Serena's chest felt tight. "I wish I'd realized that sooner," she said quietly. "I was too afraid of repeating a mate bond gone bad. But now I know the truth. I heard Kai talking with my own ears. I hear better in cougar form, not worse." She was still irritated from Poppy's accusations about her animal.

Logan patted her shoulder. "We'll prove to Poppy that Kai is behind this. At least we got the heads up from Theo. We can check these ropes before anyone else gets hurt."

They reached the first suspect station, where a tangle of rope hung from an anchor on the side of a short practice wall. Serena helped him unclip the rope. They found a subtle cut along the core, exactly like the ones from Theo's photos. Logan clicked his tongue in frustration.

"This one's definitely compromised," he muttered.

He replaced the damaged line while Serena inspected the anchor and the metal connectors. She spotted a loose bolt and tightened it, frowning at how deliberate it seemed. No one would have left it like that by accident. Tension crackled through the air as more staff arrived, hauling gear in frantic attempts to finish setup.

Serena and Logan moved to the next station, swapping more rope and examining the anchor points. Serena felt a rush of relief at each sabotage they managed to fix. But as long as Kai roamed free, it wouldn't matter how many pieces of gear they repaired. He could do anything.

When they finished the last station, Logan looked at his watch. "We've only got a few minutes before participants arrive. You should get going, Serena. Your station is up the mountain."

Serena paused to catch her breath. "Yeah. Let me know if you see anything else suspicious."

“I will,” he said. “Stay safe. We’ll handle the rest.”

They parted ways. She felt a surge of urgency as she headed to the medic bay for her supplies. She grabbed a fully stocked medic pack, along with a portable radio. Guilt pressed at her again, but she pushed it aside. All that mattered was preventing any more disasters.

She left the building and started up the mountain trail. After a few minutes, she took out her phone and typed a text to Theo. She told him she was sorry for believing he might have sabotaged the academy and thanked him for sending those photos. She pressed send. The phone showed a loading circle, then flashed a confirmation that the message was sent. But there was no reply. Her gaze dropped to the corner of the screen, watching the reception fade.

While the trail wound through thick pines, she felt a subtle, thrumming awareness. She couldn’t see him, but something inside her said he was out there. The thought made her heart tighten. She felt foolish for ever doubting him, though she knew how her parents’ toxic bond had shaped her fear. She had allowed it to color her view of Theo. Now she would give anything to fix that mistake.

When she climbed higher, she checked her phone one last time, hoping a text from Theo might have gotten through. Nothing showed on the screen. She tucked the phone away, knowing she would have to rely on her radio if an emergency happened.

Her assigned station was the final checkpoint for the charity climb, positioned right at the base of a towering climbing wall. The wall’s surface loomed above her, and ropes dangled from anchor points near the top. A small clearing of tall conifers surrounded this section of the route, and though the ground was mostly flat, the sheer vertical face added a dramatic sense of scale and urgency.

Her medic tent stood off to one side, stocked with basic supplies she might need in an

emergency—oxygen canisters, splints, and analgesics all neatly arranged. It was meant to be a safe haven, but in this moment, it felt more like a lone outpost on the edge of a battlefield.

Serena cast a wary glance at the climbing wall, imagining the participants who would soon ascend it. She turned, half-expecting to see Theo's bear moving through the trees. It reminded her how isolated she was up here, and a nervous flutter rippled through her stomach.

She took a steadying breath. She had no choice but to trust that Logan had swapped every damaged rope, and that Theo could collect the proof they needed. She only hoped that when the day was over, everyone would walk away safe. For now, she was ready to face any emergency that might come her way.

Chapter

Forty-One

Theo crouched in the shadows just off the main trail, heart pounding as he watched Kai trudge uphill. He set off behind him, keeping his distance. He took care to duck behind the occasional trunk or thick brush. Kai scrambled up a narrow slope that led to the top of the tallest cliff that acted as the course's final checkpoint.

When he reached a cluster of rocks near the summit, he stopped and craned his neck to see Kai. His worst fears came true. Kai was crouched near the ropes. A small toolkit lay open by his knee, revealing wire cutters, a short blade, and an assortment of spare metal parts.

Lifting his phone, Theo started recording. He zoomed in on Kai's hands carefully slicing part of a rope. His hands moved with precise, almost surgical motions as he loosened several critical anchor bolts. Theo's anger burned, but he forced himself to stay still.

He'd seen enough. He stopped recording and tried to send the video to Poppy. A spinning icon mocked him. He checked his signal and saw no service. He gritted his teeth.

The climbers would soon arrive. This was too dangerous. He could not remain silent any longer. Switching his phone's camera on again, he propped it on a stable rock to capture the view of the summit. Then he stood and stepped out.

“Kai,” he said, voice echoing in the thin air, “stop what you’re doing. You’ve messed with enough gear. I’m not letting you hurt anyone else.”

Kai spun around, eyes wide. Then a mocking smile curved his lips. “Theo. I was just double checking the gear for the charity climb.” He let out a laugh that made Theo’s fists curl.

“You’re lying. I saw you. You cut ropes, loosened bolts—you’re the reason the academy’s in trouble.”

Kai shrugged and stood. “And who do you think they’ll believe? The wild bear who lost control in a city park and is wanted by the police, or me?” He gestured around them. “I could say I found you in the middle of sabotage.”

Theo fought the urge to shift. He steadied his breathing, reminding himself there was a camera rolling behind him. “You won’t get away with it.”

Kai glanced over the ledge. “Tell that to the cops. They’re looking for you, not me. Better get out of here before they show up.” He smirked and secured a harness around his waist.

