



Cooper (Pecan Pines #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Miles Brooks can barely keep it together. With a mountain of bills and a business going under, he has no time for anything else. Then his older brother and uncle piss off the local alpha, and now they all have a target on their backs. Calling his brother's best friend is his only option. He hasn't seen Cooper in years, yet he still has a crush on him. All Miles has to do is keep his paws to himself. Cooper never really saw him, but something's changed. Cooper can't seem to take his eyes off him.

Cooper Hayes left Pecan Pines ten years ago after a humiliating defeat. He's in a better place and in a stable pack now. When Cooper receives a frantic call from his best friend's little brother, he has no choice but to return home. Staying long isn't an option, but then he meets Miles again. Gone is the annoying brat who constantly tagged along with Cooper and his best friend. In fact, the little wolf is all grown up now. Even Miles' scent has changed...because Miles smells like his mate.

Total Pages (Source): 20

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Chapter 1

Miles

I glanced up from the worn pages of the book I was reading as the bell above the door chimed. A familiar face smiled back at me—a regular customer, Mrs. Jenkins.

She had a penchant for historical romances and rarely left the bookstore without adding something new to her collection.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Jenkins," I greeted warmly, closing my book and standing up from behind the counter. "What can I help you with today?"

"Oh, just the usual, dear," she replied, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "I'm looking for something set in the Victorian era."

I nodded and led her to a section of shelves lined with the kind of books she loved.

Not that I needed to; she knew this place like the back of her hand. But I was bored and didn't mind chatting with my favorite customer.

"I just got a new shipment last week. You might find something you like over here," I said, gesturing to the shelf at the back.

While Mrs. Jenkins browsed the books, I found myself staring at an old photo on the wall.

It was of me, my brother Sawyer, and our dad, standing proudly in front of the bookstore from way over fifteen years ago.

Dad had his arm around us, and we were all grinning with excitement on opening day. I reached out and touched the frame, feeling a rush of nostalgia.

“Found it!” Mrs. Jenkins’ voice pulled me back to the present. She was clutching a novel with a wide smile. “This one looks perfect.”

"Great choice," I said, ringing up the book. "That one's a classic. I think you'll really enjoy it."

After exchanging a few more pleasantries and thanking Mrs. Jenkins for her purchase, I flipped the sign on the door to "Closed" and locked up.

I went around the counter, making sure everything was in its place before heading to the back office.

The small office at the back of the bookstore was cluttered with stacks of books and paperwork—Sawyer’s mess from last night when he was helping me with the budget.

I let out a deep sigh, not wanting to think about the chaos, and made my way to the coffee maker.

As the coffee brewed, I imagined Sawyer's voice in my head, chiding me for drinking coffee so late.

"You know you'll be up all night if you drink that now," Sawyer would say, shaking his head.

I chuckled to myself, stirring in some cream and sugar. "Yeah, but I need it tonight," I

muttered under my breath.

Those numbers weren't going to crunch themselves.

Sometimes, I think I was a coffee addict because of him, always needing the extra boost to keep everything in check.

He was supposed to finish next month's budget tonight, but he was nowhere to be seen. He hadn't answered any of my calls or messages over the past couple of hours either.

If he ditched me for another date or random hookup, I swear I'll make him handle the bookstore's budget for the rest of the year.

I couldn't help but reflect on how different we were. After Dad died, I felt the need to keep everything in order, to plan everything meticulously.

Maybe it was my way of coping, of maintaining some control in a world that had suddenly become so unpredictable.

Sawyer, on the other hand, seemed to thrive in chaos, always flying by the seat of his pants.

But someone had to keep things running smoothly, and that someone somehow ended up being me.

I took a sip and closed my eyes for a moment.

After a few seconds of intense meditation—or rather, vivid imaginings of how I'd get back at Sawyer for this—I felt a bit more prepared to tackle the mountain of bills and payments awaiting me.

Sitting down at the cluttered desk, I began sifting through the papers. The bookstore's finances were tight, and the added strain of Uncle Benjamin's hospitalization was weighing heavily on me.

Uncle Ben took Sawyer and me in after our father passed away.

I thought back to the days growing up with Uncle Ben—how he welcomed us without hesitation, brought us to the lake every summer, and attended our graduations and school events no matter how busy he was at work.

I rubbed my temples, trying to shake off the nostalgia and focus on the present. I flipped through the bills, relieved to see I had enough to cover the basics for the next couple of months.

But I needed to tighten the budget even more to handle the extra expenses. We weren't in trouble yet, but things would be strained for a while.

The repairs and improvements Sawyer and I had planned would be postponed.

My plans for the café section of the bookstore would have to wait a little longer too, but that was alright. Uncle Ben was family, and Sawyer and I owed him everything.

"It'll have to do for now," I muttered.

I made a mental note to discuss the situation with Sawyer over the weekend.

My brother would grumble and complain, but I knew exactly how to soften the blow. I'd just have to put some free food in front of him, and he'd do anything.

As the minutes ticked by, I finally finished and gathered the papers into a neat pile. I took one last sip of my now-cold coffee and glanced at my watch.

I had just enough time to meet Noah for our movie. My phone vibrated, startling me out of my thoughts. Speak of the devil.

"I know, I know, I'm in my car. I'm five minutes away." I was lying through my teeth, but I stood up and quickly started grabbing my things.

"Just get the tickets first; I'll be there soon," I urged into the phone.

There was no response, just silence on the other end. I paused, a knot of worry starting to form in my stomach.

"Hello? Noah?" I called out into the phone, hoping for a reply.

There was silence at first, but then I heard harsh breathing, as if Noah were running.

I could vaguely hear the sounds of a crowd in the background, but my focus was on Noah's labored breaths.

"You need to get to the pack lands quickly. Your brother just challenged Ryder," Noah whispered urgently.

I froze, my mind racing. Challenging Ryder, the lead alpha, was not something to be taken lightly.

I didn't know what was going through Sawyer's mind, or why he would do something as reckless as that. But it didn't matter.

For now, all I knew was that I needed to be there.

"Are you sure?" I asked, my voice tight with concern.

"I saw it myself," Noah whispered urgently. "Hurry, Miles."

"I'm on my way," I said firmly, my heart pounding. I hung up, grabbed my keys, and rushed out of the bookstore.

It usually took about 20 minutes to drive from town to the pack lands, but I knew a shortcut through the woods that cut the trip in half.

It was a narrow dirt road that twisted through the thick trees. I gripped the wheel tightly as my car skidded over loose gravel, finally pulling into the empty lot in front of the pack house.

As I stepped out of my car, I was met with a surreal sight.

Every wolf in the pack seemed to have gathered, forming a tight circle.

Their eyes turned toward me as I approached—some with snickers, others with pity, but all with an intensity that sent a shiver down my spine.

Pushing my way through the crowd, I felt the stifling heat and humidity of the hot summer night clinging to my skin, yet I shivered as if I were cold.

Panic and fear gnawed at me as I neared the center. I didn't know what I would find there, didn't even know if I wanted to see it, but I continued pushing my way through.

An arm shot out from the side, grabbing me and pulling me back.

"Let go!" I protested, trying to break free, but it was Noah. His face was grave.

"What's going on?" I demanded, my voice tight with worry.

Noah didn't answer immediately, his gaze fixed on the scene ahead. The crowd parted slightly as Noah led me through, their murmurs and whispers blending into an indistinct hum.

I tore my gaze away from Noah's grip and looked in the direction he was staring. My heart sank as I watched the scene unfold before me.

At the center, two wolves were circling each other: a black wolf—Ryder, the alpha of our pack—and a grey wolf—my brother, Sawyer.

Ryder lunged at Sawyer with powerful, precise strikes, his jaws snapping dangerously close to Sawyer's neck.

Sawyer twisted and turned, desperately trying to dodge Ryder's attacks and find a chance to hit back. Every move was a near miss.

I could tell that Sawyer wasn't thinking clearly, that his emotions were clouding his judgment. His strikes were wild and unfocused, missing their mark, as if he were too caught up in his anger.

My breath caught with every clash of teeth and claws. I felt helpless, just standing there, unable to do anything.

Then, Ryder lunged at Sawyer's head, making him flinch and momentarily drop his guard.

Seizing the opportunity, Ryder snapped at Sawyer's back leg with a sickening crunch.

The sound of bone breaking was loud and seemed to echo through the crowd. Time felt like it slowed down as both wolves suddenly shifted back into their human forms, collapsing to the ground in pain and exhaustion.

I could vaguely hear the hooting and hollering from the sidelines, but my mind was consumed by one overwhelming thought.

My brother was dying in front of me.

My feet instinctively moved forward, wanting to get to my brother's side, but a large hand suddenly pushed me back. It was Griffin, Noah's brother.

"Wait," Griffin urged, his voice firm.

Sawyer lay motionless on the ground, blood pooling around him, his leg mangled with bone protruding.

Ryder knelt beside him, his hand reaching out, his claws extended. He whispered something into Sawyer's ear.

Even in the dark, I could see Ryder's hand digging into Sawyer's neck, drawing blood. Droplets glistened in the moonlight.

"No!" I cried out.

I didn't even know how we managed to get out of the pack lands.

The last thing I remembered was breaking free from Noah and Griffin, my legs propelling me toward my brother, desperate to reach him.

Images flashed in my mind—Griffin's strong arms helping to lift Sawyer into the backseat of the car and my frantic insistence that we not take him to the pack healer.

I couldn't trust anyone from the pack right now, not after what happened.

Noah and Griffin were the only ones I felt I could rely on at that moment. I told them to take Sawyer to a hospital instead, even though I knew it might prolong his recovery.

But I didn't care. I couldn't risk anything, not when Sawyer's life was at stake.

In the hospital, the sterile, antiseptic smell assaulted my senses as I sat by my brother's bedside. I watched his chest rise and fall with each labored breath, his face pale and drawn with pain.

"Noah, Griffin," I said quietly, turning to them. "I'm fine. You can go home now."

Noah opened his mouth as if to protest, but Griffin placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Call us if you need anything," Griffin said softly, giving me a nod of understanding.

I nodded back gratefully, watching them leave the room.

They'll only allow family in here anyway, and the room was too small for all of us to sleep in.

More than anything, I wanted to be alone with my brother. I pulled up a chair beside the bed and took Sawyer's hand in mine.

"Hang in there, Sawyer," I whispered, my voice barely audible.

I rested my forehead against the cold hospital bed bars. First it was Uncle Benjamin, and now my brother. Worry and exhaustion felt like a heavy load on my shoulders.

I heard a rustle of cloth and movement beside me. Startled, I looked up.

My brother was finally waking up, lifting his hand weakly. I could feel tears welling up behind my eyes.

I opened my mouth, wanting to speak, but Sawyer was struggling with his oxygen mask, clearly trying to take it off.

Even though he was having difficulty breathing, it was clear he wanted to tell me something important.

Without hesitating, I reached over and helped him remove the mask, feeling the urgency in his eyes.

He wheezed as he managed to speak. "Call... Cooper..."

"Cooper?" I repeated, surprised. Cooper was my brother's best friend, who had left the pack over ten years ago.

I hadn't realized they were still in touch.

Sawyer looked at me with piercing intensity. "I need... him," he insisted, his voice strained but determined.

I nodded silently as he closed his eyes, and I carefully put the oxygen mask back in place.

Scanning the belongings the nurses had left on the side table, I quickly found his phone. After unlocking the screen, I scrolled through his contacts until I found Cooper's name.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to push away the nervousness and anxiety gnawing inside me.

Childhood memories came flooding back: my secret crush on Cooper, even though he barely seemed to notice me; how his eyes would light up with mischief and that smile of his that made everything feel a little better.

Although I knew he saw me as Sawyer's annoying little brother, I had always looked up to him.

He had this way of making even the simplest moments seem special.

Now, with everything going on, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd remember me at all or if I'd just be a distant memory.

But my brother needed him. I pushed back any lingering doubts and pressed the call button, bringing the phone to my ear.

"Cooper? It's Miles," I began, my voice cracking slightly with emotion. I glanced at Sawyer's pale face as I spoke. "Sawyer's in the hospital. He... he needs you."

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Chapter 2

Cooper

“Sawyer’s in the hospital. He... he needs you.” Miles’ words echoed in my head, dredging up memories I kept locked up—memories I thought I had outrun.

I remembered that night, even ten years later, clear as day.

Me, at 18, reckless and foolish enough to believe I could challenge the lead alpha of the Pecan Pines pack and avenge my father.

Me, covered in wounds, and Ryder’s fangs around my throat.

The only reason he allowed me to live was because some of my former pack mates begged him to spare my life... and I suspected he did so knowing I’d have to live with the humiliation of defeat for the rest of my life.

"Cooper... are you there?" ventured an unfamiliar voice.

Miles, I recalled, pulling myself back to the present. His voice had become deeper.

He was probably all grown up now, but all I could remember was Sawyer’s kid brother, tagging along with us when we were kids.

I smiled a little at the memory, but the present rammed its ugly head.

Sawyer was hurt. We weren't blood related, but he was my brother.

Even though I had moved out of Pecan Pines ten years ago, built a new life, and joined another pack, Sawyer and I kept in touch.

Now, my brother needed me, and although heading back to my hometown would definitely stir unpleasant memories, I dreaded the thought of going back.

But I wasn't going to leave Sawyer hanging.

"I'm still here," I told Miles on the phone. "Give me a day. I'll need to let my lead alpha know. Then I'll drive straight there."

I was about to say "straight back home," but Pecan Pines hadn't been home—not for a long time.

Winter Valley and the pack that protected it, the pack I belonged to and was second-in-command of, that was home.

I hung up and took a deep breath, trying to steady the whirlwind of emotions inside me. The cold mountain air of Winter Valley blew through the open window, usually calming, but not today.

I could still feel Ryder's fangs at my throat, hear the jeering of the pack, the shame searing through me.

A knock on the door broke my train of thought. It was Daniel, my current lead alpha.

He took one look at me and immediately seemed to know something was wrong. Daniel furrowed his brows.

“Everything okay, Cooper?” he asked, his familiar voice grounding me.

“Not really,” I admitted. “My best friend’s in the hospital. I need to go back to Pecan Pines.”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

Are you sure you’re ready to face your past? Was Daniel’s unasked question.

“I don’t have a choice,” I said. “He’s my best friend, and I consider him a brother.”

Daniel nodded, his gaze steady. “We’ll manage here. Take care of what you need to,” he said.

I packed quickly, my mind racing. The drive was going to be long, giving me plenty of time to dwell on everything I had tried to leave behind—the memories, the scars, both physical and emotional.

But none of that mattered now. Sawyer needed me.

I drove through the winding mountain roads, the landscape changing from the snowy peaks of Winter Valley to the dense forests of Pecan Pines.

To be honest, I didn’t know what to expect once I got there. It then occurred to me that I should’ve asked Miles more questions.

What exactly had happened to Sawyer? How bad was he hurt? Who did this to him?

But there had been no time for details. Miles had sounded frantic on the phone, his words rushed and panicked, and my own shock had frozen my thoughts.

Either way, I was here now and intended to get answers. Sawyer could hold his own in a fight, unless... he picked a fight he couldn't win.

The closer I got, the heavier the weight in my chest became. Night had fallen by the time I reached the outskirts of Pecan Pines. The town was eerily quiet, shadows lengthening across familiar streets.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, knuckles white. Every corner seemed to hold a ghost of the past, every landmark a reminder of what I had lost and what I had run from.

I parked in front of the hospital, the harsh fluorescent lights stark against the dark night. Miles was waiting for me at the entrance, his face pale and drawn.

Before I could study him closer, my inner wolf snarled in warning. I could feel someone—no, a couple of someones—watching us. Other wolves. Ryder's wolves.

My gaze landed on two wolves seated in a car parked nearby. I didn't recognize either of them. Then again, I had been gone for ten years.

Whenever I spoke with Sawyer on the phone, he avoided discussing the current state of the Pecan Pines pack, knowing my history.

One of them, a beefy guy with yellowing teeth, flashed his fangs at me in warning. My wolf instinctively wanted to lash back.

I silently sized up the other wolf and knew he would be no match for me.

I hadn't spent the last ten years idle, and I hadn't become Daniel's second-in-command from pure luck alone—I clawed my way to the top.

In a way, I worked hard because some part of me wanted to prove to that foolish 18-year-old I'd been that I had grown and matured. So, I tore my gaze from Ryder's wolves and focused on Miles.

Was this gorgeous guy really Miles? As I neared him, his scent wrapped around me like a glove.

My wolf soon shrugged off his initial anger, and I felt something else—a more potent emotion—desire I'd never experienced before.

“Miles,” I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

He looked up, and our eyes met.

“Cooper,” he breathed, relief and something more flickering across his features. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

I stepped closer, feeling an unexplainable pull toward him. His scent enveloped me, stirring a primal urge deep within.

My wolf recognized him as more than just an old friend’s brother. There was a connection, an unspoken bond that had been dormant until now.

“I came as soon as I could,” I replied, my voice low. “Tell me what happened.”

His gaze flickered toward Ryder's wolves, tension evident in his posture.

“Not here,” he said quietly. “They’re watching us.”

I nodded, understanding the need for caution. “Let’s get inside,” I told him.

As we moved toward the hospital entrance, I couldn't help but steal glances at Miles.

He sure had grown up. My wolf stirred restlessly, and I felt a surge of protectiveness and longing that caught me off guard.

Inside the hospital, the sterile smell of antiseptic did little to calm my racing thoughts.

Miles led me down a dim corridor, the flickering fluorescent lights casting eerie shadows. My senses were on high alert, every instinct attuned to potential danger.

We reached a small waiting room, and Miles closed the door behind us. The moment we were alone, the tension between us became palpable. I could hear his heartbeat, rapid and steady.

"Miles," I began, but he cut me off with a look that sent a jolt of electricity through me.

"Cooper," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I was so scared. When Sawyer got hurt, I didn't know what to do."

His vulnerability hit me hard, and I closed the distance between us in two strides.

"It's all right," I said softly. "I'm here now. We'll get through this together."

Get through this together? What sort of promise was I making? I told Daniel I would only be here a few days, a week at the most.

For a moment, we stood there, the air between us charged with unspoken emotions. Then, without warning, Miles reached out and grasped my hand.

The touch sent a shiver down my spine, and I felt my wolf stir, recognizing the

significance of this contact.

“Uncle Ben’s also in this hospital... and now Sawyer’s here, too,” he said, sounding a touch panicky.

I couldn’t blame him. With Ben and Sawyer down for the count, Miles probably felt alone and vulnerable. Vulnerable and in danger, I thought, not forgetting Ryder’s wolves.

“Miles, listen to me,” I said, gripping his shoulders and forcing him to meet my gaze.

His eyes were wide with fear, and I didn’t like that one bit.

I continued, “We’re going to get through this. But I need you to stay calm and focused. Can you do that for me?”

He nodded, but I could see the uncertainty still lingering in his eyes. “I’ll try,” he whispered, his voice trembling.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I reminded him.

He let out an adorable sniff, and I couldn’t help myself any longer. In that instant, the tension between us snapped, and I pulled him into my arms.