Theo took a step closer. “Why are you putting people’s lives at stake?”

Kai checked his harness with the casual air of confidence. “I’m done here.” He flicked his rope over the edge, grabbed it with a practiced hand, and turned to flash Theo a final grin. “I suggest you run, friend.”

With that, Kai settled his weight onto the rope and began rappelling down the cliff face, vanishing bit by bit from Theo’s view. The faint clink of metal echoed up the mountain, then faded away. Theo stood there, seething. But the phone he had propped against a rock was still recording. His chest felt tight. He glanced at the sabotaged

lines, wishing he had tools to fix them. He had to do something to protect everyone coming up the mountain.

Chapter

Forty-Two

A thin layer of morning sun filtered through the canopy, heating the air just enough to make the first arrivals sweat as they reached Serena's checkpoint. They trudged up the trail in a small group, breathless and smiling. She lifted her radio and keyed the button. "Alicia, this is Serena at the final checkpoint. The first climbers have arrived."

A moment later, Alicia's voice crackled through. "Great. Keep me posted if they need anything."

Serena set the radio aside and offered the participants protein bars and sports drinks. Some took grateful sips, while others quickly inspected their harnesses, eager to tackle the wall. A few spotters lingered below, ready to guide the climbers.

Serena felt a knot of tension coil inside her. If Logan hadn't found all of the faulty equipment, someone could get hurt. Theo was still out there, trying to collect evidence. The thought only made her more uneasy.

The climbers moved upward with surprising speed, though their excitement soon mixed with the strain of the climb. Spotters on the ground offered cheers and occasional warnings. Serena kept an eye on each person, watching them make their careful ascent. Then her gaze snapped to a figure rappelling down at a startling pace.

As the rappelling figure came to the bottom of the cliff, she realized it was Kai. He

landed in a slight crouch, stood, and briefly locked eyes with her. A flash of triumph crossed his face before he bolted away down the trail. Serena started after him, but she couldn't leave her post. She raised her voice. "Kai, wait."

He didn't even glance back.

She grabbed her radio. "Logan, this is Serena. Kai just rappelled down the wall and ran off down the main trail. I don't know what he was doing up there."

Logan's response crackled through, sounding tense. "Understood. I'm headed that way."

Anxiety spiked as she imagined what Kai might have done at the summit. She scanned the top of the wall, searching for any sign of fresh trouble. Her thoughts buzzed with dire scenarios, but there was nothing she could do from down here except watch.

A piercing scream shattered the calm. Serena jerked her head upward. One of the climbers, a middle-aged woman, dangled from a secondary safety line. The main rope had snapped clean in two, and the climber had slammed against the rock. She now hung motionless, unconscious, her body limp in the harness.

Panic clenched in Serena's chest. She saw the spotters rushing forward, shouting for help. Without a second's hesitation, she sprinted to her medic tent and yanked open the flap. She snatched up her radio again. "Alicia, we have an emergency. One climber's main rope snapped. She's dangling by her backup and hit the wall hard. She's unconscious."

Alicia's voice turned instantly urgent. "Serena, you'll need a backboard to secure her. You have to get her down carefully, or you'll risk further injury."

“On it,” Serena said, snatching the backboard from her supplies. Her heart pounded as she thought of the height of the wall and the tangled lines. Every second she waited, the climber remained unconscious and vulnerable, suspended in midair.

Chapter

Forty-Three

Theo stood at the summit. The wind whipped against his face as he stared down at the scene below. He saw a climber suspended limply from a backup rope, her main line clearly snapped. Most of the ropes were compromised.

He scanned the scattered gear. He found a harness Kai hadn't touched, and he knew the line Kai had used must be secure. There was more shouting below, and it prompted him to move faster. After tugging on the rope to test its tension, he hooked himself in, took a breath, and stepped over the edge.

Theo kept his feet wide apart on the rocky surface, descending with controlled movements. The rope felt solid. Halfway down, he found himself level with the unconscious climber, a middle-aged woman. She hung limply, swaying slightly in the breeze. A fresh wave of anger coursed through him. He shouted toward the ground. "You can't use any of these ropes."

Theo steadied his feet and continued lowering himself. Relief washed through him when his boots touched the ground. He unhooked himself as Serena rushed forward. They embraced for one intense moment, and all the fear, guilt, and hope they shared passed between them. She pulled back, her face set with urgency. Logan arrived, jogging up with a coil of rope slung over his shoulder. Theo wasted no time explaining the situation.

Serena pointed up at the injured climber, still unconscious and dangling. "I have to

get her down fast.”

Theo glanced over at the cliff. “We can’t trust any of these ropes, but I know for sure the one I used is safe.”

Serena nodded. “I have the backboard and first-aid supplies. I can climb up to her and secure her while you spot me from below.”

“I’ll secure more lines from above to help you get her down safely,” Logan said.

“Hurry,” Serena said as she secured her harness. Theo double and triple checked it. She strapped herself into the rope Theo had just confirmed. Her gaze flicked to the unconscious climber, then back to Theo. “I’ll get her stabilized on the backboard and wait for Logan to throw down the safely anchored ropes.”

Theo took his position at the base and then braced himself to support Serena’s weight. His adrenaline spiked at the thought of something going wrong. He met Serena’s eyes and gave a firm nod. She nodded back, resolve shining through. Together, they began hoisting her upward.

Chapter

Forty-Four

Serena felt the weight of the backboard on her shoulders, reminding her how much was at stake. Theo had assured her this line was safe, but the memory of Kai's sly words made her hands shake. With a determined breath, she pulled the rope taut and started her climb.

Each step that carried her higher made anxiety tighten in her gut. She had learned to trust her instincts, but right now every nerve was on edge. The unconscious climber hung above, and there was no telling how long she had before things got worse.

At last, she came level with the limp figure clinging to a backup line. Her breath caught at the sight of the woman's pale face and slack limbs. Serena rushed to examine the injured climber, murmuring a reassurance the woman could not hear.

She checked for a pulse, relieved to find one. She placed a hand on the woman's ribs, sensing a shallow rise and fall. With careful fingers, she felt along her neck and found no obvious fractures.

Serena pulled out a brace from her pack and slipped it around the woman's neck, securing it snugly. Next, she gave a quick look for bleeding. There was some bruising around the woman's temple, but no large wounds.

A shout from above caught her attention as two ropes tumbled down the mountain toward her. "Serena," Logan called, his voice echoing down the rocks. "These lines

are safe.”

“Got it,” Serena yelled back.

She grabbed the lines Logan had sent down and attached the board. She tested each connection and then maneuvered the board into position under the injured climber, careful not to jar the climber’s neck or spine. Serena exhaled a relieved breath as she strapped the woman onto the backboard, aligning her spine and cushioning her head against any further impact. Sweat beaded on Serena’s forehead. A single mistake could worsen the woman’s injuries.

With the help of Logan and Theo, Serena guided the backboard in a controlled descent. On the way down, she stayed by the injured woman’s side as best she could, adjusting the board’s angle whenever it bumped into the rock. At last, they reached the lower ledge. With a final push, Serena ensured the board landed gracefully on solid ground.

Serena then began her own rappel. Adrenaline coursed through her, heightening every sensation. Her feet finally met the ground. She stepped away from the wall, unhooking the rope. Across the clearing, she saw Alicia rushing in, medical bag in hand. The injured woman still lay strapped to the backboard, eyes closed, bruises forming on her face.

Alicia knelt and started examining the patient. “She’s got a bump on her head, likely a concussion, and there may be spinal damage,” Alicia muttered, her voice tight. “We need to evacuate her fast.”

Serena felt an arm slide around her shoulders. She glanced up to see Theo, worry etched across his features. She let herself lean into him, comforted by his presence. It felt like a small miracle that they had brought the woman down safely.

Alicia's urgency brought them back to the present. "We'll carry her down the mountain right away. Serena, I need you to help notify everyone the climb is canceled. There's no telling which gear was tampered with."

Serena nodded. "We'll handle it."

Alicia and a small rescue crew lifted the injured climber, careful to keep her spine aligned. They headed down the trail, Alicia in the lead, delivering orders to keep the board steady. Within moments, they disappeared behind a line of pine trees, their voices fading into the forest.

Serena let out a shaky breath, turning to Theo. She felt overwhelming remorse for ever doubting him, for letting her fear cloud the truth. Tears pricked at her lids as she remembered how it had felt to question him. She swallowed hard, wishing she could take it back. She wrapped her arms around him, leaned against him, pressed her cheek to his chest, and inhaled his scent.

"I was so afraid I'd lost you," he whispered.

"I should have trusted you."

Theo held her firmly against him. "No matter what happened, I never stopped believing in us," he said, his voice rough with relief. "I knew we'd find our way back to each other."

She closed her eyes, letting that knowledge wash over her, something deep in her responding to the mate bond they shared. Gratitude flooded her, along with an undeniable longing she had tried for so long to suppress.

Chapter

Forty-Five

Serena threw her arms around Theo's shoulders, and he pulled her against him. Their lips met in a fierce, desperate kiss, the taste of relief on her mouth. Every ounce of fear and tension poured into that moment. His thoughts spun with renewed devotion, and he clung to her, remembering how close he had come to losing her.

When the kiss finally ended, he pressed his forehead against hers. She looked up at him, eyes filled with lingering adrenaline. His pulse raced as he brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. For a long moment, they savored the quiet together, safe on solid ground.

He swallowed, then spoke in a hushed tone. "Serena, I have proof Kai is the saboteur. I caught it on my phone." He fished the device out of his pocket, his hand trembling.

Serena's expression shifted from tenderness to alarmed curiosity. She stepped closer, resting a hand on his arm. "You actually have evidence?"

"Yeah, I filmed him. And I took some pictures too." He tapped his phone's screen, pulling up the videos. He showed her a clip of Kai hunched on the summit, tampering with ropes and anchor bolts. Serena's eyes widened.

"This is everything we need," she whispered, her voice shaking. "Poppy can't ignore that."

Before Theo could respond, Serena's radio came to life. Alicia's voice came through with a crackle. "Serena, do you read me? No more climbers on the trails. The injured climber is on her way to the hospital. The charity climb is canceled. Head back to campus."

Serena lifted the radio. "Received. We're on our way." She turned to Theo, a flicker of relief in her eyes. "It's over for now. At least no one else is in danger."

Theo gave a short nod, though he felt a new sense of urgency gnaw at his stomach. They gathered their backpacks and started down the trail. Midway along the path, Theo stopped and turned to face her, his voice steady but charged. "When we get back, if Poppy doesn't finally see that Kai is guilty, I'll take my evidence to the police."

Serena squeezed his hand. "The footage is undeniable. We'll make them see it. We have to protect the school."

"And the people of Fate Mountain."

Chapter

Forty-Six

Late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the parking lot as Theo and Serena walked toward the administrative building. A crowd of staff members, administrators, and trainees had gathered near several police cars parked at the entrance. The atmosphere crackled with tension, making Theo's pulse spike before anyone even spoke. He spotted Poppy standing beside Kai, and behind them were Logan, Alicia, Jade, Travis, and Morgan. The look on Kai's face told Theo this confrontation would be ugly.