The embrace was fierce and desperate, and exactly what we both needed at that moment. His body fit against mine perfectly, as if we were two halves of a whole.

“Miles,” I murmured, burying my face in his hair, inhaling his scent deeply.

It was intoxicating, filling me with a heady mix of desire and protectiveness. I could feel the warmth of his body against mine, the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as he

breathed.

His scent, a unique blend of wolf musk and something sweet, filled my senses, making it hard to think clearly. Back off now, I reminded myself.

For one, this was Sawyer's kid brother, and two, this was inappropriate.

It felt like I was taking advantage of him, and yet I couldn't seem to part from the embrace. My mind was a whirl of conflicting emotions.

On one hand, I knew I needed to be the strong, reliable presence he could lean on in this time of crisis. On the other, every fiber of my being was drawn to him in a way that was both exhilarating and terrifying.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to loosen my grip slightly. He looked up at me.

"Cooper... I don't know what I'd do without you. Thank you for coming," Miles said.

Then Miles did the unexpected. He leaned in, his eyes softening as he moved closer.

I could see the gratitude and affection in his gaze, and I knew he was about to kiss my cheek. But something in me shifted, a deep, primal urge that I couldn't ignore.

As his lips neared my cheek, I purposely turned my head at the last second so he'd kiss my mouth instead.

The contact was electric, a spark that ignited a fire within me. For a split second, I wondered if I'd made a mistake, if I'd pushed too far. But then I felt his response, the way his lips softened against mine, hesitant but willing.

He probably did that to thank me, I rationalized. But at that moment, I got greedy and decided I wanted to taste his mouth.

Reluctantly, I pulled away, the warmth of Miles's body lingering on my skin.

The intensity of the moment left me at a loss for words, and I could see the same bewilderment reflected in his eyes.

“Um, that was...” I trailed off, searching for the right words to explain what had just happened between us.

Miles blinked, his cheeks flushed, and took a step back to put some distance between us. He cleared his throat.

“Let’s go see Sawyer,” he said, his voice steadier than I expected.

I nodded, grateful for the distraction. “Good idea,” I replied, trying to regain my composure.

My mind was still reeling from the kiss, the way it had felt so right. I couldn’t afford to let my emotions cloud my judgment, not when Sawyer needed us.

I stole another glance at Miles, trying to gauge his feelings, but his expression was unreadable. He kept his gaze forward, and I reminded myself once more that I was here for Sawyer.

Miles led me to a room at the end of a long corridor. When we reached the door, he paused, turning to me with a haunted look.

“He’s not in good shape,” he said. “But he’s been asking for you a lot.”

I nodded, pushing the door open. Sawyer lay on the hospital bed, pale and injured, an IV drip attached to his arm.

Machines beeped softly, monitoring his vital signs. He looked so vulnerable, and the sight hit me like a punch to the gut.

“Sawyer,” I whispered, stepping closer. His eyes fluttered open, a weak smile forming on his lips.

“Coop... you came,” he rasped.

“I’m here, brother,” I said, taking his hand. “I’m here.”

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Chapter 3

Miles

Well, that was... unexpected? Weird? Awkward? Hot?

Okay, maybe not hot, since our lips barely touched. But still, it felt electric, sending a shiver down to my toes.

I had no idea what came over me, leaning into him like that. How did we go from a hug to a kiss?

I bit my lip, tasting the faint remnants of Cooper's lips—coffee with a hint of cigarette.

Conflicted, I stood by the door, torn between the unexpected kiss and the pressing reality of him being here because of Sawyer.

How I managed to pull myself away and lead him to my brother's room, I had no idea.

As Cooper and Sawyer chatted, I stared blankly ahead, their conversation flying over my head.

All I could think about was the kiss, replaying it in my mind and wondering how and why it happened.

It had to have been an accident, right?

Because who would kiss someone they hadn't seen in over ten years and only met again because their brother was lying in a hospital bed?

Plus, Cooper must have been tired from driving for hours, not thinking clearly. That had to be it.

Yet, there was a look in Cooper's eyes, darkened and intense, that seemed like he might have wanted more.

With the way he looked at me—it wasn't just about the kiss; there was something deeper, something almost hungry in his gaze. The image was burned into my mind, so vivid that it couldn't have been my imagination.

But what did I know? I was stressed, tired, and anxious from everything that had happened tonight—or was it yesterday? I couldn't even tell anymore.

Either way, neither of us was in our right frame of mind.

I still couldn't believe the last time I saw him was ten years ago. Did he always look this good?

No, 'good' didn't even come close. The baggy sweater he was wearing didn't do him justice. When he pressed his body against mine earlier, I could feel the solid, defined hardness of his muscles.

His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showing off veined forearms that hinted at his strength. A light stubble covered his face and neck, adding to his rugged, slightly rushed appearance.

Yet, despite it all, he looked effortlessly handsome, like he'd just stepped out of an ad for some outdoor gear or a classic western movie.

Cooper glanced at me, a curious expression on his face, before turning away to laugh at something Sawyer said. I quickly shifted my gaze back to the spot on the wall I had been staring at.

This won't do. Sawyer mentioned that Cooper would probably be here for a couple of days.

I winced at the thought. I probably needed to talk to Cooper about this, to apologize or something.

I couldn't spend the next few days looking away awkwardly and staring at spots on hospital walls.

The tension was palpable, and if we didn't address it, it would only grow more uncomfortable.

Sawyer coughed, bringing my thoughts back to the present. I took the pitcher from the table and poured him a cup of water. He nodded in thanks.

Right. I needed to focus on the real issue: my brother was hurt, and Ryder might still come after him.

"So, what exactly happened?" Cooper asked Sawyer, his expression serious.

Sawyer sighed, his face tightening with pain and frustration. "I challenged Ryder because he attacked Uncle Ben. Uncle Ben was defending Glenn, a pack member who was constantly being harassed by Ryder. This time, Ryder went too far and threatened Glenn to do something he didn't want to do, or he'd kick him out of the

pack.”

Anger flared within me. “Why didn’t you tell me this before? You know how dangerous Ryder is!” I shouted, walking toward the bed.

Sawyer looked apologetic. “I’m sorry, Miles. I thought I could handle it. But it was Uncle Ben! I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing.”

Now that I finally knew what had happened, I could understand why my brother did it.

Sawyer always had a strong sense of justice ever since we were children. Come to think of it, so did Cooper. They were like two peas in a pod.

“And you asked for Cooper because...?” I asked, trailing off.

“When you found me, I thought I was dying,” Sawyer said, trying to joke, but his tone soon turned serious. “Honestly, after what happened with Uncle Ben, I knew Ryder wouldn’t let us off the hook easily.”

“So Cooper is our backup plan?” I asked, frowning. “But we have Noah and Griffin. Isn’t that enough?”

Sawyer shook his head. “I just needed my best friend,” he said, though I could tell there was more to it. I was concerned that Sawyer might be asking too much of Cooper.

Cooper, who seemed lost in thought, returned to the moment and placed a reassuring hand on Sawyer’s arm. “I’m here as long as you need me,” Cooper said.

Sawyer’s expression softened, and a small chuckle escaped him. “Hey, remember

when we tried to build that treehouse in the old oak behind your house?" Sawyer asked.

Cooper laughed, and even I couldn't help but grin at the memory. "Yeah, and we used those rusty nails we found in the shed. The whole thing was so crooked, but we were so proud of it," Cooper said.

Sawyer's grin grew wider. "And then it rained, and the treehouse collapsed. We were soaked and covered in mud, but we couldn't stop laughing."

I rolled my eyes at the memory but felt a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. Despite everything, it was good to see my brother in better spirits than yesterday.

"Want me to grab you guys anything while I get coffee?" I asked.

Cooper glanced at Sawyer and then back at me. "I'll come with you."

I was a bit surprised but nodded. "Oh. Yeah, okay."

We navigated around the bed and headed for the door. I held it open for Cooper, who gave me a small smile as he walked through.

The corridor was dimly lit, and a quiet settled between us as we walked. I could feel the heaviness of the situation pressing down on me, but I didn't want to dwell on it right now.

"You could've stayed with Sawyer," I said, trying to fill the silence. "Caught up with him."

Cooper shook his head. "No, it's cool. I could use some food too."

“The cafeteria’s closed now. Just vending machines,” I said, keeping the conversation going.

“Oh, I saw some in the waiting room earlier,” Cooper said casually.

“Yeah, but the vending machines on this floor aren’t that great,” I blurted out. “The ones near the ER are way better, especially for coffee. They even have a machine that sells hot sandwiches. I don’t know how it works, but it’s surprisingly good—better than the cafeteria. They’ve got fresh chocolate chip cookies and sometimes mini muffins too. The coffee’s decent for a vending machine; still instant, but much better than what’s on this floor. And if you’re into chips or candy, they’ve got a good selection. I even found an amazing granola bar there once...”

I realized I was rambling and stopped, feeling my cheeks flush. I had been so focused on making conversation that I didn’t notice how much I was oversharing.

Cooper just smiled, a small, understanding grin that made my heart skip a beat.

“Sounds like you know your way around here,” he said, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

“Yeah, I guess I’ve spent more time here than I’d like,” I muttered, trying to downplay it. “Anyway, let’s head to the vending machines near the ER. It’s a bit of a walk, but it’s worth it.”

Cooper chuckled softly. I felt a twinge of self-consciousness.

“Sorry, am I talking too much?” I asked.

Cooper shook his head. “No, not at all. You’ve clearly made yourself at home here. You even know where the best vending machines are.”

If you'd been here for over 24 hours and tried eight different coffee machines, you'd know your way around too.

And if anyone asked me how many steps it was between Sawyer's and Uncle Ben's rooms, or what the quickest route was, I could tell them in a heartbeat.

I hadn't left the hospital since Sawyer was admitted, constantly shuttling between his and Uncle Ben's rooms.

It kept me busy and distracted, even though I couldn't escape the worry gnawing at me.

Also, I couldn't fall asleep even if I wanted to, not knowing what might happen to them if I did.

We walked in near silence, the uncomfortable tension settling between us once more. Finally, we reached the vending machine area. I pulled out my wallet to slot in a bill, but Cooper placed his hand on mine, his wallet already out.

"No, let me," he said.

I quickly pulled my hand back, as if I'd touched something hot. The weirdness from our kiss earlier still lingered, making me feel exposed.

Cooper's eyes widened for a moment, but he didn't comment on it, and I was grateful for that.

Clearing my throat, I tried to break the awkwardness. "So, uh, about what happened earlier..."

Cooper nodded, his expression understanding. "Yeah, we should probably talk about

that,” he said.

I rubbed the back of my neck, shifting my weight from foot to foot. “Sorry if I crossed any lines or made things weird.”

Cooper sighed softly, his gaze meeting mine. “No, Miles, it’s not you. I... maybe I should have been more aware too.”

I nodded, feeling a small weight lift off my shoulders. “Yeah, well, let’s just... put it behind us and focus on helping Sawyer,” I said.

Cooper smiled, and the tension between us eased a little. “Agreed.”

As the vending machine whirled to life, the smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. Cooper handed me the cup, and I took a sip while he slotted another bill into the machine for a second cup.

“So, tell me about your pack,” I said, trying to keep things light.

I wanted to shift the focus away from the awkward moment earlier. Also, I was genuinely interested and wanted to get to know Cooper better.

Cooper leaned against the wall, thinking for a moment. “It’s good. From the moment I joined, it felt different. Ryder’s a dictator, but Daniel—he keeps the pack in line and actually listens to everyone’s opinions,” Cooper explained.

A lead alpha who cared about others’ thoughts? That was a new idea to me.

Cooper then mentioned how he’d climbed the ranks to become second-in-command. He spoke about it casually, but I was genuinely impressed.

I'd always believed he had potential. After all, Cooper's father was the lead alpha before Ryder killed him.

Sawyer once told me that Ryder accepted Cooper's challenge ten years ago because he saw Cooper as a real threat.

The only reason Ryder won back then was that Cooper was young and inexperienced. Now, that wasn't the case anymore.

"What about you?" Cooper asked, shifting the conversation back to me. "What have you been up to?"

"Oh, just working at the bookstore," I said, trying to sound casual.

I wondered if I should bother telling him more about it—the endless repairs, the struggle to make ends meet, and the café I'd been thinking of adding.

It felt unnecessary, even though this was just small talk and shouldn't really matter. Just a way to pass the time.

But for some reason, I found myself constantly reminding myself to stay focused on Sawyer and the threat Ryder posed to our family.

If I didn't, if I let my guard down even a little, I knew everything would come flooding out. And with Cooper around, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop it.

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Chapter 4

Cooper

"So, what are your plans now?" Miles asked, his voice steady but his eyes betraying a flicker of concern.

"I'm checking into an inn. I'll swing by first thing tomorrow," I answered, trying to keep my tone casual.

"I see," Miles said with a nod, looking relieved.

His shoulders seemed to relax just a fraction, and I had the sudden urge to pull him close for a comforting hug.

But I hesitated, remembering we had returned to Sawyer's hospital room after our walk.

What was it about being with Miles that made me forget everything else around me, focusing solely on him?

Sawyer's eyes were glued to the TV, but I wondered if he sensed something had changed between Miles and me. Not yet, probably. Sawyer could be dang clueless at times.

Even if he did know, he'd see it as a betrayal. Heck, I still felt sketchy for having these feelings for Miles, and it was such an inappropriate moment. I left the room,

feeling bothered by the changes inside me.

My wolf grew alert as I exited the hospital. Ryder's wolves were still there. Sawyer had been right to call for me.

If both Uncle Ben and Sawyer had pissed Ryder off, then their family had made their way onto Ryder's wanted list.

Miles would be put in danger... and I didn't like that thought one bit.

Sawyer had come to the defense of his uncle, who was simply protecting a pack member Ryder was harassing.

I suspected it wasn't a one-time incident. Ryder had always done what he wanted, even in the past, as if the rules didn't apply to him.

As I walked to my ride, I noticed the big werewolf who snarled at me earlier was waiting for me.

He wasn't alone. A fit, ginger-haired man in his forties was with him. I silently sized up this newcomer.

Not a newcomer, I realized, as the ginger-haired man smiled at me like we were old friends. I didn't return his smile.

"Bruce," I said, acknowledging Ryder's second-in-command from ten years ago.

He hadn't aged gracefully. I wondered if he was still in the same position.

"Cooper, been a while," Bruce said, his tone deceptively friendly.

"So, Beefy here called you in. Must be serious," I said, keeping my tone casual and nodding toward the big werewolf who had growled at me earlier.

Beefy growled again, narrowing his eyes at me. He punched his fist into his hand, a clear threat.

Bruce's smile widened, but there was no warmth in it. "You know how it is. Ryder likes to keep tabs on old friends, make sure everyone's... behaving."

"Right," I replied, my eyes flicking between Bruce and Beefy. "Well, I've got nothing to hide."

"Good to hear," Bruce said, stepping closer. "Because if you did, Ryder wouldn't be happy. And you remember what he's like when he's not happy."

"Vividly," I said, my voice tight.

Did Bruce bring up the past to agitate me? Probably, but I wasn't the same reckless and angry boy I'd been ten years ago. It would take much more to provoke me.

I continued, "But I'm not here to cause trouble. Just visiting old friends."

"Old friends?" Bruce asked, his tone dripping with false concern. "Well, that's good. What happened to Sawyer and Ben was such a shame. Now Miles is all alone."

His words hit a nerve, and I felt my wolf stir, the urge to protect Miles rising within me.

Be patient, I reminded myself. Bruce seemed intent on baiting me.

"Sawyer and Ben are fighters; they'll make a quick recovery," I said, keeping my

voice steady.

"I'm sure they will," Bruce said, still smiling that infuriating smile.

I was tempted to punch his smug face but reeled myself in. If I did anything now, it would give them a reason to fight a 'misbehaving' visitor in their territory.

When I did nothing, Bruce looked a little disappointed. I wasn't going to lose my cool, not with so much at stake.

Bruce and his cronies were waiting for any excuse to pounce, but I wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

"So, how long are you planning on staying in Pecan Pines?" Bruce finally asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Just a few days," I said, forcing a casual tone. "I figured I'd use the opportunity to do a little sightseeing. Been a while since I was here."

Bruce's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Sightseeing, huh? Well, I hope you enjoy your stay. Pecan Pines has changed a lot in the last ten years," he said.

"I'm sure it has," I replied, meeting his gaze without flinching. "But some things never change."

"Indeed. Well, just remember, Cooper. You're in our territory now. Watch your step," Bruce said.

With that, he turned and walked away, Beefy following close behind. I watched them go, my fists clenched at my sides. This encounter was a good reminder that none of us were truly safe.

As I climbed into my car, my mind raced with the worst-case scenarios. That encounter with Bruce reminded me that I was under constant surveillance, and that Ryder's pack would have their eyes on me at all times.

It also meant they considered me a threat. Good, because I wasn't the reckless 18-year-old they remembered. I had grown stronger and smarter.

I started the engine, the roar of the truck filling the quiet night. My thoughts drifted back to Miles and how my wolf and I felt so comfortable around him.

Despite the danger, despite the uncertainty, I wasn't the least bit scared of Bruce, Ryder, or the other wolves in their pack. Miles' safety, Sawyer's well-being, and their family's protection were my top priorities.

That was the reason I had dropped everything to come here. When I told Daniel I'd only be here a few days, I didn't know the situation yet. Now that I did, I knew I would have to extend my stay.

I rubbed my eyes, forcing myself to focus on the road and wake up. What I needed was coffee. I could drop by a nearby café but decided against it.

It would be better to ask Miles if he wanted to get coffee at the cafeteria or vending machine. That would be a good excuse to leave Sawyer's room and have some privacy.

I wasn't worried about Ryder's guys making a move on Sawyer or Ben because Noah and Griffin were there when I wasn't.

I hadn't spent the last two days doing nothing, although I probably should have been spending more time at the hospital with Miles and Sawyer.

I'd been making a few calls, meeting with former pack mates I trusted to get a feel for what Ryder had been doing with the pack for the last ten years. I needed to assess how much of a threat they were.

By some miracle, I reached the hospital without falling asleep at the wheel.

Seeing Beefy, whose name I learned was Garth, along with another muscle-bound werewolf chatting by the entrance, I immediately woke up. Guard up, I headed to the entrance.

"Still here?" Garth asked me. His pal gave me an unfriendly look.

"Yep," was all I said before strolling in.

I could feel their stares behind me, but I was pretty sure they weren't foolish enough to attack me in broad daylight in front of a busy hospital.

Sawyer was asleep when I entered the room, but Miles wasn't. I frowned, studying him carefully.

There were dark circles under his eyes, and he looked like he hadn't gone home last night because he was still wearing the same clothes he wore yesterday.

"Hey," I said softly.

Miles jerked up, looking momentarily panicked.

"Did something happen last night?" I asked carefully, sitting in the chair next to Miles.

"Cooper, you're here," Miles said, rubbing at his eyes. "Griffin was supposed to drop

by last night, but he had a family emergency."