The moment Kai caught sight of Theo, he pointed an accusing finger, voice cutting through the murmurs of the crowd. "There he is, the saboteur," Kai snarled. "He's always been unstable, ever since childhood. It's in his blood. His father was the same way, nothing but a brute."

Theo felt Serena's grip on his arm tighten. Anger flared in his chest, but he forced himself to speak calmly. "You're lying. You're the one who rigged the ropes and anchor bolts."

Kai's eyes glinted with a vicious confidence. "Don't pretend you and your little girlfriend didn't plan this together. Maybe she wanted to sabotage the climb to deal with her daddy issues."

Theo's vision blurred at the insult to Serena, but he swallowed hard and turned to Poppy and the nearby police officers. "I have proof," he said, his voice shaking with

anger. He fished out his phone. "I filmed Kai tampering with gear."

Poppy stepped forward, her expression stern, while the officers eyed Theo warily. "Let me see it," Poppy said.

Theo unlocked his phone, showing her and the police the videos of Kai hunched over ropes. "This is irrefutable evidence of you tampering. Not to mention the anchor kit I saw you steal from the gear warehouse."

Serena stood close by, nodding. "I heard him confessing to it."

Kai scoffed, arms crossed over his chest. "Grainy cell phone footage proves nothing," he said. Theo bristled, fists clenching. Kai flicked his gaze over the officers, then back to Theo. "I heard you killed that little girl in that bank robbery. You were never a hero."

A cold wave of shock rolled through Theo. "That's not true," he said, struggling to keep his voice steady. "I saved her."

The police watched the video on Poppy's phone with serious expressions, no one speaking yet. Theo felt his composure fraying. He couldn't believe Kai would twist the memory of that terrified child, the one he had risked everything to protect.

Kai snorted. "You've never been a hero, Theo," he sneered. "You're just like Serena's father, a lifelong villain. Admit it. It's in your blood."

Something snapped in Theo's chest. Shame, fury, and grief tore through him. He felt the tremor in his limbs, the warning signs he had experienced before. The rage was too great to hold back. A guttural growl escaped his throat as his body began to shift. Fur broke through his skin. His bones contorted, forcing him onto all fours. Gasps and cries came from the staff and the police, but no one could stop him.

Theo roared, the primal sound echoing off the buildings. In a flash, he lunged straight at Kai, massive paws scraping the pavement. Kai staggered back, eyes wide in sudden terror. At the last possible moment, before Theo's bear form could collide with Kai, he spun and charged into the woods. Branches cracked under his weight, leaves scattering in his wake.

Behind him, he heard Serena's voice, desperate, calling his name. "Theo, stop, please!" But the beast had taken over.

Chapter

Forty-Seven

Serena stood rooted in place, barely breathing, as the police and Poppy hovered around Theo's phone. The incriminating video played on the small screen, and there was no doubt it showed Kai admitting to tampering with the ropes. The officers exchanged tense looks, then moved in to corner the culprit.

Kai, sensing the net closing around him, tried to slip away. He edged toward the parking lot exit, avoiding eye contact. But the police were too quick. They closed ranks, and one officer clamped a firm hand on his shoulder.

Serena took a shaky step forward, her voice trembling with raw emotion. "Who are you working for?" she demanded, eyes blazing with anger.

Kai offered no answer, only a smug glance that made her skin crawl. The tension built, crackling through the crowd, until the officers finally forced Kai's arms behind his back and snapped on the cuffs.

Across from them, Poppy still held Theo's phone, her expression a mix of shock and regret. Serena's throat tightened with unshed tears as she turned on the administrator. "Are you satisfied?" she asked, her voice wavering between fury and heartbreak.

Poppy's gaze dropped to the ground. "I was wrong," she said softly, shame clear in her tone. It was an admission that struck Serena like a physical blow. She wanted to rail at Poppy, but that wasn't what she needed. Theo was gone, chased by his own

anger and grief.

She spun away from the parking lot, not caring about the startled looks from staff or the police. Her heart hammered as she raced in the direction she had seen him run. Every stride felt more desperate, tears burning her eyes. When she reached the edge of the forest, she tore off her clothes mid-sprint, her cougar pushing forward in a rush.

Fur prickled across her skin as her bones shifted with a surge of raw power. In seconds, she galloped through the trees on all fours, nose to the ground, inhaling Theo's musky scent. Adrenaline spiked with every leap, and she sensed his presence somewhere ahead, deeper in the darkening woods. Twigs snapped beneath her paws, and leaves brushed her flanks.

She spotted him as night fell. His massive bear moved wildly through the undergrowth. Serena circled around, her heart thudding as she tried to get in front of him. She needed to make him see reason, see her.

When she finally found a narrow clearing, she slipped in front of him and shifted back to human form, trembling and naked in the moonlight. Her voice shook as she spoke. "Theo, please," she said, holding her arms out in a gesture of surrender. "Remember who you are."

The bear's lumbering steps slowed. His furious eyes locked onto hers, and for a moment, Serena feared he would charge right past her. Then she saw recognition flicker within those golden depths. She drew a trembling breath. "Nothing Kai said was true. You're a hero. My hero. I want you as my mate, forever."

Her words seemed to cut through his haze of anger and grief. His powerful body began to ripple, fur receding into skin. Bones popped and re-formed, and with a final shuddering breath, Theo stood in front of her, naked and trembling. The night air felt charged with the intensity of the moment. She saw the torment in his eyes, but also

the raw desire. He stared at her for a heartbeat, then crossed the clearing in two strides.

Chapter

Forty-Eight

Theo closed the distance between them in a matter of seconds. His hands were rough as they grabbed her, pressing her back against the rough bark of a towering oak. The tree dug into her bare shoulders, but she barely registered the pain. All she could feel was the heat of his body against hers as he claimed her mouth in a scorching kiss.

“Theo,” she whispered, her voice trembling with need.

His cock pressed insistently against her stomach, already hard and leaking. She gasped, her hands flying to his broad chest, feeling the rapid thud of his heartbeat beneath her fingertips. His tongue plunged into her mouth, exploring every inch with a ferocity that made her knees buckle. She moaned against him, her hands sliding up to tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, desperate for more.

His hands roamed over her body, leaving trails of fire in their wake. He cupped her breasts, kneading the soft flesh, rolling her nipples between his fingers until she was crying out with pleasure. Then his mouth followed, his lips closing around one peak while his fingers teased the other. She arched into him, a low whine escaping her throat as he sucked and nibbled, sending waves of pleasure coursing through her body.

Theo’s hands moved lower, tracing the curve of her hips before slipping between her legs. She was already soaked, her slick arousal coating his fingers as he teased her entrance. He growled against her neck, the sound vibrating through her as he pressed

a finger inside her tight heat. She gasped, her walls clenching around him as he began to pump his finger in and out, setting a slow, torturous pace that had her panting.

Her back arched off the tree as she came undone, her release crashing over her in waves that left her trembling. He pulled his fingers from her dripping pussy, bringing them to his mouth and sucking them clean with a low growl of satisfaction.

Then he dropped to his knees as he buried his face between her legs. His tongue plunged into her, lapping at her folds. He devoured her like a man starved, his tongue flicking over her clit until another orgasm ripped through her.

Theo rose to his feet, his eyes dark with desire. He pressed his body against hers, his cock throbbing against her stomach as he kissed her. She could taste herself on his tongue and it only fueled her need for him.

Serena shoved Theo down onto the forest floor, his broad shoulders sinking into the bed of pine needles that crunched beneath his weight. The scent of earth and sweat hung heavy in the air, mingling with the primal musk of arousal that radiated off them both.

Her inner cougar roared, demanding she claim what was hers—what had always been hers. Theo's cock throbbed against her thigh, hard and insistent.

She straddled him with a growl, her thighs bracketing his hips like a predator pinning its prey. The moon's pale glow spilled over her bare skin, highlighting the curves of her body. She arched her back, letting the cool night air brush over her heated flesh.

Her fangs descended, sharp and glinting in the moonlight. She licked her lips, her pussy clenching in anticipation as she positioned herself above him.

“You're mine,” she growled, her voice low and guttural, as she sank down onto his

cock in one fluid motion.

He stretched her wide, filling her to the hilt, and she threw her head back with a shuddering moan. Theo's hands gripped her hips. She rode him, grinding herself against him, the head of his cock hitting her g-spot with every thrust. Her clit throbbed, swollen and aching, and she reached down to rub it in tight, frantic circles. The pleasure built, coiling tight in her belly, and she could feel another orgasm approaching like a tidal wave, ready to crash over her.

She managed a ragged gasp as she came. "I need to claim you. I need you as my mate." Theo met her gaze, pupils dilating with the same desperate hunger she felt.

In one swift motion, he flipped her onto her back, pinning her down with a strength that made her clit throb. His hands were everywhere—gripping her wrists, trailing down her sides, palming her tits with a roughness that made her whimper. His cock barely left her cunt, just enough to make her ache with emptiness before he slammed back into her.

His fangs descended, sharp and lethal. Serena arched off the ground. She could feel the edge of another orgasm clawing at her, relentless and raw, as Theo fucked her with a ferocity that left her trembling.

"I need to make you mine," she breathed.

Theo lowered his head to flick his tongue across her neck. "Are you sure?" The gentleness in his voice nearly undid her.

Serena swallowed and nodded, cupping his cheek. "Yes. I want us to claim each other," she said, words trembling with conviction. "Now."

They bared their necks to each other. Their fangs sank into each other's flesh, sharp

and deep. The pleasure and pain was a lightning bolt that arced through her body, igniting every nerve ending. The taste of him exploded on her tongue—rich, metallic, and intoxicating. He groaned, the sound low and primal, and she felt his body shudder against hers.

As he came inside her, her body convulsed with waves of pleasure, his cock pulsing inside her throbbing core. The sensation was electric, his come pumping against the sensitive walls of her pussy. She could feel his pleasure as if it were her own.

All of Theo's memories and secrets surged into Serena's mind in a breathtaking rush, and at once, she experienced the same intimate immersion of her life stories flowing into him. The world around them dissolved into a shimmering, infinite void—stars and luminous nebulae stretched out in all directions, their bodies adrift as if freed from gravity itself. Serena felt both giddy and serene, like she was floating in the heart of the universe, with Theo's presence anchoring her in this cosmic sea.

High above, galaxies swirled in slow, eternal spirals. Constellations pulsed softly, as though exhaling beams of light around them. She saw Theo across a starlit plane, his form outlined in brilliant silver against a velvet-black horizon

Theo took her hand, and his voice rang through her psyche: I will always protect our bond.

Her entire being responded. She felt her cougar spirit roar awake inside her chest, no longer afraid to connect. Serena's vow of acceptance exploded like a supernova, so bright she thought it might fill this cosmic realm entirely. She offered him her trust, and Theo's heart echoed back that devotion, weaving them into one another with threads of starlight.