"Miles, you should head home, get a shower, and some sleep," I said gently.

"I can't," Miles said, sounding panicky. "If I take my eyes off Sawyer or Uncle Ben for a second... I saw Garth wandering the corridors last night. The way he grinned at me..."

Garth. I silently swore. I knew Ryder's guys would hover, but I foolishly assumed they'd keep some distance from Sawyer and Ben's rooms, which were on the same floor.

Knowing Garth was this close to Miles made me seethe. On the outside, I might look like a changed person. I wasn't baited easily anymore, but the anger inside me never truly went away after Ryder beat me all those years ago.

It would always be there, I realized, so I chose when to unleash it and when to put it aside.

"Cooper?" Miles asked, brushing his hand against my arm.

I was this close to striding outside and pummeling the heck out of Garth, but Miles' touch immediately calmed me down. It made me see reason again.

I turned to look at him, his eyes filled with worry and exhaustion.

"I'm sorry, Miles. I should've been around more," I said. "You're not alone. We're in this together. I promised I'll be here for both Sawyer and you."

"That's alright," Miles said quickly. "The fact you're still here is enough."

"Miles, sorry about last night," came a new voice.

Griffin had arrived. He nodded to me when he saw I was there.

"Griffin will keep an eye on Sawyer. Why don't we get some coffee?" I suggested, hoping the break would help Miles relax a bit.

Miles hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, okay," he said.

We made our way to the hospital cafeteria. The walk was quiet, the tension still lingering in the air.

Although I didn't know Griffin that well, Miles assured me he and Noah could be trusted.

Like Sawyer, Ben, and Miles, they belonged to a small group that opposed Ryder. During our walk, I made sure none of Ryder's wolves were lurking nearby.

In the cafeteria, we found a small table in the corner. I bought us coffees, the bitter scent filling the air as we sat down. Miles cradled his cup in his hands, taking a slow sip.

"I'm really glad you're here, Cooper," Miles said, breaking the silence. "Things have been getting worse with Ryder's pack."

"I've noticed," I replied, my eyes meeting his.

Miles shivered slightly, and I reached over, placing a reassuring hand on his arm.

To be honest, I had even considered moving Sawyer and Ben, and by extension, Miles, to Winter Valley.

Daniel would need convincing, but in the end, I didn't think he'd argue. However, I eventually dismissed that thought.

Pecan Pines was Sawyer and Miles' home, and leaving, even temporarily, was not an option.

That was just me being overprotective. Still, we had a huge problem.

"Noah mentioned that you met with two pack mates yesterday," Miles brought up hesitantly. "Can I ask why?"

"I needed a first-hand account of the current situation, how the pack's been during Ryder's rule, from the other Pecan Pines pack members," I said.

"I see," Miles said. "So you've really been busy. But Cooper, what if Ryder finds out?"

"The people I've spoken to are aware of that risk. So I only spoke to those willing to meet up with me," I said.

The two people I'd spoken to, Lee and Hannah, were former enforcers of the pack and were my dad's old friends. They weren't pushovers.

"I see," Miles said, nodding in satisfaction. "You've...changed."

"You've changed too," I murmured, taking a chance and letting Miles see the hunger in my eyes.

Miles swallowed, and I decided now wasn't the right moment to bring up what was brewing between us. It couldn't be ignored, but for now, my priority was to take care of Miles.

"Look, since Griffin's here, why don't I drive you back home so you can freshen up, maybe get some sleep?" I asked.

I didn't make the suggestion earlier because, even after just speaking to Miles for a few days, I realized how stubborn he could be. Right now, his defenses were down.

"But..." Miles began, but I interrupted him.

"Sawyer needs us both at a hundred percent," I gently reminded him.

"Alright," he finally said. "Let's tell Griffin."

Griffin, it turned out, was agreeable. As Miles talked to Sawyer, who was now awake and eating breakfast, Griffin took me aside into the corridor.

"Cooper, are you sure it's a good idea to take Miles back home?" Griffin asked, his brow furrowed with concern. "Ryder's guys might be watching."

"I'll be careful," I assured him. "And besides, I can't let Miles continue like this. He's exhausted, and it's only a matter of time before he collapses. I need him strong for what's coming."

Griffin nodded slowly. "Alright. Just... keep your guard up. Ryder's men might do something if they see an opportunity," Griffin said.

"I know," I said, my jaw tightening. "Believe me, I'm ready for them."

We rejoined Miles and Sawyer, and after a brief conversation, Miles reluctantly agreed to leave.

As we made our way to my truck, I couldn't help but keep a close eye on our

surroundings, my senses heightened.

Once we were in the truck, I started the engine, the roar filling the quiet morning.

"I can't thank you enough for this, Cooper," Miles said softly, breaking the silence. "I didn't realize how much I needed a break until now."

"You're welcome," I replied, glancing over at him. "We all need to take care of each other, especially now."

Miles leaned back in his seat, closing his eyes. "Just... wake me up when we get there, okay?"

"Sure thing," I said, a small smile playing on my lips.

As I drove through the streets of Pecan Pines, I kept my eyes sharp for any signs of trouble.

My mind, however, kept drifting back to Miles and the growing feelings I had for him.

Those feelings would have to take a backseat for now, I decided.

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Chapter 5

Miles

"Mr. Hayes, we need to discuss the financial aspects of your uncle's and brother's stays," the doctor began, his voice calm and measured. "Let's start with your uncle, Ben. He's recovering well, but we'll need to continue monitoring him a little longer."

I nodded, feeling a knot tighten in my stomach. "I understand. What about my brother?"

The nurse, a kind-looking woman with warm eyes, stepped forward.

"Sawyer will need physical therapy for his leg. To proceed with the treatment, we'll need you to sign the consent forms. We also need to ensure that payments or insurance coverage are sorted out before we can start," she said.

"How long do I have to decide?" I asked, trying to keep the anxiety out of my voice.

The doctor exchanged a glance with the nurse before answering.

"Ideally, we'd like to begin his physical therapy as soon as possible to ensure the best recovery. He'll be discharged soon, so we need to have the financial arrangements in place before then," he said.

The nurse handed me a stack of papers. "Here are the forms you'll need to sign. You can take a moment to review them."

I took the papers, my hands trembling slightly. When they left, I looked up to find Cooper standing in the corner, his arms crossed and a concerned expression on his face.

"I guess you heard everything," I said.

"Didn't mean to eavesdrop," Cooper said, stepping closer.

He looked uncertain, as if he'd walked into a conversation he wasn't supposed to overhear.

"It's alright," I replied, nodding toward Sawyer's room.

We began walking in silence, the weight of the conversation still hanging in the air.

After a few moments, Cooper finally spoke up. "Is everything okay?"

I glanced at him, wanting to say everything was fine, but there was something in his look that made me want to open up.

I took a deep breath and decided to lay it all out. "It's... the bookstore. I lied the other day. Things aren't fine at all. We're barely staying afloat. I can manage the essentials, but there's not much left for renovations or any future plans I had in mind."

Cooper listened intently, his expression serious. His comforting presence made me feel like I could keep talking, like it was okay to let everything out.

"I've been thinking about setting up a café in the bookstore, but that'll have to wait," I continued, "I'm just so tired of things staying the same, of nothing changing."

With everything going on—the weight of the hospital bills, the uncertainty of the

future—it all felt like too much to handle.

Each new worry seemed to pile on top of the last. I felt like I was buried under an avalanche of stress and anxiety.

Cooper nodded slowly, processing everything I said. "I had no idea things were this bad," he said.

"Yeah, it's been rough," I admitted. "Sorry. I didn't want to dump all this on you."

I was grateful that Cooper didn't rush to offer solutions or tell me what I should do.

Instead, he just listened, allowing me to vent without judgment. It was exactly what I needed.

I wasn't one to easily share my problems; I usually put on a brave face and claimed everything would be fine, even when I didn't believe it myself.

Eventually, we stopped in front of Sawyer's room. For a moment, we looked at each other. Maybe Cooper noticed something in my face—worry or exhaustion, I didn't know.

"Why don't you take a break? Eat some real food for a change. I can stay with Sawyer for a bit," Cooper said.

I appreciated the suggestion, and the shower he had insisted on the other day had been more than just about washing off the grime from nearly two days in the hospital. It had been about taking a moment to breathe and clear my head.

But the thought of leaving Sawyer and Uncle Ben alone kept me in a state of constant panic. I had spent every waking moment running back and forth between their rooms,

surviving on coffee and vending machine snacks.

Even when Noah or Griffin offered to take over and told me to go home, I couldn't bring myself to leave their sides.

It was like a mental block—I was too scared, too obsessed with needing to be there with them, not wanting to let them out of my sight.

Yet when Cooper told me to take a break, somehow it felt okay.

"I'll think about it," I said, though my voice wavered slightly.

Cooper looked like he wanted to say more, concern still in his eyes. But before he could speak, I turned the door handle and stepped inside Sawyer's room.

"Hah! I win again!" Sawyer exclaimed triumphantly. Noah threw his cards on the table in defeat. It looked like they were playing for candy bars.

Both of them looked up as we entered. I noticed Noah's disappointed look and suspected it wasn't just because he'd lost the game.

I always knew Noah had a crush on my brother but sadly, Sawyer didn't feel the same way.

Before I could say anything, Cooper jumped in. "Hey, Sawyer, mind if I take Miles out for dinner? He hasn't been eating well for days."

I opened my mouth to object, but Sawyer was quicker. "Sure, go ahead. Noah's here to keep me company anyway," Sawyer said.

I knew that tone. My brother was clearly trying to get me out of the room because he

hated eating hospital food.

I raised an eyebrow, trying to ignore Noah's pleased expression at the suggestion.

"No. I need to make sure you eat everything on your plate," I insisted, pointing to the untouched hospital dinner on the tray. "You barely touched your meal yesterday."

Sawyer rolled his eyes and turned to Cooper. "Coop, will you take him out to dinner, please?"

I started to protest, looking to Noah for support, but instead?—

"Griffin's coming over soon, right after he finishes work. You guys go ahead. We've got this," Noah chimed in.

I was stunned. "W-wait, what?"

Noah's grin widened. I could tell he was loving this. I was still trying to wrap my head around how my plans had changed so suddenly.

I couldn't believe I'd been outsmarted by both my brother and my best friend, and not only that, my best friend was siding with my brother.

Although, I shouldn't be surprised. Noah had liked Sawyer for as long as I could remember, but I had no idea why.

They would never work out. Not in a million years because Sawyer only see him as his 'other younger brother'.

Sawyer seemed to be enjoying this too, though for a completely different reason. He was probably getting back at me for constantly hovering over him this past week.

I shot a glance at Cooper, who raised an eyebrow and barely managed to hide a smile. I sighed, realizing I was outnumbered.

“Alright, fine,” I conceded, giving Sawyer a pointed look. “But you better eat everything on that tray, no excuses.”

Sawyer smirked. “Yes, Mom,” he teased, earning a chuckle from Cooper.

Cooper gently pushed me out the door before I could do anything else. Just as the door was closing, I overheard Sawyer telling Noah to call Griffin and bring him a burger.

I felt a flash of irritation and almost turned back to make sure Sawyer ate the hospital meal he was supposed to, but Cooper stopped me with a firm grip on my arm.

“Come on, I’m sure everything will be fine,” he said, his voice calm and reassuring.

I hesitated for a moment but then nodded reluctantly. Cooper was right.

I needed to trust that Sawyer and Noah could handle things without me for a bit.

Cooper led me down the corridor, his hand warm and steady on my arm. As we walked, I couldn’t shake the mix of frustration and gratitude.

I was annoyed that my brother and best friend had teamed up against me. Yet, I was grateful that Cooper was here, looking out for me. Maybe this dinner wouldn’t be so bad after all.

Cooper led me on a longer route through the hospital, steering us past the oncology building and several other departments. I muttered under my breath about the detour.

“Why are we taking the long way?” I asked.

Cooper just shrugged. “We’re already in a hospital—hardly the most exciting place. Might as well make the most of it and take the scenic route. Trust me, it’ll be better than those vending machine snacks you’ve been surviving on,” he said.

“Hey, they weren’t that bad!” I defended.

“Yeah, yeah, keep telling yourself that,” Cooper teased, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

As we walked, I couldn’t help but wonder where Cooper was taking me. After spending almost a week here, I thought I had explored every corner of the hospital.

“Where exactly are we going?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me. “I thought I’d seen every inch of this place.”

“It’s just that you’ve been sticking to the same few places. Maybe it’s time to explore a bit more and try new things,” Cooper said, his smile hinting at something more.

It felt like he was nudging me not just to explore the hospital but to think about trying new things in other areas of my life as well.

I wasn’t exactly comfortable with change and preferred sticking to what I knew. It felt foolproof. Safe.

After all, I’d been the responsible one since I was a kid, taking care of Sawyer and the bookstore after our dad passed away.

Staying in my comfort zone was easier, and I usually avoided stepping out of it because I felt like I needed to keep things under control. But maybe Cooper was

right.

As we walked through the hospital, it felt odd to be so at ease during such a stressful time. The past week had been overwhelming, but with Cooper by my side, I could finally breathe.

The anxiety about Ryder's wolves and the mounting bills was still there, but Cooper's presence made it easier to manage.

This small adventure—just walking through the hospital—helped me realize how much I'd been missing by sticking to my usual routines. Even though stepping out of my comfort zone scared me, it also excited me in a way I hadn't felt in a long time.

It was clear that getting out of that hospital room wasn't just about taking a break. Even though Sawyer had joked about it, I knew deep down that it was good for me to get out and not hover over him all the time.

After what felt like a long walk, we finally reached the café Cooper had mentioned. I looked around, noticing that this part of the hospital was completely new to me.

Cooper led me to a table by the window. The cozy atmosphere was a refreshing change from the hospital's sterile, monochrome walls.

"Is it okay if I order for you?" Cooper asked.

"Yeah," I replied, relieved. I was tired of making decisions where every choice felt heavy. Letting someone else take the lead felt nice for a change.

Cooper soon returned with a tray holding two sandwiches and two cups of coffee that smelled incredible. He set the tray down and took a seat across from me.

I took a sip of the coffee, savoring the rich flavor. “This is really good,” I said, surprised. “Way better than the vending machine coffee.”

Cooper chuckled. “Told you it’d be worth it.”

As Cooper started eating, I watched him for a moment, then took a deep breath. “Cooper, I need your help,” I admitted, feeling a mix of relief and vulnerability.

It felt strangely comforting to ask him for help because I knew I could trust him.

“I’ve been trying to come up with ways to raise funds for the bookstore and keep things going, but I’m hitting a wall. Got any ideas?” I asked.

Cooper chewed on his sandwich, his brow furrowing in thought. “I’ve actually been thinking about that. You probably wouldn’t take money if I offered it, would you?” Cooper asked.

“No, I won’t,” I replied firmly.

Cooper nodded, as if he had expected my answer. He took the paper placemat from the tray and flipped it over to the blank underside.

Then he called a staff member over and borrowed a pen from the counter. In bold letters, he wrote “IDEAS” at the top of the placemat.

“Okay, let’s brainstorm,” he said, tapping the pen thoughtfully. “We need to raise funds and increase the bookstore’s popularity.”

I nodded, grateful that Cooper was ready to jump in and help. His enthusiasm made tackling the problem feel a lot less daunting.

“What about a bake sale?” he suggested.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Yeah, no. Have you ever tried anything I’ve baked before?”

Cooper leaned back, a teasing smile on his face. “I haven’t, but I’m sure I’d enjoy whatever you make, especially if it’s something sweet.”

I felt heat rise to my cheeks, caught off guard by the suggestive tone in his voice.

I coughed, trying to hide my embarrassment. “Anyway, that won’t work. Next.”

“Okay, okay,” Cooper said with a mischievous grin, clearly enjoying my reaction.

We both took a moment to think. Then Cooper spoke up, “How about a car wash?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek, considering it. “A car wash... that could work.”

“My dad’s old enforcers own a hardware store,” Cooper said. “They might have rental services for tools and equipment like a pressure washer.”

I sat up straight, my interest piqued. "A pressure washer? Those things are amazing. I saw this video once where they used one to clean off years of grime from a patio, and it was so satisfying to watch. It’s like all the dirt and buildup just disappears with one swipe. It would make cleaning the cars so much easier. Maybe we could even offer to do?—”

Cooper chuckled, clearly amused.

“What?” I asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious. Did I talk too much again?

“I haven’t seen you this excited in a long time,” Cooper said, his eyes warm.

I smiled, feeling a little embarrassed but also pleased. I hadn’t meant to think about the bookstore right now, but it was something that had to be solved sooner or later.

Normally, I liked to have more time to plan things out, but maybe something spontaneous and quick like this could be good too. Besides, having Cooper here to help made it all seem more doable.

I kept telling myself that I was doing this for the bookstore, so Sawyer wouldn’t have to worry. But the idea of spending more time with Cooper definitely made my heart beat faster.

“All we need is a venue,” Cooper said, bringing me back to the moment.

I nodded, feeling excited. “Let’s do it.”

When we finished dinner, we stood up, and I watched as Cooper carefully grabbed the placemat with our ideas written on it. He folded it neatly and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

Noticing my curious gaze, he smiled reassuringly. “So we can show Sawyer,” he explained.

As we walked back through the hospital, I felt a shift inside. My worries and stress seemed to fade with every step, replaced by a lightness I hadn’t felt in a while.

Cooper’s presence, his support, brought a calming, comforting feeling that I really needed.

When we reached Sawyer's room, I paused, taking a deep breath. Cooper turned to

me, and there was a warmth in his eyes that made me feel drawn to him. Without thinking about it, I took a step closer.

“Cooper,” I began, my voice barely above a whisper. Before I could second-guess myself, I leaned in and kissed him.

This kiss was different from before. It wasn’t accidental or hurried like the other day. Back then, I wasn’t sure if Cooper saw me in the same way I saw him.

But now, it was deliberate, filled with all the emotions I had been holding back.

In that moment, I didn't care about anything. I just wanted to see how Cooper would react.

Cooper's lips were warm and firm against mine. The kiss started gentle, exploring, then grew more intense. I felt the soft pressure of his lips, the tentative touch of his tongue.

His hands, which had been resting lightly on my shoulders, suddenly gripped me tight, pulling me closer until I could feel the delicious warmth of his body pressed against mine.

I pulled away first, my breath coming in short gasps. My heart was pounding, and I was pretty sure it wasn’t just because of the seven cups of coffee I had today.

Cooper's eyes widened in surprise, as if he couldn't quite believe what had just happened. For a moment, he didn’t say anything.

Oh crap.

Panic flared inside me, and I looked away, hoping I could just brush it off as another

accident.

But then I saw Cooper's reaction—his eyes had darkened to a deep gold, his breathing was heavy and uneven. I could hear his heart beating wildly, just like mine.

I felt a thrill of satisfaction. I liked that I could have that effect on him.

I smiled and took his hand. "Come on, let's tell my brother," I said, my voice steady despite the rush of emotions.

Cooper blinked, then smiled back, his grip on my hand tightening as we headed inside Sawyer's room together.