Slowly, the radiant brilliance faded, and they found themselves lying side by side on a cushion of pine needles, their bodies warm from the aftermath of that otherworldly

joining. Moonlight fell across their bare skin, and overhead, the same stars shone—only now, they seemed so much closer.

Serena's breath caught as she turned her head. Theo's eyes, still luminous, gazed back with awe and tenderness. Her pulse fluttered as she realized that the bond she had once feared was, in fact, her greatest liberation. Never before had she felt so wholly herself yet irrevocably linked to another soul.

Chapter

Forty-Nine

Serena stood by the broad window of her Fate Mountain Lodge guest room, letting the morning sun stream across her face. Today was her wedding day, and the world outside—blossoming and bright—seemed to echo the renewal she felt in her heart.

Budding leaves rustled in a mild breeze that carried the scent of blossoms. Below on the lawn, a wide walkway led toward rows of neatly arranged chairs. Guests were already gathering, their murmured voices and occasional bursts of laughter carried up to her window above.

Spring had truly arrived, both in nature and in her life. Only months ago, fear and conflict had overshadowed every step she took with Theo. She had dreaded that their mate bond would be overshadowed by her father's toxic legacy. But now that they were bonded, a fierce sense of love and purpose pulsed in her chest.

Across the room, her mother, Grace, adjusted the final detail of Serena's gown. She ran her hand over the delicate lace trim. Serena walked over and caught their reflections in the large mirror beside the king-size bed.

"Ready?" her mother said, nodding to the gown.

Serena took the wedding dress in hand and slipped behind a decorative privacy screen by the dresser. She shrugged off her robe, folding it neatly on a nearby chair. The satin of the gown felt cool as she stepped into it, sliding the straps onto her shoulders

until the delicate lace bodice settled around her torso.

She carefully lifted the skirt to ensure nothing snagged on her feet, then emerged from behind the screen. Her mother stood waiting. Serena's heart squeezed with gratitude for how far they had come. Turning her back slightly, she asked in a hushed voice, "Would you mind helping with the buttons?"

Grace moved behind her fingers deftly fastening each tiny pearl button that ran down the back of the dress.

"Almost there," Grace murmured, pressing her hand to Serena's shoulder in a gesture both soothing and proud. As the final button found its place, Serena inhaled a surge of emotion.

They turned to the mirror. "Look at you," Grace whispered, her voice thick. "So beautiful."

Serena studied her reflection, struck by how right this felt. The gown suited her curvy, athletic build perfectly: a gently fitted bodice with delicate lace overlay that highlighted her narrow waist, and a flowing A-line skirt that fell gracefully over her hips. The sweetheart neckline was trimmed with subtle beadwork, adding just enough sparkle to catch the morning light.

She'd styled her long black hair in a half-up, half-down arrangement—loose, glossy waves cascaded to her mid-back, while a few braided strands at the crown secured a small spray of tiny red rosebuds. Her makeup was soft yet radiant: a touch of rose gold on her lids, a gentle sweep of liner, and a dusty-rose lipstick to complement her warm complexion.

Her gaze shifted to Grace. "I... I'm so grateful you're here," Serena said. "That we get to share this moment."

Grace clasped her daughter's hand. "I think your father, wherever he is, would want you to be happy now, no matter what his own flaws were."

Serena nodded slowly, letting that notion settle in her mind. She knew her father had never truly granted her mother the support or freedom she deserved, but she wanted to believe he'd loved them both in his own damaged way. Today was about forging a new legacy, one where trust replaced fear, and where a mate bond symbolized partnership rather than control.

"I have a special gift for you and Theo," her mother said, squeezing her shoulders. "I'm taking the whole family on a Christmas cruise to the tropics. You, Theo, his parents and sister. And me of course. I thought it would be a great bonding experience."

"Mom, that's so generous. And thoughtful." Serena's eyes filled with tears, and she had to hold them back to preserve her makeup.

"I have the money. And now that I'm free of your father's control, all I want to spend it on is getting closer to my family."

She leaned in and hugged her mother. The sense of closeness they'd developed since her father's death filled her with a sense of safety and belonging. It was allowing her to heal from her childhood, to forgive both of her parents, and to move on with her mate in a way that felt healthy and right.

After their warm embrace, Serena followed her mother downstairs to the reception area just inside from the lawn. Outside the sliding glass door, Serena could see the rows of white chairs facing the altar. Theo stood with the officiant under a flower-adorned archway. Pastel ribbons fluttered in the mild breeze. Beyond it all, the rugged majesty of Fate Mountain rose under a clear sky.

The wedding march began to play, and her mother squeezed her hand, giving her gentle encouragement. Together, they walked outside and began the march down the aisle. Friends, family, and many familiar faces from the academy rose from their seats. Logan, Alicia, Jade, and Travis were seated on one side, smiles lighting up their faces.

On the other side, she spotted the broad shoulders of Theo's father, Shane, beside his sweet mother, Lily. Next to Lily was Stella, Theo's sister, who wore a playful grin and gave Serena a wink. Each familiar face filled Serena with warmth, reminding her of the trials she and Theo had overcome to reach this day.

As Serena neared the altar, her gaze locked on Theo. He stood tall, wearing a tailored suit that emphasized his lean strength, and his light-brown hair was neatly trimmed. His eyes shone with devotion.

A slight smile tugged at his lips as he watched her come closer. She could practically feel his heartbeat in the air between them. By the time she and Grace arrived at the front, Serena's nervous flutter had changed into pure, steady conviction. This was right. Everything about this moment felt perfect, in a way she had once believed impossible.