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Chapter 6

Cooper

It was mid-afternoon when Miles and I stepped out of his car. The two of us had finally found the perfect venue for the car wash event.

After looking at a few prospective places, we ended up choosing the broad parking lot next to Miles' bookstore.

Despite it being last minute, we'd managed to secure this spot for the event. With Sawyer's steady recovery and Ben's impending discharge, things finally seemed to be looking up.

Even Miles seemed more upbeat. I watched Miles survey the area with a small smile on his lips.

I knew how much that bookstore meant to him, and to some extent, to Sawyer as well.

In a way, it was a legacy from their father. For Miles, it had become a labor of love, a tribute to his dad's memory, but love alone couldn't pay the bills.

The bookstore was struggling, and Sawyer's hospital expenses only added to the burden. And then there were Ryder's wolves, always lurking in the shadows, watching and waiting for any sign of weakness.

So we really needed this fundraiser to be a success. It was our chance to turn things around.

“Think this place will do the trick?” I asked, nudging Miles gently with my elbow.

He turned to me, his smile widening, and I was tempted to steal a kiss right then, but somehow managed to restrain myself.

“I think it just might,” he replied. “If we get enough volunteers and customers, it could really help.”

We walked the perimeter of the lot, discussing logistics and planning where the wash stations would go. As we talked, I couldn’t help but notice the spark in Miles’ eyes when he spoke.

His passion for the bookstore was obvious, and it was impossible not to get swept up in his excitement. I really hoped this car wash would be a success.

“This will take care of the water supply,” I said, pointing to a nearby hydrant. “You’ve got the soap and sponges, right?”

Miles nodded, jotting down notes on a small notepad. “Yeah, I got a good deal from that supply store downtown. They even threw in some extra buckets,” he said.

I chuckled, imagining Miles haggling for supplies. “Of course you did,” I said.

Just then, the rumble of an approaching truck caught our attention. We turned to see old friends of my father, Lee and Hannah, pulling up in a large pickup loaded with equipment.

I had spoken to them when I returned to Pecan Pines. They owned the local hardware

store, and when I reached out again to tell them about our fundraising idea, they generously offered to loan us whatever we needed.

Honestly, given how Ryder's wolves were constantly watching our movements, I didn't think Lee and Hannah would come through for us.

The risk was too high, and those who helped us might find themselves in danger, but here they were, proving that loyalty still existed.

Lee hopped out of the driver's seat, a wide grin on his face. "Got everything you asked for and then some," he called out, patting the side of the truck. "Pressure washers, hoses, vacuums—you name it."

Hannah followed suit, her arms already filled with buckets and brushes. "We even brought some canopies in case it gets too sunny," she added, setting the supplies down and giving Miles a quick hug. "We're all rooting for you, Miles."

"Thank you both so much. This means the world to me," Miles whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

Lee waved a hand dismissively. "Anything for you and your brother. Besides, what Ryder did to Ben and Sawyer doesn't sit well with us old-timers," Lee said.

A dark look crossed Lee's face, his eyes hardening at the memory. But then he changed his tone, a lighter note creeping into his voice. "Plus, we can't let your bookstore go under. Where else would we get our fix of mystery novels and rare finds?"

"Also, Miles, have you seen the updated sign-up sheet?" Hannah asked.

I'd almost forgotten that Miles had put up a sign-up sheet online for volunteers for

the car wash.

“Not yet,” Miles admitted, a hint of worry in his voice.

“That’s understandable. You have so much on your plate,” Hannah said, her tone reassuring. “But we have enough volunteers.”

“Really?” Miles asked, his eyes widening with surprise and gratitude. “I need to find a way to thank everyone somehow.”

“Nah, everyone’s happy to help,” Lee told him, clapping a hand on Miles’ shoulder. “We’re all in this together.”

With everyone’s help, the car wash was shaping up to be a real success.

Lee, Hannah, and the support of Miles’ other pack mates were a reminder that despite the lurking threat of Ryder’s wolves, we weren’t alone in this fight.

After helping Lee and Hannah unload the truck, they left, leaving just Miles and me. We paused near the center of the lot, and Miles let out a deep breath.

“Things have been tough, but I really believe we can turn this around. With Sawyer’s therapy progressing and Ben coming home... it’s like a fresh start,” Miles said.

I stepped closer, my hand finding his and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“We’ve got this, Miles. We’ll make it work,” I assured him.

He looked up at me, and for a moment, the world around us seemed to fade away. The stress, the worry, the lurking danger from Ryder’s wolves—it all melted into the background.

All that mattered was the way his hand fit in mine, the way his eyes lit up with hope, and the undeniable connection that had grown between us.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” he whispered, his voice barely audible, but the emotion behind it was unmistakable.

His eyes, usually so full of determination, were now softened by vulnerability, and it broke my heart to see him like that.

“You’ll never have to find out,” I replied, perhaps a little too recklessly.

The words slipped out before I could even think them through, but I didn’t care. Maybe I had gotten a little too swept up in the moment, but it felt right.

All that mattered was making Miles happy. I swore to myself right then and there that I would do anything in my power to fix things.

Miles looked at me, his expression a mixture of surprise and something deeper—something that made my heart race. He squeezed my hand, and I squeezed back.

We stood there for a moment, and I thought about everything Miles had been through. Despite everything, Miles had never once wavered. He kept on going.

Miles was perfect. Our perfect mate, my wolf whispered, but I didn’t want to think about that yet.

“Come on,” I said, giving his hand a gentle tug. “We’ve still got a lot of work to do before the event.”

He nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. “Yeah, we do.”

“I don't understand what the problem is. We're just here to take Ben home,” someone said. I recognized that voice—Noah.

“Well, our lead alpha just wants to have a word with Ben. That's all,” said another familiar voice. Beefy, or rather, Garth.

I was on my way to bring Sawyer dinner after driving Miles back home when I heard voices coming from Ben's room.

For a moment, I debated intervening or simply letting Noah handle this, then realized there was nothing to think about. I peeked into Sawyer's room and saw that Griffin was there.

He had his headphones on and was sound asleep. No wonder he didn't hear the commotion in the corridor. Sawyer, too, was taking a nap.

On one hand, I could wake Griffin and let him handle this. In a way, this was a pack affair, and I was no longer part of the Pecan Pines pack, but shoving this task onto Griffin felt cowardly.

I couldn't just stand idly by either. I set Sawyer's food on a nearby table. Griffin didn't even notice my arrival. I planned to have a word with him later about being more vigilant.

Then, remembering that Griffin was probably also tired from helping keep an eye on Sawyer and Ben, I decided against it. Either way, Griffin was no slouch.

Miles assured me he was a pretty formidable fighter. If one of Ryder's wolves made a move on Sawyer, Griffin would wake up and confront him.

Leaving Griffin and Sawyer, I proceeded to Ben's room. As I approached, I could

sense the tension in the air. Noah stood just outside Ben's door, his stance defensive, while Garth loomed over him, arms crossed and a smug expression on his face.

Another of Ryder's wolves hovered nearby, their eyes flicking between Noah and the door as if expecting trouble.

I didn't recognize this one. I took a deep breath and stepped forward.

I reminded myself I would handle this in a mature and peaceful manner. There was no use starting unnecessary fights if words would suffice.

"What's going on here?" I asked, keeping my voice calm but firm.

Noah glanced at me, relief flashing in his eyes. "Cooper, they're saying Ryder wants to have a word with Ben before he leaves," Noah said.

Garth smirked, his gaze shifting to me. "Cooper. You shouldn't interfere. This is a pack matter, and you're no longer a member of our pack," he reminded me.

"That's true," I replied evenly. "But that doesn't mean I'll stand by while you harass my friends."

"Harass?" Garth chuckled, a low, menacing sound. "We're just following orders. Ryder wants to talk to Ben. Nothing more."

"Ryder can wait until Ben is settled," I said, stepping between Garth and Noah. "Ben's been through enough. He doesn't need this right now."

Garth's eyes narrowed, his posture stiffening. "Are you challenging Ryder's authority?" Garth demanded.

He curled his hands into fists, and I could sense his wolf was on the verge of coming out.

That aggravated my own beast, but I held him back. In moments like this, diplomacy, not violence, was the answer.

“I’m protecting my friend,” I shot back. “If Ryder wants to talk to Ben, he can arrange a proper meeting. But not here, and not now.”

The air crackled with tension as Garth and I stared each other down. I could feel Noah’s anxiety behind me, but I also sensed that he would back me up if it came to a fight—which I was still hoping to avoid.

Either way, we weren’t going to back down. After a moment, Garth snorted and took a step back.

“Fine. But this isn’t over. Ryder won’t be happy,” Garth told me.

“Let Ryder know he can reach out to arrange a meeting with Ben,” I said, not breaking eye contact. “But until then, stay away from him.”

Garth muttered something under his breath and turned away, motioning for the other wolf to follow. They retreated down the corridor, and once they were gone, it was easier to breathe.

My own wolf retreated, having decided Ben and Noah were no longer in danger. I turned to Noah, who let out a breath he’d been holding.

“Thanks, Cooper. I wasn’t sure what to do,” Noah admitted.

“You did fine,” I assured him. “We need to stay vigilant. Ryder’s wolves are looking

for any excuse to push us.”

Noah nodded, glancing toward Ben’s door. “He’s been through so much already,” Noah said.

“I know,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “But we’ll get him home safely. That’s what matters.”

With one last look down the corridor to ensure Garth and his lackey were gone, I opened the door to Ben’s room.

Inside, Ben was sitting up in bed, his expression a mix of exhaustion and curiosity.

“What was that all about?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“Just a little misunderstanding,” I said, offering him a reassuring smile. “But it’s all sorted now. Let’s get you ready to go home.”

I quickly informed Griffin and Sawyer that I was going to accompany Noah and Ben to Ben’s home. Sawyer raised one eyebrow at me, clearly curious.

“I’ll explain later,” I told him, giving him a reassuring smile.

Noah and I accompanied Ben to the parking lot. Noah wanted to borrow a wheelchair, but Ben scoffed and said he didn’t need it. The old wolf was as tough as I remembered him.

Noah was driving, and I was going to sit next to him, but Ben insisted I sit in the back with him. I had a sense he wanted to know what transpired earlier, so I told him.

As I finished recounting the encounter with Garth, Ben nodded, and there was a look

of approval in his eyes.

“It’s really good to have you back with us, Coop. I wish your father could see you now. Back then, when you challenged Ryder, you were so hotheaded and full of yourself. But you’ve grown,” he said, his tone full of approval. “You didn’t allow Garth to suck you into a fight.”

“Of course not,” I answered, still a little embarrassed by Ben’s words. But it felt good hearing them, a warmth spreading through me that I hadn’t felt in a long time.

“I’ve heard Noah, Griffin, Miles, and even Sawyer talking about some car wash. Tell me more about it,” Ben asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

So, I did. I told him everything, from the initial idea to the support we’d received.

I described how Lee and Hannah had loaned us the equipment, how Miles had set up an online sign-up sheet for volunteers, and how everyone was coming together to make it a success.

Ben listened intently, nodding along as I spoke. When I finished, he gave a small chuckle.

“Sounds like quite the operation. I’m proud of all of you for pulling together like this. The pack needs these moments, these reminders of what we stand for,” Ben said.

“Yeah, it’s been a rough road,” I admitted, glancing out the window at the passing scenery. “But we’re getting there.”

Ben patted my shoulder, his grip strong and reassuring. “You’re doing good, Coop. And I’m glad you’re here,” he said.

We pulled into Ben's driveway, and Noah assured me he'd keep an eye on the old wolf. The two of us helped Ben out of the car and into his home. I made sure he was settled before saying goodbye.

"Ben's right, you know. It's good to have you back," Noah told me before I left.

I didn't have the heart to remind him that my stay here was just temporary. I took a bus back to the hospital, my mood sober.

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Chapter 7

Miles

“ I want to go to the car wash, Miles. Even Uncle Ben will be there. Why can’t I?” Sawyer argued, clearly frustrated.

I hummed in response, barely glancing at him as I straightened my T-shirt in the mirror.

The T-shirt was white with a bold print on the back that read, “Wash to Save the Bookstore.”

I tried to act nonchalant, adjusting my hair and the shirt's fit. Sawyer had already been discharged from the hospital, but he still needed to return for physical therapy sessions a few times a week.

“You know you’re supposed to be taking it easy,” I said with a sigh, even though I knew it was pointless to argue.

Sawyer crossed his arms, a stubborn look on his face. “I’m not useless, you know. I can help out. I can’t just let my little brother do everything,” he said.

Seeing the determination in his eyes, I finally relented. “Fine, you can come. Just... don’t overdo it,” I reminded him.

Sawyer's annoyance gave way to a triumphant smile, though I could see a flicker of

relief in his eyes.

The car ride was filled with his continuous grumbling about how he wasn't useless and could contribute just as much as anyone else.

"I can't just sit around doing nothing. It's our shop, Miles. I have to be there," he insisted, his voice filled with conviction.

I kept my gaze forward, remaining quiet throughout the drive to the bookstore.

I tried to maintain a neutral expression, trying not to show my excitement. I had seen the setup yesterday—the canopies and the stations where each car would be washed.

My efforts to keep a calm facade seemed to be working, as Sawyer continued to grumble the entire way, oblivious to the small smile that tugged at the corners of my mouth.

I couldn't help but feel a bit amused, almost wanting to pat him on the head like a kid who's sulking because they didn't get picked for a game.

When we arrived at the car wash, it was already in full swing. The place buzzed with activity, a lively mix of shifters and non-shifters working together. Griffin spotted us and waved us over, looking relieved.

"Finally, you guys are here. It's been a crazy morning," he said, his voice carrying over the noise of the busy event. "Sawyer, we need you manning the cashier ASAP."

He handed Sawyer a T-shirt identical to mine. Sawyer looked surprised, his eyes widening in shock.

"Of course, you were going to be here the whole time," I said with a grin, nudging

him playfully.

Sawyer took the shirt and started putting it on. “You guys really thought of everything, huh?”

“We wanted it to be perfect,” Griffin said with a grin. “Now let’s get you set up.”

Griffin brought Sawyer to a makeshift cashier table where he would handle the money. He immediately began greeting people, processing payments, and chatting with customers.

As I walked away, I took a moment to survey the scene. More people had shown up than I’d expected.

There were makeshift food booths run by volunteers, and people were taking pictures and videos of the whole event.

Brightly colored banners and signs were strung up everywhere, creating an inviting atmosphere. Volunteers, all wearing matching white T-shirts with our “Wash to Save the Bookstore” logo, were busily washing cars, directing traffic, and assisting customers.

I didn’t expect everyone to come and help out like this. The T-shirts, generously donated by Floyd's Printing Shop next door, had been a huge help.

Mr. Floyd, who had run his shop for almost as long as our bookstore had been around, insisted we had to stick together.

“Neighbors need to look out for each other,” he had said when he handed over the boxes of T-shirts.

The signs had been made by the kids who attended our bookstore's Story Hour, held once a month on weekends.

As a trade-off, some parents had requested we make it a bi-weekly event during the school holidays, with two sessions every Saturday.

Though I knew some might use it as some kind of free daycare, I didn't mind the extra work.

In fact, I was already considering it as a trial run for expanding our community events.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without Cooper's help. He'd been here since early morning with Noah and Griffin, setting everything up.

I wanted to be here when it started, but I had to keep up the ruse to make sure Sawyer didn't find out beforehand. Seeing the surprised look on his face now made it all worth it.

I took a deep breath, feeling a mix of pride and relief. Everything was coming together perfectly.

As I scanned the area, I quickly found Cooper manning one of the stations.

His hair was wet and slicked back. His white T-shirt was already dirty and clinging to his body, annoyingly accentuating his muscular frame.

When he caught my eye, he flashed a smile. I wanted to walk over and thank him properly, but just as I started, someone grabbed my arm.

"Miles, dear! I'm so happy you're doing this. We'll do anything to help the

bookstore. I even got all my friends from the bingo club to come over later,” Mrs. Jenkins said, patting my arm. “And look, I brought some sandwiches for you boys. Don’t want you getting hungry.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Jenkins. You really didn’t have to,” I replied, touched by her kindness.

Just then, I felt a warm hand on my shoulder. It was Cooper.

“Sorry, ma’am, I need the boss’s help with something,” he said politely.

Mrs. Jenkins beamed. “Of course, don’t let me keep you.”

I smiled as Cooper led me away, his hand resting lightly on my waist.

When I glanced down, he quickly removed it, but I felt a pang of disappointment. I kind of liked how his hand felt there.

Cooper cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair. “Actually, I have a surprise for you. Come on.”

He guided me to an empty station and stood in front of something covered with a towel. I tilted my head curiously as he dramatically unveiled it like a magician.

I widened my eyes in surprise. “Is that a...”

Cooper grinned, clearly proud. “This is one of the best pressure washers available. It’s top of the line, or so I’ve heard.”

I moved closer, my eyes wide with excitement as I took in every detail of the pressure washer.

“It has a 2000 PSI pressure rating, a nozzle that can switch from low to high pressure, and an onboard detergent tank for easy cleaning.” I rattled off the features without taking a breath, my eyes never leaving the machine.

Cooper chuckled, looking amused. “I see you know your pressure washers.”

“Yeah, well, I did a bit of research,” I admitted, feeling a bit sheepish but also excited.

It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. But with Cooper standing next to it, maybe it was the second most beautiful.

Actually, I wasn't sure. It was hard to decide because I really, really wanted to test it out—the pressure washer, I mean. I reached out, fingers trembling with excitement.

“Go ahead,” Cooper encouraged.

I nodded eagerly, ready to dive into the tutorial and start spraying the hell out of some dirt and grime.

“But don't get too excited,” Cooper added with a grin. “This is only for those who choose the premium package, so there might not be much to clean right away.”

We had decided the car wash would offer three options: the Basic, which included a simple scrub and rinse; the Standard, which added waxing and tire cleaning; and the Premium, which included everything from the Standard package plus a thorough power wash.

I didn't care even if only one person chose the premium package. I just couldn't wait to put the pressure washer to use.

“Got it,” I said, not taking my eyes off the machine. Cooper chuckled and gestured for Griffin to bring the first car into my station.

“I’m tired,” Noah groaned, slumping down on the bench next to me.

I glanced at him briefly before returning to the task at hand, maneuvering the hose as I pressure-washed the front tires.

The rhythmic motion of the spray against the grime was so much more satisfying than I imagined.

Noah sighed again, even more dramatically, draping an arm over his face. Ignoring him, I moved around to the back of the car, continuing to pressure-wash the rear tires.

To my surprise, a lot of people chose the premium package. We only had one pressure washer, but honestly, I couldn’t complain. I was having the time of my life, lost in the steady rhythm of cleaning.

Finally, Noah seemed unable to take my silence any longer. “I think I need a rest over there by one of the canopies,” he said, pointing to the front of the car wash.

I glanced in that direction. “Why not over there?” I pointed at the canopies at the other end.

Though, seeing where he was pointing at, I didn’t really need to ask why.

It was the cashier area where my brother was stationed. Still, I wanted to hear Noah’s explanation.

He merely glared at me, not taking the bait. I chuckled. “You know what, maybe you can help by checking how many are waiting for the premium package.”

Noah's eyes lit up. He immediately jumped up from his seat, giving me a thumbs-up before heading toward the cashier. Any sign of his supposed tiredness was gone.

It wasn't like I was setting them up. If anything, I knew how my brother felt about him, and Noah definitely deserved someone better than him.

But Noah was distracting me, and I knew the line for the premium package was getting too long.

As I glanced around at the bustling car wash, I lifted my shirt to wipe my face and noticed grime and splatter all over me.

My shirt looked like it had been through a mud fight, and even my legs and shorts were covered in who knew what.

When I lifted my shirt higher to check my stomach, I found even more dirt. I had no idea how it ended up there.

"You look like you could use a drink," came an unfamiliar voice from behind.

I turned around to see Jake, a fellow shifter. I'd seen him around at a few pack meetings but had never really talked to him before.

In fact, with the number of times he'd come over to my station this morning, I had exchanged more words with him today than in all our previous encounters combined.

I nodded politely and accepted the water bottle he offered. I set it down on the table beside me, along with a few other bottles and snacks that people had handed me throughout the day.

I didn't understand why so many people were suddenly coming over and giving me

things. I felt a bit frustrated because I just wanted to focus on pressure washing without any interruptions.

Noticing Jake's gaze lingering on my shirt, I realized it was still slightly lifted, revealing a bit of my stomach. I quickly pulled it down.

"Thanks for the drink," I said, hoping he'd take the hint and let me get back to work.

Jake didn't, and stepped closer instead. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and gently touched it to my forehead.

"You've got some dirt here. May I?" he asked, his voice unusually low.

It was noisy, and if he hadn't been standing so uncomfortably close, I wouldn't have heard him.

I had dirt everywhere on my body. In fact, all the volunteers were covered in grime. Was he planning to wipe off everyone too?

Just then, Cooper strode over, his presence commanding immediate attention. "Is everything alright here?" he growled, his voice low and dangerous.

His eyes locked onto Jake, who visibly shrank under the weight of Cooper's intense golden gaze. Cooper stepped closer, positioning himself protectively between Jake and me, his possessiveness unmistakable.

Jake cleared his throat, looking suddenly uncomfortable. "Uh, yeah, everything's fine. I was just offering Miles some water." He gave a weak smile, clearly sensing the shift in atmosphere. "But I should probably get back to my car."

Cooper's jaw clenched as he watched Jake walk away. The sight sent an unexpected

thrill through me.

Caught off guard by my own reaction, I quickly looked away, pretending to focus on the pressure washer in my hands.

Cooper turned his attention back to me, his expression softening. “Actually, I’m on my break. Mind if I stay here for a bit?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, just sat down on a nearby bench with a sigh, stretching his long legs out in front of him.

I nodded, trying to keep the smile on my face from showing too much. “Make yourself comfortable,” I said.

As I continued working, I heard a faint noise behind me that sounded like a water bottle being crumpled and tossed into a trash bin.

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Chapter 8

Cooper

I growled at Jake as he walked past the cashier. The other shifter jumped, looked at me with wary eyes, and then swiftly walked away.

That's right, keep walking; stay away from Miles, I thought with some satisfaction.

I had already extended my break time, and Miles seemed to have noticed, so I went back to work for a bit before deciding to hang out with Sawyer.

Miles had requested that I check in on Sawyer every now and then.

"What's with you?" Sawyer asked when I sat in the unoccupied plastic chair next to him. "Scaring off poor Jake like that? That's not the first time today. He stepped on your tail or something?" Sawyer joked, a smirk playing on his lips.

I thought of Jake making his move on my Miles and scowled.

Sure, Miles wasn't exactly mine yet, but Jake sure had some nerve approaching him like that.

"It's—" I hesitated, unsure of how much I should tell Sawyer about Miles and me.

Sawyer raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying my reluctance. "Come on, Coop. Spill it. What's going on?" Sawyer asked.

I'd forgotten how perceptive Sawyer could be sometimes. I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck.

Might as well get this conversation out in the open. Besides, I wasn't planning on keeping secrets from my best friend.

"It's just... Jake. He keeps hovering around Miles, and it's getting on my nerves," I admitted.

Sawyer's smirk widened. "Ah, so that's what this is about. You're jealous."

"I'm not jealous," I shot back a little too quickly, feeling my cheeks heat up. "I just don't trust him around Miles."

"Right," Sawyer drawled, leaning back against his chair. "Because Jake's a real threat and all."

I scowled at him. "You know what I mean. Miles deserves better than some guy who flirts with every shifter he meets," I pointed out.

After I scared him off, Jake had proceeded to flirt with the next single guy he could see.

Sawyer's expression softened, and he studied me for a moment. "You care about him, don't you? More than just as a friend," Sawyer said.

I looked away, feeling the weight of his words.

"Come on, Coop. I might've been bedridden the past few days, but I'm not blind. I saw the way you guys look at each other. The way Miles lights up whenever you're around," Sawyer said.

"Yeah, I care about Miles a lot. But it's complicated," I said.

"Complicated how?" Sawyer asked, scratching his head.

I sighed again, running a hand through my hair.

"I don't know. There's a lot going on right now with the bookstore, Ryder's wolves, and there are issues with my current pack. I don't want to stress him out," I said.

Then it struck me. Sawyer was being unexpectedly calm about this. Too calm.

I thought he'd be more pissed off that I was interested in his little brother.

"Sawyer, you're not angry?" I had to ask.

"To be honest, it didn't sit well with me at first," Sawyer confessed. "But then I kept watching the two of you and realized I was worried over nothing. It's actually kind of cute, watching you two fumble around, trying to sort your feelings out. And besides, it's you, Cooper. I'd rather you date my brother than some douchebag."

His words hit me like a ton of bricks, but in a good way. The tension I'd been carrying around started to melt.

"Really? You're okay with this?" I had to ask.

Sawyer nodded, his expression sincere. "Yeah. I've seen how you've stepped up, how you've been there for him. And I know you'll keep being there. You've got my blessing, Coop."

Sawyer didn't know how much those words meant to me and what a relief it was to hear them. I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips.

“Thanks, Sawyer. That means a lot,” I told him.

“Just don’t screw it up,” Sawyer added, his tone half-joking, half-serious. “Miles deserves the best, and you better give it to him.”

“Trust me, I will,” I promised, my voice firm.

“You two should really talk,” Sawyer suggested. “Let him know how you feel. It might be just what he needs right now.”

I considered his words, my mind racing. “You really think so?”

Sawyer nodded. “Yeah, I do. It’s what I’d do if I were in your shoes,” he said.

I nodded. My best friend did have a point.

“You mentioned your current pack. Are you truly happy there, Coop?” Sawyer questioned, his eyes searching mine.

I knew what Sawyer was getting at. He wanted to know if I’d be willing to leave my current pack for Miles, if it came to it.

At that moment, I was torn, and I had to make him understand how important my current pack was to me.

“Daniel’s a good lead alpha, and I get along with the enforcers and other members,” I said. “Sawyer, when I left Pecan Pines ten years ago, I was a mess. I felt lost, but Daniel gave me a fresh start, a new home.”

Sawyer nodded, understanding flashing in his eyes. “I see what you mean when you said it was complicated. But Coop, sooner or later, you’ll need to make a hard

decision, especially if things with Miles really get serious.”

“I get that,” I told him. “But for now, I want to focus on the present.”

“I don’t envy being you,” Sawyer said, shaking his head.

“Hey, how long are you two going to continue chatting? Everyone else is working hard,” Miles called out as he approached us.

Dang, but he looked downright delicious, and I wanted to eat him right up. Some of my feelings must’ve shown on my face because Sawyer cleared his throat.

“Run, Coop. The enforcer is here,” Sawyer joked.

Miles rolled his eyes and jabbed his elbow at Sawyer’s shoulder.

“Sawyer and I are just clearing up some important matters,” I told Miles, who gave us both suspicious looks.

“What important matters?” Miles asked.

“You don’t need to know for now,” I said. Then I was struck with the sudden urge to kiss him, so I leaned forward and kissed him briefly on the mouth.

Miles stared at me in shock, then anger, as if he was silently asking me why I had the guts to kiss him in front of his brother.

“Back to work, guys,” Sawyer said, trying to defuse the tension.

Miles glared at me for a moment longer before his expression softened. “Alright, but don’t think this conversation is over,” he warned, pointing a finger at me.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied with a grin.

“Uh, Coop. One more thing,” Miles said.

He began fidgeting with his hands and suddenly looked all awkward and adorable.

“Yeah?” I asked him, intrigued by his sudden shyness.

“Well, I was thinking of a way to thank you for helping me arrange the car wash.”

“It’s nothing,” I told him, trying to downplay it.

“I’m not done,” he said, and I waited for him to continue. “So, I thought maybe I could treat you to dinner sometime?”

Miles was asking me out on a real date, I realized with a rush of excitement.

“Yeah, dinner sounds nice,” I told him, unable to keep the smile off my face.

“Great,” he said, his own smile widening, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

As we turned to head back to work, I could feel the electricity in the air between Miles and me. The anticipation of that dinner date buzzed in my mind.

I might not have come to a decision regarding my current pack yet, but I did know one thing: Miles was worth it, and I was determined to prove to him that I was worth it as well.

As I walked back to my station, I couldn’t help but glance back at Miles, who was already busying himself with some task.

Our eyes met, and he gave me a small, almost shy smile. My heart skipped a beat.

There was something incredibly sweet and genuine about that smile, and it warmed me from the inside out.

I turned back to my work, my mind racing with thoughts of our upcoming date. What would we talk about? What would I wear?

The excitement was almost too much to contain, and I found myself grinning like a fool. I felt like a teenager going on his first date again.

The rest of the day passed in a blur, my thoughts constantly drifting back to Miles.

The way he had looked at me, the way he had asked me out—it was all so perfect. I headed back to my motel room that evening, feeling optimistic.

I flopped onto my bed, staring up at the ceiling with a goofy smile plastered on my face. This was it. My chance to convince Miles I was born to be his mate.

So far, we'd only been meeting at the hospital. This was different. It would be our first real date.

My buzzing cellphone broke me away from my current train of thought. Seeing Daniel's name flashing across the screen, my mood dampened. I immediately answered his call.

"Cooper, I sincerely hope you're on your way back to Winter Valley," Daniel said.

I swallowed. "Did something happen?" I asked.

Daniel sighed, and I could hear the frustration in his voice. "We have an important

meeting coming up with the Blue Fangs. They're trying to encroach on our territory again, and we need to settle this once and for all. I need my second there," Daniel said.

My heart sank. The Blue Fangs always employed aggressive tactics, and any meeting with them was bound to be tense. But my mind kept turning to my upcoming date with Miles.

The excitement I had felt moments ago was quickly being overshadowed by the weight of my responsibilities.

"Daniel, I understand the importance of the meeting," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "But I haven't managed to resolve matters here. Sawyer and Miles, they still have targets on their backs, and?—"

"Cooper," Daniel's tone was firm, almost fatherly. "I get that you have your personal commitments, but this isn't just about us. It's about the safety and stability of our pack. We've worked hard to establish Winter Valley as our territory. We can't let the Blue Fangs threaten that."

I closed my eyes, feeling conflicted. Daniel had always been there for me back when I had no one, and now he needed me.

"I know, Daniel. I owe you and the pack so much," I admitted. "But Miles and... Sawyer, they mean a lot to me."

There was a pause on the other end, and I could almost hear Daniel weighing my words. "Look, Coop, I'm not asking you to abandon your friends. But the timing of this meeting isn't negotiable. I need you to be there," he said.

I sighed, realizing Daniel wouldn't push unless it was important. "When is the

meeting?" I asked.

"Tomorrow evening," Daniel replied. "I'll need you to leave tonight to make it back in time."

I thought of the car wash, the look on Miles' face when he asked me out to dinner, and the way he made me feel like I belonged.

Then I thought of everything Daniel had done for me, my duty towards my current pack, and the responsibility I had as the second-in-command.

"Alright, Daniel. I'll be there," I said.

"Good. I'll see you soon," Daniel said before hanging up.

I lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling once more, but my silly smile was gone. In case something happened to me in Winter Valley, I needed to tell Miles. I also needed to find a way to make this right.

I grabbed my phone and dialed Miles's number. He picked up after a few rings. "Hey, Coop. What's up?" Miles sounded warm and cheerful.

"Hey, Miles," I began, trying to keep my voice steady. "I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure, what is it?" he asked, a hint of concern creeping into his voice.

"I have to head back to Winter Valley tonight. There's an important meeting with a rival pack, and I need to be there," I explained.

There was a pause, and I could sense his disappointment through the phone. "I see.

So you're canceling our date?" Miles asked.

"No, but I'm asking if we can push it to another night. I'm really sorry, Miles," I said, my heart aching. "I don't want to let you down. This is just something I have to do."

Miles was silent for a moment. "I understand. I know your pack is important to you," he said.

"I promise, I'll make it up to you," I said, hoping to convey how much he meant to me. "As soon as I get back, we'll have that dinner."

"Alright," he said softly. "Just... be careful, okay?"

"I will," I assured him. "And Miles? Thank you for understanding."

"No problem," he said, ending the call.

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Chapter 9

Miles

"A h!" I yelped as pain shot through my foot. I'd smacked it hard against the table leg, causing the entire book display to topple over.

The box I was carrying slipped from my hands, and books scattered everywhere in a chaotic mess—hardcover volumes, paperbacks, and even a few delicate old editions spread out across the floor.

I grimaced, feeling a sharp throb in my big toe. Serves me right for wearing open-toe sandals on a stock day.

Did we always have this many tables? This must have been the third one I'd bumped into today.

I glanced around the cluttered bookstore, trying to locate the nearest chair.

Just then, Noah appeared beside me, his brow furrowed with a mix of concern and annoyance.

He took my arm and guided me to the seat behind the counter.

"Take a seat before you bump into anything else today," Noah scolded, his tone half-joking, half-serious. "At this rate, we'll be here all night cleaning up."

I blinked, rubbing my sore toe absentmindedly. Noah let out a resigned sigh as he moved back around the counter to fix the display I had knocked over.

Noah had agreed to help clean up the bookstore and take inventory since we'd been closed since Sawyer's hospitalization.

He carefully picked up the fallen books, arranging them back into a neat stack. His movements were almost automatic—a sign of how many times he'd had to clean up after me today.

Feeling guilty, I tried to stand up and help him gather the scattered books, but he put up a hand to stop me. "Just stay there for now. Please," Noah said.

I sat back down and nodded obediently, watching Noah as he worked.

He moved quickly, gathering the books from the floor and sorting them into their proper categories.

I wanted to protest, to insist on helping despite my clumsiness, but seeing the way I'd been flustered all day—with my mind drifting in the clouds and causing Noah more trouble—I couldn't bring myself to argue.

I'd been more of a hindrance than a help today, and I knew it. So, I stayed put, letting him take charge while I tried to collect my thoughts and get my head back in the game.

After a while, he finally pulled over a stool, the metal legs scraping against the floor with a loud grating noise that jolted me from my daze.

He placed two mugs of hot beverages in front of me. "I didn't know whether you needed caffeine to wake up or some tea to calm your nerves, so I made both. Now

spill it,” he said.

I opened my mouth, ready to tell him off and insist that nothing was wrong with me, but then I caught sight of his disheveled appearance.

His shirt was rumpled, his hair slightly mussed, and there was a smudge of dust across his cheek.

I looked around the bookstore at the newly stocked shelves and the neatly organized displays—work he had practically done all on his own.

I felt a pang of guilt again. My best friend deserved to know the truth. I hesitated for a moment, gathering my thoughts. I told him about asking Cooper out.

Noah looked excited until I mentioned that Cooper had taken a raincheck because he had to go back to his pack in Winter Valley.

But then I told him about Cooper coming by really early this morning, just back from his trip, just before dawn, leaving a bag of bagels and coffee on the porch.

I wouldn't have seen him if I hadn't needed to wake up early to leave for the bookstore and take inventory.

I told Noah how I couldn't forget the surprised look and the slow smile that spread across Cooper's face when he saw me.

It was the kind of smile that made me feel like he was genuinely happy to see me first thing in the morning—like an unexpected but wonderful surprise.

We didn't talk much because I told him to leave and get some rest since he looked like he'd been driving for hours.

But the thought of Cooper driving all night and the first thing he did was drop by my place made my heart feel light, like I was floating on air.

And then we kissed.

I stopped there, not telling Noah about the feel of Cooper's mouth on mine, the taste of coffee on his lips, the graze of his stubble against my skin—which, by the way, was really working for him—and the way he gripped my waist and nape tightly, as if he had missed me and couldn't stand another second away from me.

I looked at Noah, expecting him to make me spill the details about the kiss. But Noah didn't ask for any more.

His serious expression stopped me from teasing him about it. “So, what now? What are you going to do?” Noah finally asked, his tone gentle but probing.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. “I... I don't know what to do about Cooper,” I began, my voice shaky. “I mean, he's part of another pack. He's only in town temporarily for Sawyer, but now that Sawyer is practically recovered, other than the physical therapy...”

Noah leaned in, his expression serious. “You don't know when Cooper will leave, and that worries you.”

“Yeah,” I admitted, feeling the weight of the words as they left my mouth. Every time I saw Cooper, I felt this flutter, this happiness that I couldn't quite explain.

But at the same time, I couldn't seem to ask him how long he was staying.

I was terrified that he'd tell me he's leaving soon. That these were the last few days I'd see him before he left Pecan Pines again.

I knew I was being irrational. I didn't even fully understand why I felt this way.

But the thought of Cooper leaving felt like a crushing weight on my chest.

Losing my dad was one thing, but after everything that happened with Uncle Ben and Sawyer—how close I came to losing them—the fear of another loss was overwhelming.

It wasn't just about another goodbye. The idea that Cooper might leave just as I was starting to feel like we had something real made my chest tighten with a worry I couldn't shake.

Noah nodded. "I get it, Miles. You don't know what to do. But you need to understand something about yourself. You've always been someone who can't make a decision without all the facts and pieces in place. And that's not a bad thing. But sometimes, life doesn't give you all the pieces," Noah said.

I looked down, fidgeting with the edge of my shirt. "I know. It's just... with Cooper, it's different. I want to know everything. I want to plan for everything. But I can't. And it scares me," I admitted.

It wasn't just about the fear of uncertainty; it was the fear of starting something that might end too soon, of opening myself up and finding out it was all temporary.

The idea of investing my heart into something that could disappear felt daunting. Noah reached over and placed a reassuring hand on my arm.

"Miles, not everything has to be planned or perfect. Life is short. Remember what happened with your brother and your uncle? Your brother challenged Ryder because he attacked your uncle. It was risky, it was dangerous, but he did it because it was the right thing to do," Noah said.

I sighed. "You're right. I just... I don't want to get hurt. And I don't want to hurt Cooper either."