The officiant, a local Fate Mountain shifter with graying hair and a genial smile, greeted everyone and asked them to be seated. "Friends and family," he began, his voice echoing slightly in the open air, "we gather here to celebrate the union of Serena Vaughn and Theo Keenan. Today we witness a bond that is both profound and grounded in mutual respect."

Serena's heart pounded as she handed her bouquet of red roses to her mother, then turned fully to face Theo. Taking his hands in hers, she saw the flicker of emotion in his eyes—love, relief, and the memories of everything they had faced together. She cleared her throat, determined to speak her vows without ruining her special makeup.

“Theo,” she began, voice trembling slightly. “I used to believe that a mate bond could only be a cage. But then I met you, and everything changed. You showed me that trust and love can shape a bond into something freeing and life-giving. Through every challenge, and the doubts and fears that tried to divide us—you stood by me. You taught me that real strength is not about power or control; it’s about caring for each other, even in the darkest moments. I promise to be your partner, your mate, and your wife, for every triumph and every trial that life brings.”

Tears threatened at the corners of her eyes. She felt Theo’s fingers tighten around hers. He inhaled and began his own vows. “Serena,” he said, voice low and warm, “I remember the day you first looked at me as if I might be dangerous, and, to be honest, I was dangerous—to myself—because I couldn’t control my bear. I was haunted by the belief that I would never be able to live a normal life, never be worthy of a real bond. You changed everything. You showed me acceptance, courage, and a willingness to face fear head-on. You saved me in more ways than I can count, and I vow to be the partner who always respects your freedom, your dreams, and your spirit. As your mate and husband, I will fight for your safety, your happiness, and your heart, every day of our lives.”

A hush fell over the assembly, broken only by the soft wind rustling the ribbons. Serena could feel the emotion radiating from the crowd. Her mother dabbed at her eyes with a tissue while Lily leaned into Shane’s shoulder, tears glistening.

After acknowledging that Serena and Theo already shared a mate bond through shifter tradition, the officiant explained: “This ceremony represents another vital step, uniting your lives in every sense. We celebrate your cosmic connection and your human choice to stand before loved ones and declare your devotion.”

He then guided them through the exchanging of rings. Serena’s stomach fluttered as she picked up the simple yet elegant band they had chosen together. Slipping it onto Theo’s finger felt like anchoring the life they had fought so hard to claim. With a soft

chuckle, he returned the gesture, though he fumbled briefly, prompting a ripple of light laughter from the guests.

The officiant cleared his throat, grinning at the couple. “By the power vested in me,” he said, “I now pronounce you husband and wife—and mates in every sense.”

A sudden eruption of applause and cheers greeted the declaration. Logan hurried forward, arms outstretched. “Congratulations!” he exclaimed, nearly enveloping Theo in a bear-like hug of his own.

Alicia, Jade, and Travis followed, each offering their own brand of warmth. Theo’s parents, Shane and Lily, pulled them each into an embrace. Stella trailed behind, rolling her eyes in mock impatience.

“My turn,” Stella teased, sidling in for a hug. “You two are glowing, you know that? Guess that’s what happens when a couple is truly fated.”

Shane patted Theo’s shoulder with a proud grin. “This is the day we’ve dreamed of for you, Son. And, Serena,” he added, turning to her, “welcome to the family. We couldn’t have asked for a more caring and brave daughter-in-law.”

The festivities then moved to a decorated patio. Spring blossoms in pastel hues adorned the tables, and a gentle melody from a local quartet drifted through the air. Guests mingled, sipping light drinks and offering their heartfelt congratulations. A line formed for the buffet, where fresh dishes captured the essence of springtime. Soft laughter and lively conversation made the patio feel cozy despite the open space.

One by one, friends and family offered toasts. Logan stood up, cleared his throat, and raised his glass. “I couldn’t let this day pass without saying a few words,” he began, throwing a grin first at Theo and then at Serena. “You two have been absolute rocks for Fate Mountain Academy. No matter what craziness happened, you both had our

backs—and each other’s.”

He paused, gaze settling on Theo. “Theo, I’ve witnessed your resilience firsthand. Even when the odds were stacked, you kept pushing on. We’re sure going to miss having you around the academy every day,” he told Theo, “but knowing you’re cooking up a storm at Fate Mountain Lodge feels right. It’s a better fit for you in the long run—your talent belongs where it can really shine.”

“And Serena,” Logan inclined his head in her direction. “Your bravery is legendary. Frankly, we owe you more thanks than you’ll ever admit to deserving.” Logan lifted his glass in salute. “Here’s to both of you.” He clinked his glass with a final flourish.

Alicia lifted her glass with a bright smile, waiting for the chatter to settle. “I think it’s my turn,” she said, her gaze sweeping over the crowd until she found Serena. “I had the privilege of working side by side with Serena during some pretty tense situations.” She paused, letting out a small laugh. “And I watched her grow into one of the bravest paramedics I’ve ever seen. She faced every threat head-on, stood up for what was right, and refused to let fear dictate her life.”

Alicia grinned. “Which is why I have a little announcement tonight. Some of you may know that Poppy is stepping down as head administrator at the academy. I’ll be taking on that role, which leaves a big gap in the paramedic training department. But fortunately”—her eyes sparkled as she raised her glass a bit higher—“we already have the perfect person to fill it. Serena, I can’t think of anyone better to take over as our new Paramedic Integration coordinator. You’ve proved your mettle a hundred times over.”