"You're not going to hurt him by being honest," Noah said firmly. "If anything, it'll bring you two closer together. Talk to him, Miles. Ask him how long he's staying. Tell him how you feel."

I looked up at Noah, seeing the sincerity in his eyes. He was right.

I needed to talk to Cooper, to be honest about my feelings and my fears. It wouldn't be easy, but it was the only way forward.

"Okay," I said softly. "I'll talk to him."

Noah smiled, giving my arm a gentle squeeze. "Good. And remember, I'm here for you, no matter what happens."

I nodded, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. But then, in typical Noah fashion, he couldn't resist lightening the mood.

"Are you meeting him right after this?" He looked at me with exaggerated disgust, his eyes scanning me up and down.

"What? Is it the sandals?" I asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious. "It's fine, it's summer. He'll understand."

I tried to smooth the creases on my shirt and jeans, but I could feel Noah's eyes on me.

I pursed my lips as I picked off a particularly large dust bunny from the hem of my jeans and flicked it behind me, hoping Noah didn't see. But his raised brow said

otherwise.

Why should it matter anyway?

Cooper didn't seem to mind when he saw me this morning in my ratty old T-shirt and sweats. Though I had to admit, they looked like even the Salvation Army wouldn't accept them.

Noah cleared his throat. "You do know that most of the time he's seen you, you were either unwashed or dirty, right?"

I started to retort but then clamped my mouth shut.

The first few days Cooper saw me, I hadn't gone back home, wearing the same clothes when I brought Sawyer to the hospital because I was too scared to leave him and my uncle alone.

Sure, it improved over the next few days when I finally caught a break, but not by much.

The memory of the car wash, with my shirt wet and splattered with dirt, flashed through my mind. I looked down at the shirt I was wearing now.

It wasn't much better since I noticed another small dust ball on my thigh. I didn't even know how that got there, but I vowed never to let the bookstore get this messy for this long again, no matter the reason.

"Fine," I conceded. "I'll tell him to pick me up at home instead."

Noah smirked smugly and hopped off his chair. "Great, that means I can leave early, right?"

“Yeah, yeah,” I said in an annoyed voice but couldn’t help smiling.

We quickly cleared up the last of the boxes and prepped the store for closing.

After locking up from the outside, Noah nudged me and subtly gestured with his chin.

I followed his gaze and saw Bruce, one of Ryder’s men, standing across the street. His presence was enough to set my nerves on edge.

I turned around, ready to confront him. Noah looked at me, concerned. “What are you doing?” Noah asked.

“Handling it,” I replied firmly, a note of irritation creeping into my voice.

Noah hesitated, his eyes darting between me and Bruce. “Don’t you want to call Sawyer? Or I could call Cooper or my brother...”

“No, I don’t want to trouble Sawyer with this. It’ll just take a sec.” I waved off his concern, though I could tell Noah wasn’t entirely convinced.

Sawyer was still recovering, so I didn’t want to rely on him.

And as for Cooper, he might leave Pecan Pines at any time. I shouldn’t get too dependent on him either.

Noah nodded reluctantly but followed me as I crossed the street toward Bruce. As we approached, Bruce grinned, his smile more of a sneer.

He took a long drag from his cigarette before flicking the glowing stub onto the ground near my foot. Without a second glance, I stomped out the cigarette.

“The bookstore isn’t open yet,” I said with a smirk, “so if you’re here to buy something, you’ll have to come back another time. Or you could’ve just come inside and enjoyed the air-conditioning if you were waiting for me out here.”

Bruce’s grin widened, revealing his fangs as he chuckled darkly.

“You’re funny,” he said, giving a dismissive wave before walking away. His laughter echoed behind him as he disappeared into the street.

Noah glanced at me. “What if he comes back?”

“So he comes back,” I said with a shrug, trying to sound nonchalant. “Doesn’t matter.”

I turned and started walking toward my car, the sound of my footsteps mingling with Noah’s cautious steps behind me.

I could tell he wanted to say more but he just followed me.

As we reached the car, Noah finally broke the silence. “You sure you don’t want me to call Sawyer?”

“I’m sure,” I replied, sliding into the driver’s seat. “It’s under control.”

Noah didn’t argue further. He settled into the passenger seat, but I could still see the worry in his eyes.

I didn’t want them to think they could faze me. They could come back every day for all I cared. I was sick of all this.

I also didn’t want to let this ruin my date with Cooper.

Even after talking things through with Noah, I still felt uneasy and that our time together was running out.

But whether we had just a few days or even less, I wanted to make the most of it.

Make the most of it.

I repeated the thought to myself, trying to push away the heavy feeling in my chest at the idea of it possibly ending soon.

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Chapter 10

Cooper

I looked at my reflection in the mirror and decided my white button-up shirt wouldn't cut it. After unbuttoning it, I took it off, wincing as I did so.

A pattern of bruises lined my upper chest and shoulders. The meeting with the Blue Fangs had started with a minor tussle.

I had to get between one of our hasty pack members and the Blue Fang who taunted him. In the end, we managed to sort things out.

I was lucky to get out of that with only a few bruises. I was still sore when I stopped by Miles' house to drop off breakfast, and I was still sore now.

Either way, nothing was going to stop me from going on this date. I had it all planned out while I was in Winter Valley.

First, I'd take Miles to his favorite little café by the lake. It was a quaint spot with outdoor seating and fairy lights strung between the trees, perfect for a romantic evening.

I'd made sure to reserve the best table, right by the water, where we could watch the sunset.

Afterward, I planned a surprise: a private boat ride on the lake, complete with a small

picnic of his favorite snacks and a bottle of wine.

We'd float under the stars, away from all the worries of the world—just the two of us. I'd never put so much effort into a date before. I worried it was too much.

How would Miles react? Then again, when I made these plans, I was thinking Miles could use a break from everything he'd been dealing with.

He deserved a night where he could simply relax and enjoy himself.

I changed into a fresh shirt, a dark blue one that complemented my eyes. I checked my appearance in the mirror once more, hoping to hide the bruises and the fatigue from the past few days.

When I arrived at Miles' house, my heart was pounding with anticipation. I knocked on the door, and a moment later, it swung open to reveal Miles, looking as handsome as ever.

He was wearing a comfy sweater and jeans that hugged his ass nicely. His eyes lit up when he saw me.

I could eat him up right now, but then I spotted Sawyer in the living room, watching TV, and decided to be on my best behavior.

“Hey, Coop,” Miles greeted me with a smile. “You look great.”

“Thanks, Miles. You look amazing too,” I replied.

“You guys have fun,” Sawyer said, not getting up from the sofa.

Finally, this was happening. Miles was all I could think about while I was in Winter

Valley. In hindsight, that made me a little distracted.

I probably could've prevented that fight from breaking out if I had been paying more attention to the meeting and staying in the present.

We walked to my car, and as I opened the door for him, he gave me a curious look. "So, where are we going?" Miles asked.

"It's a surprise," I said with a wink. Miles chuckled, and the sound warmed my insides.

As we drove to the café, we talked about everything and nothing, the conversation flowing easily between us.

When we arrived, Miles widened his eyes. "You remembered this place," he said softly.

"Of course I did," I replied, leading him to our reserved table by the water. "You couldn't stop talking about it the other day."

We enjoyed a delicious meal, the peaceful ambiance of the café making it feel like we were in our own little world.

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the lake. It was perfect. After dinner, I led him to the small dock where a boat awaited us.

"A boat ride?" Miles asked, his excitement evident.

"Yep. I thought we could use a little adventure," I said, helping him onto the boat.

As we drifted out onto the lake, the stars began to twinkle above us. I pulled out the

picnic mat and basket.

We shared the snacks and wine, laughing and talking as the boat gently rocked on the water.

“This is incredible, Coop. Thank you. No one has ever done anything for me like this before,” he said.

I took his hand in mine, feeling the warmth of his touch. “Anything for you, Miles,” I said.

He turned to me, his eyes reflecting the starlight. “You’re really something, you know that?”

“I’m just a guy trying to impress someone special,” I said, my heart racing as I looked into his eyes.

Miles leaned closer, and before I knew it, his lips were on mine. The kiss was gentle at first, then deepened as we poured all our feelings into that moment.

It was passionate, filled with all the emotions we’d been holding back. When we finally pulled apart, we were both breathless.

“Wow,” Miles whispered, his forehead resting against mine.

“Yeah,” I agreed, my heart soaring.

The boat rocked gently as we floated further into the middle of the lake. The soft hum of the motor was barely audible over the breeze.

Miles and I sat close together, the warmth of his body a comforting presence against

the cool night air. I turned to Miles, taking in the way the moonlight played across his features.

He looked much more relaxed, and I could see the tension of the past few weeks slowly melting away. I reached out, tucking a stray lock of hair behind his ear.

Miles took my hand, kissed it. I cupped his cheek, and didn't hold back this time around.

The kiss was rough and hungry. I could feel my pants tightening. I wanted Miles with everything I was.

"Come with me," I said, tugging him to the boat's private cabin.

I already informed the captain we'd be using it. Once inside, Miles sat on the edge of the bed and I joined him.

Miles didn't seem to mind when I reached for the hem of his sweater and pulled it off him. He tentatively began unbuttoning my shirt, his fingers trembling slightly as he worked each button free.

I watched his face closely, wanting to memorize every expression. When he reached the last button, he pulled the fabric aside and gasped.

The tender moment was momentarily broken as his eyes widened in shock at the sight of the bruises. I inwardly swore, regretting not covering them up better.

"What happened?" Miles demanded. "Did you get into a fight with... one of Ryder's wolves before our date?"

"It's nothing like that," I reassured him quickly, not wanting him to worry. "It was

just a minor scuffle in Winter Valley. Nothing serious."

"It sounds dangerous," he murmured, his fingers lightly tracing the edges of the bruises. There was a gentleness in his touch that made my heart ache.

"I normally prevent fights before they break out," I explained, hoping to ease his worries. "But I was distracted by a certain handsome bookstore owner."

"Oh?" Miles asked, raising an eyebrow. Despite his concern, there was a pleased look on his face.

"Yeah," I admitted, a smile tugging at my lips. "It's hard to focus when all I could think about was you."

Miles' expression softened, and he leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to one of the less bruised areas on my chest. His touch was warm and soothing, and I felt the tension in my muscles start to melt away.

"I don't like seeing you hurt," he whispered, his breath warm against my skin. "But I have to admit, it's kind of flattering knowing I'm the reason you were distracted."

I chuckled softly, pulling him closer. "You're more than a distraction, Miles. You're everything," I said. I was being a little cheesy, but what did it matter?

Miles kissed me again. It was a slow, lingering kiss, filled with a depth of feeling that made my head spin. When we finally pulled back, we were both breathless.

"Promise me you'll be careful," Miles said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I promise. I'll do everything I can to stay safe. For you," I told him, my voice firm. "Now, how about we focus on what we were doing earlier?"

He sighed softly. Just like that, we got rid of the rest of our clothes.

Miles lay on his back and I ended up straddling him. I took my time, leaving a trail of kisses down the column of his throat, his collarbone, his chest and stomach.

Hearing Miles moan as I arrived at his thickening prick, was like music to my ears.

“Miles, tell me to stop if you’re not comfortable,” I told him.

“Don’t stop,” he pleaded.

That was all I needed to hear. I reached for the lube tucked in the back pocket of my jeans, then hefted his legs over my shoulders.

Then I applied a generous amount in his ass. After making sure he was ready, I entered him. Not wanting to hurt him, I went slow and easy, until I was fully sheathed inside him.

“You good?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he murmured.

I began pushing in and out of him, rhythm slow at first, before picking up speed. Soon enough, I reduced us both to pants and moans.

I was rock-hard at this point and knew I couldn’t last much longer. Wanting him to feel good, I switched the angle of my thrusts.

Miles gasped, arching his back and I knew I found his sweet spot. I kept aiming for that spot until Miles cried out. He came, painting my abs and stomach with his jizz.

Several thrusts later, it was my turn. After filling him with my seed, I slid out of him. Then I cleaned us both up. We donned our clothes, but remained lying there on the bed.

Miles reached for my fingers, and I grasped them, feeling the warmth and strength in his touch. He rested his head on my shoulder, and though he seemed content at first glance, I could tell something was on his mind.

The subtle tension in his body and the way his fingers fidgeted against mine gave him away.

“Do you have any regrets?” I asked gently.

“Not at all,” he immediately answered, but then he hesitated. “It’s just...”

“Miles, you can tell me anything,” I reminded him, squeezing his hand reassuringly.

He took a deep breath and began to speak. “I was just wondering,” he said, his voice wavering slightly, “what are your plans?”

I felt a lump form in my throat. Meeting Miles had changed everything, and he deserved an honest answer.

I knew exactly what he was asking and didn't need him to elaborate further. I thought of Daniel and my current pack, of the situation here in Pecan Pines.

Most of all, I pondered the potential future I had with Miles and knew I couldn't give him up.

“Meeting you changed things,” I admitted, looking into his eyes. “And you deserve an answer.”

I knew the next words out of my mouth would shape our future.

“All I can tell you right now is that I’ll stay for as long as you need me,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

His face fell for a moment, and I knew it wasn’t what he wanted to hear. Heck, Miles deserved better. He deserved the world, but at that moment, I just couldn’t give it to him.

“I’m sorry,” I said, leaning in to kiss him softly on the mouth.

The kiss was tender, filled with a bittersweet longing.

“No,” Miles said quickly, pulling back just enough to look into my eyes. “I asked, and you answered. I appreciate your honesty, Cooper.”

I could see the conflict in his eyes. I wanted to promise him everything, to tell him I’d stay forever, but I knew it wouldn’t be fair to make promises I wasn’t sure I could keep.

We sat there in silence for a moment, the only sound the gentle lapping of the water against the boat. The tension between us was hard to ignore.

I could feel his heart beating in time with mine, and I knew that despite the uncertainty, we were in this together.

“Miles,” I said softly, breaking the silence. “I don’t have all the answers right now, but I do know that I care about you more than anything. I want to be with you and see where this goes. Can we take it one step at a time?”

He nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. “One step at a time,” he

agreed. “I can live with that.”

I pulled him closer, wrapping my arms around him and resting my chin on top of his head.

Chapter 11

Cooper/Miles

C OOPER

I woke up feeling the warmth of another body next to mine, a comforting sensation that made the unfamiliar surroundings fade away.

The gentle rise and fall of Miles' chest as he snored softly brought a smile to my face

Last night, after our boat ride, we had driven back to his house, and now, waking up here in his room felt unexpectedly right.

I recalled how we had both snuck past Sawyer, who had fallen asleep in the living room.

In hindsight, we probably didn't need to be so stealthy since Sawyer already knew about us.

Remembering that Sawyer had a hospital appointment for another physical therapy session later, I decided to see if my best friend was still around.

I leaned over and kissed Miles on the cheek, watching his serene expression for a moment before slipping out of bed.

As I made my way downstairs, the comforting smell of brewing coffee wafted

through the air. Sure enough, Sawyer was in the kitchen, pouring himself a cup.

"You guys got in late last night," he said with a grin as he handed me a mug.

"I took Miles on a boat ride," I explained, savoring the warmth of the coffee in my hands.

Sawyer raised an eyebrow. "A boat ride, huh? Sounds romantic."

"It was," I admitted, feeling a flush of pride and happiness. "We had a lot to talk about."

Sawyer nodded, sipping his coffee thoughtfully. "I'm glad to see you two finally figuring things out. Miles deserves someone who makes him happy," Sawyer said.

"He does," I agreed, thinking back to the look of contentment on Miles' face last night. "And I'll do whatever it takes to keep making him happy."

Sawyer gave me a long, appraising look. "You've come a long way, Coop. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks," I said. "How are you feeling about your session today?"

Sawyer shrugged, a shadow crossing his face. "It's been tough, but I'm getting there. Just gotta keep pushing through," he said.

"You'll get through it," I told him firmly. "You've got us by your side."

He smiled. "Yeah, I know. And it's good to see you by Miles' side too. Just don't sneak past me next time," he joked.

I chuckled. "Deal. No more sneaking."

As I washed my mug at the sink, a suspicious Range Rover parked in the driveway of the house across the street caught my eye.

It couldn't be the neighbor's; I recalled Miles mentioning that their neighbor of five years had just moved out, and the lot was now empty.

My good mood evaporated as I tried to make out the driver through the tinted windows but failed.

"Say, Sawyer, I think I'm heading out for a run," I announced casually.

"What? Why now all of a sudden?" Sawyer asked, narrowing his eyes at me.

"When's your session again?" I countered, trying to divert his attention. "I'm just in the mood for a run."

Sawyer furrowed his brows, clearly sensing something was up. He glanced out the window and noticed the vehicle as well.

"Alright, enjoy your run. My session is still in a couple of hours," he said, his tone laced with suspicion.

Reassured that Miles wouldn't be alone in the house, I borrowed some clothes from Sawyer and headed out for my pretend run.

I kept my pace steady, doing a quick circuit of the neighborhood, all the while keeping an eye out for any signs of trouble. My heart pounded not from the exertion but from the tension coiling inside me.

When I looped back around, I wasn't surprised to see the Range Rover still parked there.

I slowed my pace, making it seem like I was winding down from my run, and approached the vehicle cautiously.

As I got closer, I tried again to get a better look at the driver, but the tinted windows gave nothing away.

I circled the block again, this time coming up from the other side to see if I could catch anything different.

My instincts were on high alert. Whoever was in that vehicle was watching Miles' house, and I couldn't shake the feeling that it was one of Ryder's wolves.

They were watching Sawyer and Miles' home now?

Ryder sure had some guts, sending people here, encroaching on Sawyer and Miles' private space and spying on them.

It made my blood boil. This was a direct threat to the people I cared about, and I wasn't going to stand for it.

This time, I approached the Range Rover from behind the cover of nearby trees and bushes. As I got closer, I noticed the engine was still running.

Whoever was inside, they were ready to leave at a moment's notice. Taking a deep breath, I crept closer until I was almost beside the vehicle. With a quick motion, I peered through the gap in the window.

Seeing Garth sitting in the driver's seat, his eyes fixed on Miles' house, my anger

spiked. I knew confronting Garth directly could escalate things, but I couldn't let him keep spying on them.

I circled back to the front of the vehicle, took a deep breath, and stepped out into the open.

"Garth," I called out, trying to keep my voice steady. "What are you doing here?"

He turned his head slowly. Garth seemed momentarily surprised, but then he smirked. "Just keeping an eye on things, Coop. You know how it is," he said.

That excuse again, I thought, irritated.

"Yeah, I know how it is," I replied, stepping closer. "And I know you're not welcome here. Leave now, and there won't be any trouble."

Garth chuckled, his smug grin igniting a fire in my chest. "I'll leave when I'm good and ready. Ryder just wants to make sure everything's in order," he said, his tone dripping with arrogance.

My temper snapped like a brittle twig. In an instant, I partially shifted, my hands transforming into lethal claws. The glass of the passenger side window exploded into shards, scattering like confetti.

Garth's bravado faltered, his eyes widening with a flash of genuine fear.

"You didn't even notice me approach you. What kind of spy are you?" I taunted.

His glower deepened, his knuckles white as he gripped the steering wheel. I retracted my claws, forcing myself to calm down, though my blood still boiled.

"Consider this your warning. Next time, you won't get off so easy," I growled, my words carrying a promise of retribution.

Garth's gaze flicked between me and the shattered window, the threat sinking in.

Without a word, he started the engine and drove away, the tires screeching as he sped off.

I stood there, watching the taillights disappear down the street, my pulse pounding in my ears. After taking a few deep breaths, I returned to the house.

MILES

I stood by the kitchen entrance, puzzled by a few things.

First, why had we ended up back at my place instead of Cooper's motel room last night?

Second, why wasn't Cooper beside me when I woke up? And third, what on earth was Sawyer doing by the sink, standing as still as a statue?

He hadn't moved an inch for the past five minutes.

I bet if I threw a spoon at his head, he wouldn't even flinch. I really wanted to test it out but decided against it—Sawyer had just gotten out of the hospital.

Instead, I shuffled over to the fridge, my slippers squeaking against the wooden floor.

Sawyer didn't seem to notice, still fixated on whatever was outside the window. I opened the fridge door, making sure to clink a couple of bottles as I took out the milk.

Still no reaction from him.

Finally, I slammed the door shut, causing him to jump. He quickly pulled down the blinds, blocking my view of whatever had caught his attention.

“Should I grab you a chair or some binoculars or something—hey!” I exclaimed as Sawyer turned me around and guided me to the table, forcing me to sit with my back to the window.

For someone who’d just been discharged from the hospital, he was annoyingly strong.

“Seriously, what were you looking at?” I asked, my annoyance growing with each new surprise this morning.

This wasn’t how I imagined starting my day. I had expected to wake up with Cooper beside me, maybe some cuddling, maybe something more.

I definitely didn’t expect to see my brother first thing, and certainly not doing this.

“Hey!” I repeated more forcefully when Sawyer didn’t respond.

Before he could answer, the front door slammed shut. It was Cooper.

Sawyer, moving as quickly as he could with his slight limp, hurried over to Cooper and pulled him into the hallway.

They started talking in hushed, urgent tones, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Curious, I stood up and tiptoed toward them. Just as I reached halfway, they both

came back into the kitchen.

Sawyer noticed my attempts to listen in and smirked. "Eavesdropping again, Mily?" He ruffled my hair with the old nickname he hadn't used in years.

I frowned, swatting his hand away. "I'm not a kid anymore. And don't call me that."

It was a name Sawyer used to get rid of me when I tried to tag along or listen in on him and Cooper back when we were kids.

It would get me riled up, and I'd usually hit him on the shoulder or whichever part of him I could reach, or stomp away. But now, the words didn't bother me as much.

Because in the past, Cooper would join in on the teasing, laughing along with Sawyer. This time, though, Cooper shook his head, walked over, and gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

"Good morning. Have you eaten?" he asked.

I was stunned, not sure if it was because Cooper kissed me in front of my brother or because he seemed to be taking my side.

The gesture was unexpected, a clear break from the teasing I'd braced myself for. Sawyer raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised too.

The atmosphere was tense, with an awkward silence hanging over us. Sawyer cleared his throat, breaking the quiet. Cooper just smiled and gave my shoulder a quick squeeze.

I felt a bit embarrassed, not used to this kind of public affection, especially in front of my brother.

I could feel my face heating up. I ran my fingers through my hair nervously and quickly turned to grab the loaf of bread from the kitchen counter.

“Do you want some toast?” I asked, trying to shift the focus.

“Sure, thanks,” Cooper replied.

I heard the chairs scraping against the floor as Sawyer and Cooper took their seats at the table.

For a moment, I thought things were settling back to normal and we could just focus on breakfast.

But when I turned to set the plate of toast on the table, I noticed it moving slightly, as if someone were pushing it from underneath. They were clearly trying to kick or nudge each other under the table.

I rolled my eyes. They could be so childish sometimes.

I placed the plate down a little too forcefully, and the noise made them stop immediately. Cooper coughed and smiled.

“Thanks,” he said, reaching for a piece of toast.

As I glanced at Cooper’s hand, I noticed it was bruised and had small cuts with tiny shards of glass still embedded in them. My breath caught in my throat.

“Cooper, what happened?” I asked, grabbing his hand.

Cooper and Sawyer exchanged a glance, and the room fell into an uncomfortable silence. I stood up abruptly, anger bubbling over.

“You two aren’t saying anything? Fine.” I marched over to the kitchen cabinet and pulled out the first aid kit.

“I know you’re both hiding something. What happened out there?” I demanded, my voice trembling slightly as I returned to the table.

I locked eyes with Sawyer, hoping he’d break first. But he just glanced at Cooper, as if silently asking, “Are we going to tell him or not?”

Just as they were about to respond, my phone rang. I glanced at the caller ID and saw it was Uncle Ben.

There were also over 30 unread messages, which made my heart race.

I picked up the phone. “Uncle Ben?”

"Son, you need to get down to the bookstore. Your friend is panicking, and there are a lot of people here," Uncle Ben said urgently.

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Chapter 12

Miles

As soon as I hung up the phone, I felt a knot tighten in my stomach. I glanced at Sawyer and Cooper, who both looked at me, their eyes filled with concern.

"What's wrong?" Sawyer asked.

Cooper leaned in closer. "Is everything okay at the bookstore?"

I shook my head, still trying to process Uncle Ben's words. "I don't know," I admitted, my voice trembling slightly. "Uncle Ben said there's a crowd of people in front of the shop."

Quickly, I scrolled through my phone, skimming through the messages. Most of them had come in the last half hour.

There were a few from Uncle Ben, but the majority were from Noah:

Noah: Walked past the shop. What's happening? A lot of people.

Noah: More and more people are showing up.

Noah: People who know I work here are asking for you.

Noah: Get down here!

Noah: I'm calling your uncle if you don't answer.

I frowned, still unsure of what was going on. Noah had a tendency to overreact, but I couldn't ignore the urgency in Uncle Ben's voice.

So on the scale of mild unease to full-blown panic, my concern was still somewhere in the middle.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Cooper asked.

"I can postpone my PT," Sawyer offered, but I could see the eager gleam in his eyes. My brother would do anything to get out of his physical therapy.

I shot him a look. "No, you can't miss that," I said firmly.

Then, turning to Cooper, I added, "And I'm fine. You just got back into town and drove all night the day before yesterday. You probably haven't had a proper sleep in two days."

Sawyer awkwardly cleared his throat. I rolled my eyes and stood up from the table, downing my coffee in one go.

"Plus, Uncle Ben and Noah are already there," I said, trying to reassure them both.

But Cooper still looked worried. "I'll be okay," I assured him.

"Fine," Cooper relented, but as I headed towards the stairs, he called after me, "But at least let me drive you there."

"Alright, alright. Just give me five minutes," I shouted back, already halfway up the stairs, my mind racing with possibilities about what could be going on at the

bookstore.

The entire drive to the bookstore, I couldn't stop fidgeting with my hands. Crowds could mean good or bad things, right?

But what if something truly terrible had happened?

Was it an angry crowd? Was Ryder involved? My mind raced with possibilities, each worse than the last.

Desperate to distract myself, I tried to think of something else. My thoughts drifted back to the kitchen earlier that morning, and I suddenly felt tense for a different reason.

"So, what were you two dumb dumbs hiding from me earlier?" I asked Cooper.

Cooper raised an eyebrow at the unexpected question, but his expression quickly shifted as his jaw clenched.

"One of Ryder's men was watching your house," he said, his voice controlled but taut with frustration.

When I didn't respond immediately, he continued, "I broke his window." He raised his bandaged fist to show me his knuckles.

Ah.

I bit my lip, unsure of how to react. Cooper glanced at me, his eyes searching my face.

He furrowed his brows. "Why don't you look surprised?"

I remembered how just yesterday, Bruce had been loitering outside the store, and I had confronted him.

Should I tell Cooper about it? He had already punched through someone's car window over something similar happening earlier.

I fidgeted nervously with my fingers, deciding not to keep anything from him.

“Yesterday, you know, um, Bruce? He was kind of outside the bookstore,” I said slowly.

The car jerked to a sudden stop, and Cooper's hand shot out protectively to my chest, even though I had my seat belt on.

“What the hell?” I yelled, looking around. Luckily, we were on an empty street with no cars or pedestrians in sight.

I wanted to yell at him more for recklessly stopping the car, but the look on his face made me bite my tongue.

Cooper was staring straight ahead, hands gripping the wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. His eyes were beginning to glow with a golden hue, and his claws were starting to emerge.

Nervously, I reached out, gently placing my hand on his shoulder.

“Cooper? Nothing happened. He just left,” I said.

Cooper turned to me, his anger barely contained.

“Why didn't you call me or Sawyer? Confronting Bruce directly is dangerous,

Miles!”

I felt my own frustration bubbling up.

"I can handle it. And I can't come running to you or Sawyer every time there's a problem. I can deal with someone like Bruce on my own," I told him.

The atmosphere was tense, but I saw Cooper's eyes slowly soften, the golden tint fading back to their normal color.

Cooper let out a sigh, his shoulders relaxing a bit. "Just... at least tell me next time, okay?"

I nodded. "But I can't promise I won't do anything before that." I said with a small smile. "And I can't just let some creep stand outside my store, right? It'd be bad for business."

The corners of Cooper's mouth lifted slightly. "Just call," he repeated, his voice gentler.

I nodded again, and Cooper started the car, driving us the rest of the way to the bookstore.

As we pulled up, I saw what Uncle Ben had been talking about. A large crowd had gathered outside the bookstore, with a line stretching down the block.

We barely got out of the car when Noah practically dragged me away. Mrs. Jenkins spotted me and waved enthusiastically. "Miles! I brought my friends over!"

She lifted some Tupperware containers, and I noticed her friends were also carrying large, heavy bags.

I remembered her mentioning at the car wash that she wanted to be here for the store's reopening and would bring some food.

I felt a pang of guilt. Even though the store was still a few hours away from opening, I should have been here much earlier.

I wanted to go over and thank them, but Noah tugged me towards the alley beside the store.

“Where have you been?” Noah asked, his voice a mixture of frustration and concern. “And why are there so many people here?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, feeling overwhelmed.

Uncle Ben appeared, looking just as confused. “Miles, what’s going on? What can I do to help?”

I shook my head, giving him a firm look. “Go home and rest, Uncle Ben. You’re still recovering,” I said.

He began to protest, but I stood my ground.

“Alright, but call me if you need anything,” Uncle Ben finally agreed.

I turned to Noah and handed him the keys. “Can you open the shop and start getting things ready?”

Noah nodded and headed inside. As I scanned the crowd, I spotted Cooper standing with Mrs. Jenkins, who looked worried.

“Mrs. Jenkins, there’s a spare foldable table in the back. Can you ask Noah to help

you set it up by the cashier?" I asked, trying to keep things under control.

She nodded, quickly moving to follow my instructions.

I then turned to Cooper. "And you," I said, poking him in the chest, "didn't I tell you to go home and rest?"

Cooper crossed his arms, clearly determined. "I'm staying, no matter what you say. There are too many customers to handle on your own," he said.

I sighed, feeling resigned. Arguing wasn't going to help right now; there were too many things to manage. "Alright, fine. Everyone, let's get moving!"

The bookstore came alive as we opened the doors, people flooding in like a wave. I'd never seen the place this full before.

We could probably handle around 20 to 30 people at a time, but we had to ask the rest to wait outside.

It wasn't because of a space issue—the bookstore was pretty big. We were just not used to managing such a large crowd.

Normally, a crowd of five felt like a lot. Ten was practically a full house.

Cooper took charge at the cashier, thankfully experienced enough to handle the rush. Noah was busy assisting customers, guiding them through the shelves and answering questions.

Mrs. Jenkins and her friends had set up a table on the side with their food, complete with an electric kettle for tea and instant coffee.

Noah had somehow managed to dig out some non-expired tea and coffee from the chaotic mess of the office—how he found anything in there, let alone something useful, was beyond me.

It seemed like my dream of having a little café section in the bookstore was finally coming true, even if it was in a makeshift, thrown-together kind of way.

As I walked around, I overheard Mrs. Jenkins firmly telling some customers that the food was only for paying customers.

I wondered if I should tell her not to worry about it, but I understood where she was coming from.

She and her friends had brought all the food, and with so many people, we needed it to last until lunchtime at the very least.

Now that the chaos of earlier had died down, I couldn't help but wonder why there were so many people here.

It wasn't like we'd done anything particularly special. From some of the conversations I overheard, a few of them were even from out of town.

What the heck was going on?

I heard a group whispering nearby, "Where are the hot guys? I thought this was the bookstore with hot guys?"

Huh? Where did they get that idea?

I quickly walked over to Noah and whispered, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Once we were out of earshot, I asked, “What are they talking about?”

Noah pursed his lips and pulled out his phone, showing me a video that had been circulating online.

It featured clips from the car wash, with hashtags like “Hot Guys at the Bookstore” and “New Reopening.”

“But how did they know the reopening day was today?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around this sudden surge of interest.

“I replied to some of the messages,” Noah admitted. “I didn’t think it would blow up like this.”

As we talked, I noticed the crowd starting to get a bit loud and impatient. Some people were grumbling about false advertising, and the chatter was getting louder.

It was starting to feel chaotic. My heart raced as panic began to set in.

Cooper, noticing the commotion, came over. “What’s going on?” he asked.

I quickly filled him in on the situation. Cooper grabbed Noah’s phone, scanning the screen. “‘Bookstore Boys in Tanks’? ‘Readers and the Ripped’? What the hell?”

“I know,” I said, my voice tinged with frustration. “I don’t know what to do. Should we just tell them it was a mistake?”

Cooper raised an eyebrow and offered, “Well, I could be the ‘hot guy’ they’re looking for.”

I shot Cooper a skeptical look, but to my surprise, Noah was rubbing his chin

thoughtfully, his gaze shifting between Cooper and the crowd, as if seriously considering the idea.

Cooper leaned in close and teased, “But half-naked in front of all these people? That should be for your eyes only, right?”

His words sent a jolt through me, and I felt my face heat up. I couldn’t afford to get flustered now, not with all these people around.

Ignoring him, I turned to Noah. “Okay, fine. But we need more help. Get your brother down here. Tell him to wear a tank top.”

Cooper laughed and mockingly pouted, "Why? Am I not enough?"

In a panic, I snapped back into business mode, pointing at him. "No! This is an all-hands-on-deck situation! Stop joking around and take off your shirt."

Cooper chuckled and, without missing a beat, took off his shirt, revealing a white tank top underneath.

He leaned in close and whispered to me with a teasing grin, “I really like this side of you, taking charge and ordering me around.”

I nudged him away, trying to hide my smile. He continued helping to serve customers, and the crowd started to calm down. Things finally felt a bit more manageable.

Meanwhile, Noah was already on the phone with Griffin, explaining the situation and trying to get him to the store as quickly as possible.

With Cooper and Noah taking charge, I finally had a chance to catch my breath. This

wasn't how I'd imagined the reopening day—far from it.

Despite the chaos, the day was turning out to be memorable in its own way. I took a deep breath and braced myself for whatever came next, knowing that for now, we'd managed to turn things around.

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Chapter 13

Cooper

A chime sounded as the door to the bookstore opened, and I looked up to see Mrs. Dalton, an elderly human in her fifties who worked at the library, making her way inside. She shuffled over to the counter, her eyes scanning the shelves.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Dalton," I greeted her warmly. "Can I help you find something?"

"Yes, dear," she replied with a kind smile. "Where is the romance section?"

I directed her to the far side of the store, near the cozy reading nook Miles had set up.

"Right this way. Are you looking for any specific title?" I asked her.

She nodded, her eyes twinkling with anticipation. "I've been searching for 'The Moonlit Garden' by Corina Bomann," she said.

"Great choice," I said, leading her to the appropriate shelf. As I bent down to grab the book, I could feel her gaze on me.

Honestly, I was shivering a little, especially since I had taken off my shirt earlier, but as Miles said, it was all hands on deck. And we were now known as the bookstore with the hot guys.

I flashed Mrs. Dalton a smile as I handed her the book.

"Here you go," I said.

"Thank you, dear," she said, her eyes lingering on me for a moment longer. "You know, it's not often you see such dedication in a young man these days."

I chuckled, feeling a bit embarrassed. "Just doing what I can to help out," I said.

She patted my arm appreciatively before heading to the counter to check out. As I watched her go, I felt a shiver run down my spine. The bookstore was getting even colder, despite the crowd.

"Need a jacket?" Miles asked, coming over to stand beside me. His eyes sparkled with amusement.

"I'll be fine," I replied, rubbing my hands together to generate some warmth. "I can endure a little cold for you."

Miles' expression softened, and he reached out to squeeze my shoulder. "You're too good to me, Coop," he said.

"Nah," I said, smiling back at him. "Just dedicated."

He leaned in closer, his breath warm against my ear. "You know, once we're done here, I might have a way to help you warm up tonight," he said.

My heart skipped a beat at the implication. "I'll hold you to that," I replied, my voice low.

As we moved back to our respective tasks, the thought of what might come after kept

me motivated. Every time I glanced over at Miles, he'd be looking back, a secret smile playing on his lips.

The anticipation made the work go by faster. Around 3 PM, I ventured to where Sawyer was helping out at the register.

The crowd had somewhat thinned, and the buzz of the busy morning had given way to a more manageable afternoon pace. Miles was in the back taking inventory with Noah.

Everyone had had their lunch except for Miles and me.

"Hey, since Noah and Griffin are here and there are fewer customers, I'm going to take Miles out for a late lunch," I told Sawyer.

Sawyer checked his watch. "It's this late already? Sure, take him," he said. "Don't take too long in case there's a crowd again."

"Sure thing," I said with a nod.

I headed to the storeroom, where Miles was diligently checking off items on his inventory list.

"Hey," I called out softly, not wanting to startle him.

He looked up, a small smile tugging at his lips when he saw me.

"Hey, Coop. What's up?" Miles asked.

"How about we take a break and grab some lunch? It's already past three," I suggested.

Miles glanced at his watch, surprised. "Wow, time flew by. Yeah, I could use a break," he admitted.

We stepped out of the storeroom, and I led him outside to my truck. The sun was still high in the sky, casting a warm glow over the town.

I drove us to a quaint little café on the outskirts of Pecan Pines, one with outdoor seating and a view of the river. To my relief, I didn't see any of Ryder's wolves tailing us.

We sat down at a table under a large umbrella, the gentle breeze carrying the scent of blooming flowers.

I ordered us two sandwiches and some iced tea. As we waited, I reached across the table and took his hand in mine.

"You know," I began, my thumb lightly stroking his fingers, "I've been looking forward to this all day."

Miles looked at me. "Me too. It's been a crazy morning, but being here with you makes it all worth it."

Our food arrived, and we ate slowly, savoring the food and the rare moment of peace. We talked about mundane things.

I was careful to avoid talking about the Garth incident this morning. My hand had already healed completely.