A small chorus of surprise and excitement rustled through the crowd. Serena was elated. She’d completed the advanced training at the academy over the fall and winter. When she’d heard Alicia was taking over Poppy’s role, she’d immediately put her name in for Alicia’s old position. Knowing she’d received the job was another

cause of celebration.

Alicia raised her glass toward Serena and Theo. “Here’s to the future. May you keep inspiring everyone around you with the same dedication, courage, and heart that got you here. Congratulations to you both and thank you for showing us what love and loyalty look like.”

After the quartet on the patio finished a melody, a lilting waltz began. Theo took Serena’s hand. “Shall we?” he murmured, gazing into her eyes. She nodded, her lips curving in a shy but eager smile. The two of them stepped to the center of the dance floor.

Theo slipped one arm around her waist, pulling her close, while she rested her hand lightly on his shoulder. Their first step was tentative, then they found a comfortable rhythm that matched the music’s soft sway.

For a moment, it was as though the entire world narrowed to just the two of them. She felt the reassuring press of his arm, the warmth of his body against her, the surety in his footsteps. She no longer questioned if love could be liberating. She was living it right now.

“You know,” Theo said, his voice low enough for only her to hear. “I never thought I’d dance at my own wedding—especially not with someone who knows my every fault and still thinks I’m worth it.”

Serena’s eyes shone. “You were always worth it,” she whispered back. “And we’re just getting started.”

He spun her gently, and she let out a soft, delighted laugh as her skirt flared around her ankles. When he drew her in again, she felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes, not from sadness but from the overwhelming happiness coursing through her.

Applause rose in pockets around them, a wave of warm encouragement.

As the final notes of the waltz drifted into silence, Theo dipped Serena, and she found herself laughing breathlessly, trusting him to hold her steady. When he brought her upright again, they remained in each other's arms, beginning their shared life on a note of pure joy.

Chapter

Fifty

Theo rested against the soft lounge chair with a wide umbrella overhead. The Hawaiian sun soaked the sandy beach around them, and a cool breeze carried the scent of saltwater from the waves that rushed onto the shore.

He took a slow sip of his fruity drink and glanced at Serena. She wore a one-piece swimsuit under a floral cover-up, her sunglasses perched on her nose. Seeing her so relaxed gave him a rush of warmth in his chest.

Ever since they had claimed each other, his grizzly felt calm, as if the beast had finally found its home. There had been times when he thought he would never conquer the restlessness inside him, but Serena's cougar seemed to soothe every worry. He felt her presence like a comforting caress on his soul, even when she was not touching him.

He marveled at how different he was from the man he used to be. Now he was a husband and a mate who spent half his time thinking about ways to make Serena happy. He realized he loved it. When she smiled, he felt invincible.

She turned to him and lowered her sunglasses. "You look like you're thinking way too hard," she said. "Still trying to wrap your head around Kai's conviction?"

He smiled, his thoughts turning to justice. "It's a relief to know he's going away for a long time."

She set her fruity drink on the little table between them. “I keep thinking about how methodical he was. I wish we knew who he was working for. Either way, I’m glad it’s over. Now the academy can focus on moving forward.”

He shook his head with a quiet laugh. “It was dicey for a while, but you handled the crisis better than anyone I’ve ever seen. There’s no doubt you’ll excel in your new role.”

A waiter in a bright floral shirt strolled by and offered refills, so they both got fresh glasses. Serena leaned back in her chair with a sigh. “This honeymoon has been amazing. The spa treatments, that waterfall hike, trying all those exciting local dishes. I’ve never felt so spoiled.”

“Remember that afternoon on the catamaran?” he asked, a nostalgic smile on his lips. “You know, the day we saw the dolphins playing along the hull.”

Serena nodded, leaning in closer. “I still can’t get over how clear the water was out there. You could see every little fish. But I think the best part was when we found that secluded cove.”

He remembered how the setting sun had cast a golden path across the water, leading them deeper into a stillness that felt almost sacred. Serena had floated beside him, her face lit with a joyful smile.

He chuckled, brushing a piece of hair away from her cheek. “You laughed at me for being overly protective, but I was so determined to keep everything perfect for you.”

“It was perfect,” she said softly. “The sun looked like liquid gold on the water, and we just floated there, you and me, no one else around.”

Theo’s eyes warmed with the memory. “Your cougar was so at ease. It made my bear feel more peaceful than it’s ever been.” He still remembered how Serena had reached

for his hand underwater, her fingers tangling with his. That simple contact had unleashed a wave of belonging that made him feel immortal. He felt a fresh flutter of awe. “I feel so close to you right now.”

Serena’s smile widened. “I guess that’s how it’s always going to be with us, huh?”

“Always,” he agreed, lifting her hand to his lips.

His phone chimed from the small beach bag at his feet. He reached for it and glanced at the screen. The message was from their realtor, letting him know the sellers had accepted their offer on the house. His breath caught. “Serena,” he said, looking up from the phone. “We got the house. They accepted our offer.”

She gasped, nearly spilling her drink. “Are you serious? That’s awesome.” Without waiting for an answer, she jumped into his lap, flung her arms around his neck, and kissed him full on the lips. He tasted the fruity cocktail on her lips, which only made his grin grow wider.

He slid an arm around her waist and held her close. The world seemed to vanish into a soft haze of warm sun and salty wind. This was why he’d fought so hard to tame his beast. He had found a purpose in Serena. In protecting her, lifting her up, and making her smile.

“We really have a place to call our own now,” she said, stroking his hair.

He nodded, his heart full. After all the storms they had weathered, he felt the quiet certainty of a man who had finally come home.