Miles seemed to get the gist and didn't elaborate more on the incident with Bruce. At one point, Miles leaned back in his chair, a contented sigh escaping his lips.

"This is perfect," he said softly. "Just us, away from everything for a while."

I smiled, feeling a warmth spread through my chest.

"I'm glad you think so. You deserve a break, Miles. You work so hard, and sometimes you need to take care of yourself too," I reminded him.

He looked at me, his expression softening. "You always know what to say to make me feel better."

I squeezed his hand, my heart swelling with affection. "I just want you to be happy," I told him.

We finished our meal, and I paid the bill. Before we left, I stood up and walked around the table, pulling Miles into a gentle embrace. He rested his head against my chest, and for a moment, the world around us faded away.

"Thank you, Coop," he murmured. "For everything."

I kissed the top of his head, holding him close. "Anytime, Miles." I leaned in close to whisper in his ear, "I'm looking forward to my reward tonight."

Miles blushed at that. Feeling satisfied, we walked back to the truck, hand in hand. As we drove back to the bookstore, I couldn't help but steal glances at him.

When I told Miles we'd take our relationship one step at a time, I'd been conflicted, but now the answer seemed so simple. I wanted Miles so much, and I could see us building a future here.

Back at the bookstore, Sawyer gave us a knowing look as we walked in. "Had a good lunch?" he asked with a smirk.

"Yeah, we did," Miles replied.

"Good. Now back to work," Sawyer said. "More customers turned up."

After a long day at the store, Miles and I finally drove back to his place.

Sawyer was out having beers with Griffin, so we had the entire place to ourselves. There was no chance of us being interrupted.

As we pulled into the driveway, I was pleased to see that Garth was absent. It looked like he finally got the message, at least for the day.

Sooner or later, I knew Ryder would stop sending his minions and confront me himself. I'd be ready for him when that time came, but for tonight, I just wanted to relax with Miles.

We stepped out of the truck, and Miles sighed, stretching his arms above his head.

"I'm beat," he confessed, walking towards the house.

He plopped himself onto the sofa as soon as we got inside, the cushions molding around him. I couldn't help but smile at how adorable he looked, all tousled hair and sleepy eyes.

"How about we order takeout? I don't have the energy to cook," he asked, glancing up at me.

"Sounds perfect," I agreed, taking out my phone to browse through our options.

We decided on Chinese food, and I placed the order. While we waited, I settled next to Miles on the sofa, pulling him into my arms. He nestled against me, his head

resting on my shoulder.

We sat there in comfortable silence, melting away in each other's presence. When the food arrived, we spread it out on the coffee table and dug in. I didn't realize how hungry I was.

Between bites of sesame chicken and fried rice, we exchanged smiles and little touches. Despite how chaotic today was, I had never felt as relaxed as I did right now.

In fact, I tried picturing a normal day I had in Winter Valley... and suddenly couldn't imagine a day without seeing or talking to Miles.

Once we'd had our fill, I cleared the containers away and returned to the sofa. Miles shifted, making room for me, and I pulled him back into my arms.

We fit together perfectly, like two pieces of a puzzle. The room was quiet, save for the occasional hum of the refrigerator and the soft rustling of leaves outside.

"This isn't a bad way to end the day," I murmured. "I could get used to this. Every day."

Miles looked at me. "Me too," he replied softly. "It feels right, being here with you."

I leaned down, capturing his lips in a tender kiss. The kiss started slow, then quickly turned passionate.

When I slid my tongue into his mouth, Miles sucked on it. My pants tightened. When I pulled back, Miles smiled and started tracing patterns on my chest.

"Let's make it a habit then," he suggested, a playful glint in his eyes. "Ending the day like this, together."

"Deal," I agreed.

I tugged him close, and Miles seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. He slid onto my lap, his fingers gently gripping my shoulders.

A small, tempting smile played on his lips, sending a rush of warmth through me. I wrapped my arm around his waist, ensuring he wouldn't fall.

"Are you going to warm me up now?" I asked him.

I tightened my hold on him, my other hand gently brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

"You bet," Miles answered with a grin.

I didn't need any more encouragement. I tilted his chin up, our eyes locking for a moment before I leaned in to plunder his mouth.

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Chapter 14

Cooper

I woke up tangled next to Miles, the early morning light filtering through the curtains. Miles smiled up at me, surprising me that he was already awake.

I leaned down and kissed him softly, murmuring, "Good morning."

"Morning," he replied, his voice still husky with sleep.

We reluctantly rose from bed and made our way downstairs. Sawyer was already in the kitchen, appearing to nurse a hangover from the night before.

I wondered what time he had returned home; dark shadows lingered under his eyes.

"Breakfast, please?" Sawyer groaned, his head cradled in his hands.

Miles rolled his eyes and started firing up the stove. "You're hopeless," he teased.

I decided to help by making Sawyer a hangover remedy of my own: a blend of tomato juice, a splash of hot sauce, a pinch of salt, a dash of Worcestershire sauce, a squeeze of lemon, and a sprinkle of celery salt.

It was what I usually drank when I was feeling rough, and it always did the trick for me.

As I handed the drink to Sawyer, Miles asked, "Hey, Coop. Are you sure you don't want me to come with you today?"

Miles was frying some eggs, his brow furrowed with concern. He looked adorable.

"What's today?" Sawyer asked, sounding more sober after taking a few sips of his drink.

Neither Miles nor I had to point it out because Sawyer's gaze turned serious, and he nodded.

"Ah, it's that time of the year, huh?" Sawyer asked.

I only nodded, a somber feeling settling over me. We enjoyed breakfast together, the easy banter lightening the mood slightly.

After freshly showering and dressing, I got ready to leave the house. Miles gave me a kiss, his hand lingering on my cheek.

"Be careful out there," he whispered.

He was probably worried about Ryder's wolves following me closely.

"I will," I promised, giving him one last smile before heading out to my ride.

I drove to the convenience store to grab a six-pack. Then, I made my way to Pecan Pines Cemetery to see my dad. The drive was quiet, giving me time to reflect.

The memories of my father always hit harder on this day, and visiting his grave was both a ritual and a way to reconnect. I parked the truck, grabbed the six-pack, and walked towards his resting place.

As I approached his grave, the familiar ache in my chest returned. I sat down, placing the beers beside his headstone.

"Hey, Dad," I said softly. "Brought your favorite."

I cracked open a can and set it on the ground, a small offering for the man whom I wished I had known a little better.

Closing my eyes, I thought of his death—how Ryder toyed with him before killing him in that challenge circle, and how angry that made me.

I was arrogant enough to challenge Ryder as well, thinking I could somehow beat him.

That anger stayed with me for a very long time, but now, after spending more time with Miles, Sawyer, and our friends, I realized I've finally managed to come to terms with my dad's death.

I spent the next hour talking to him, sharing the highs and lows of my life, my worries about Ryder's wolves, and the joy I found in Miles.

It was a bittersweet visit, but it always left me feeling a bit lighter, as if my dad was still watching over me, guiding me through the tough times.

"I figured I'd find you here," said a familiar voice.

I didn't need to turn to know who it was. Ryder finally had the guts to talk to me face-to-face. Maybe in his eyes, I hadn't been worth his time before.

However, now he finally considered me a real threat to his pack and his town. I stood up and took one last look at the headstone before confronting the man who murdered

my father.

I turned to face Ryder, my jaw set and muscles tense.

The graveyard felt eerily silent around us, though I knew it wasn't empty. On my way to my father's grave earlier, I had passed a few people visiting their friends and loved ones.

"You finally decided to show up," I said, my voice low and steady.

Just when I thought I had finally found some measure of peace, I was wrong. Inside, I was seething with familiar fury.

Calm down, I reminded my wolf. Ryder probably showed up here to provoke me on purpose.

Ryder smirked, his expression mocking. "You've come a long way since our last encounter, Cooper. I hear you've been cozying up with Miles and Sawyer," he remarked.

I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to charge at him. "What do you want, Ryder? Did you come here to pick a fight with me?" I asked.

My skin felt tightly stretched over my bones. My wolf was on the verge of emerging, but I thought of Miles waiting for me back home and forced myself to calm down.

If I attacked Ryder now, he'd have a reason to send the entire pack after me. It wouldn't end there.

Officially, I was a member of the Winter Valley Pack, and if I went after Ryder, my current pack would also be held accountable for my rash actions.

Besides, there was a human family nearby. If Ryder and I exchanged blows, they might get hurt.

Ryder shook his head, the smirk widening. "I don't want to fight you, Cooper, unless you want to be humiliated again? This is just a friendly chat between old acquaintances," he said.

I scoffed, my temper flaring. "Acquaintances? You killed my father, Ryder. Then you tried to kill Ben and Sawyer. Now you're sending wolves to stalk Miles. There's nothing friendly between us," I told him.

His gaze hardened for a moment, then turned into something resembling amusement.

"Your father was weak, Cooper. He wasn't strong enough to lead the pack. I did him a favor by putting him out of his misery," Ryder said.

I pictured myself lunging at him, partially shifting my claws and cutting his throat. Then I reminded myself that Ryder got his kicks from provoking me.

He was probably hoping I'd lose my temper. Maybe Garth had told him about the car window, and Ryder presumed it would be easy to rile me up. It took everything in me to reel in my wolf.

"Wait," I thought to myself. I wasn't the impulsive teenager I was ten years ago.

When I didn't do or say anything, Ryder had the gall to look disappointed.

"Have you turned into a coward, Cooper? You're all bark and no bite. Maybe Garth and Bruce were wrong. You're no threat to me," Ryder said with a scoff.

I squared my shoulders and looked him in the eyes. Whatever he saw on my face

made him take a hesitant step back. Triumph filled me when I realized I smelled fear on him.

“Tell yourself whatever you want, Ryder,” I said. “But I’ll be sticking around here and have no plans of leaving.”

He glared at me, and I could sense him leaking out all his aggressive aura, but I stood there unimpressed. That seemed to unsettle him.

"Enjoy your little domestic life while it lasts. But remember, Pecan Pines will always be mine," he said.

With those words hanging in the air, Ryder turned and walked away. I stood there, once more tempted to attack him.

His back was exposed, and it would be an easy kill; Ryder wouldn’t even notice if I sunk my claws into him.

But as I glanced back at my father’s grave, I recalled the lessons in decency and honor he had imparted on me before his passing. Stooping to such a cheap tactic would only lower me to Ryder's level, I realized.

I let him walk away unharmed, unsure if I would come to regret my decision later on.

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Chapter 15

Miles

My eyes skimmed over the classified section, searching for new apartment listings. I wasn't expecting much, just the same ones I'd seen the past few days. But then, my eyes widened when I spotted a new one:

Maple Leaf Residences

Address: 456 Elm Street, Pecan Pines 78901

Rent: \$850 per month

Rooms: 1 Bedrooms, 1 Bath

Square Feet: 750 sq. ft.

Available: ASAP

Features: Hardwood floors, updated kitchen, in-unit washer/dryer

Utilities Included: Water, trash removal, sewer

Utilities Not Included: Electricity, gas, internet

Contact: Arnie James, (555) 123-4567

It was just two streets over from the bookshop. I grabbed the red marker from the mug of pens by the cashier and circled it.

With the bookstore busier than ever, I've been thinking about getting my own place. Something so close by like this seemed like the perfect solution.

But then, I wondered if it was too soon. I was still worried about Sawyer.

He said his physical therapy was going well, but he would get angry every time I asked about it or mentioned his limp. So, I wasn't sure if moving out soon was the right decision just yet.

I stood up and quietly peeked into the small office behind the bookstore. Sawyer was still in there, making his coffee. I sat back down, pulled out my phone, and saved the number.

I'd have to call them as soon as possible—who knew how long this place would stay available?

Pecan Pines was a relatively small town with few apartments for rent. Finding a decent one—one with good plumbing, no mold, and a functional heating system—was like hitting the jackpot.

But finding something this good felt like your past self had made a sacrifice to a divine entity just so your present self could have this place.

Basically, this was a rare opportunity, and I knew I needed to act fast.

Just the memory of visiting other listings over the past few days made me shudder. One place had mold creeping up the walls, and the kitchen sink looked like it hadn't been cleaned in years.

Another was so tiny that calling it a “cozy” studio would have been generous. It was no wonder those places were still on the market, no matter how cheap they were.

I tapped my pen on the counter. Maybe I could sneak outside for a couple of minutes without Sawyer noticing.

I could tell him I needed to run to the grocery store real quick. The sooner, the better.

“What are you looking at those for?” Sawyer's voice interrupted my thoughts.

I almost jumped from my seat. Quickly, I folded the newspaper haphazardly to cover the classified ads and nonchalantly placed my elbow over it, leaning my head on my hand. But I was too late.

“Are you looking for a new place or something?” Sawyer asked, reaching for the newspaper under my arm. I pressed my elbow down to keep him from grabbing it, but Sawyer managed to yank it free.

He set his coffee mug down and flipped through the paper, eventually finding the classified section with my circled ad.

I grabbed his mug in annoyance and took a long, slow drink of his coffee, trying to buy myself some time.

Should I tell him the truth? That I was looking for an apartment because things were finally starting to look up?

It was strange how things could change so quickly.

Just a few weeks ago, I was drowning in bills and worry, struggling to keep the bookstore afloat. The constant threat from Ryder's men made every decision feel like

a burden.

But now, with the bookstore getting unexpected attention and the pack's threat seeming less immediate, I finally had space to think about things I'd been putting off—like the café section of the bookstore or even getting my own place.

Sure, having more privacy with Cooper would be great too—after all, we have been spending a lot of time together.

But more than that, the idea of having my own space, a place where I could set my own rules and build something real, felt like a luxury I hadn't let myself imagine before.

With everything starting to fall into place, I can't help but want Cooper to be part of this new chapter in my life.

I knew it was a big step—maybe even a hasty one. I also knew Cooper wanted to take things slow, and I respected that. But was it so wrong of me to want this for both of us?

I guess I was afraid that if I didn't bring it up now, I might miss the chance to share my plans with him, and I'd regret not being open about my hopes for our future.

But if I told Sawyer all this, he'd probably think I sounded crazy or like something straight out of a self-help book. So I kept my mouth shut.

Sawyer crossed his arms. "Please tell me you're not getting your own place because of Cooper."

I blinked. "What? No!"

Sawyer looked surprised. "Really? Because you two have been inseparable lately. But you know I don't care about... what you guys do together."

I raised an eyebrow at that. Just the other morning, Sawyer freaked out when he saw Cooper and me in the bathroom.

Ignoring the fact that my brother didn't knock and that Cooper and I forgot to lock the door, we weren't even doing anything particularly scandalous. Sawyer had acted all weird and robotic all day after that.

Cooper and I had just finished brushing our teeth. Sure, maybe we were standing pretty close. Maybe Cooper's hands were on my ass, rubbing our hard-ons together, and maybe we were planning to shower together afterward.

But Sawyer barely saw anything since he practically opened the door and slammed it shut the next second.

So, one could say that, other than finally having my own place, it might also be good for my brother's mental health.

"It's just something I've been thinking about for a while, and now seemed like a good time," I explained. "Anyway, don't you have to leave for your PT soon?"

Sawyer sipped his coffee with a slight frown. "Are you just saying that because you don't want to talk more about this?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Obviously," I said, flashing a wide smile.

I didn't want to continue this discussion—I knew it could lead to another talk about his physical therapy, and we'd end up arguing again.

Sawyer rolled his eyes and headed out of the bookstore.

As the door closed behind him, I looked at the newspaper Sawyer had tossed on the counter earlier. It was now crumpled and folded messily.

I picked it up, carefully opened it, and smoothed out the wrinkles. Seeing the classified section again, I wondered if I should tell Cooper about my plans to find my own place.

But I hesitated. I didn't want Cooper to get the wrong idea and think I was pushing him into something he wasn't ready for.

A familiar engine noise caught my attention, and I saw Cooper parking his truck outside. I quickly raised my hand to wave at him, but then I noticed he seemed unusually tense.

He remained inside, looking down at something with a frown. After a few seconds, he let out a tired sigh and answered a call.

I watched him closely, getting more worried as I saw the tension in his brow. Something was definitely up.

Cooper nodded occasionally, clearly deep in conversation. He seemed on the verge of opening his door at one point but instead leaned his elbow on the window ledge, running his hand through his hair.

I knew that look. It was the same serious expression he had every time he talked to his lead alpha. I recalled him mentioning some conflict with another pack, though the details were a bit hazy.

Guilt washed over me. I realized I hadn't asked much about his pack or his life back

in Winter Valley, yet he was spending so much time here with me instead.

Seeing him on a serious call with his lead alpha made my worries about our relationship suddenly seem trivial.

It was a stark reminder that he was still part of his pack and they needed him. I didn't want to rush him into anything, but I couldn't shake the feeling that we needed to have a more serious talk about us.

Was it bad to want to know where we stood?

I glanced down at the newspaper again and tucked it under my desk. Respecting Cooper's wish to take things slow was important, and anyway, now didn't seem like the right time to bring it up.

Eventually, Cooper got out of his truck, still on the phone. When he finally noticed me, he gave me a warm smile—the same smile he had every morning when we woke up next to each other and every night before bed. A smile I knew was only meant for me.

But he lingered on the sidewalk for a moment longer.

After a couple more minutes, Cooper ended the call and came inside with breakfast—a brown paper bag full of pastries that made my stomach growl. He came around the counter, and kissed my temple.

“Hey,” I said softly, smiling up at him.

Before Cooper could respond, his phone buzzed again. He glanced at it and sighed. “I already told you, I'm leaving tonight. Fine. This afternoon then.”

I could vaguely hear a voice on the other end of the line still talking as Cooper ended the call abruptly.

I frowned. “Everything okay?”

Cooper looked frustrated. “They need me back in Winter Valley. I wanted to spend the day with you, but it looks like I’ll have to leave early.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a pang of disappointment.

I hesitated to say anything more, still unsure if I should bring it up now. Part of me wanted to wait until he had more time, but I also felt it was important to talk about it sooner rather than later.

Cooper brushed my cheek. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Shoot. Did my face give away that I was stressing about us?

“No, it’s nothing,” I said quickly, but Cooper looked unconvinced.

“I was just wondering if we could talk when you get back,” I said, looking down and picking at the corner of the brown paper bag. “About us...?”

I glanced up, searching his eyes for a reaction.

Cooper looked uneasy. “Is this a good talk or one that’s going to end with someone crying? And by someone, I mean me.” He smiled, clearly trying to lighten the mood.

I quickly raised my hands. “No! It’s nothing like that. It’s just a continuation of our conversation from the other night, about us. But I don’t want to rush you into making any decisions, of course! I know you’re busy with your pack...” My words tumbled

out in a rush. “I just think we should talk more about it when you have the time. Not that I’m saying you don’t have time now, but?—”

Feeling the heat rise in my cheeks, I grabbed my coffee to collect myself, even though I knew the caffeine probably wasn’t helping my already fast-beating heart.

Cooper chuckled. “Good. You had me worried there for a second. Of course, we can talk.” He lifted my chin and gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

I smiled in relief. Cooper always had a way of calming me down.

“I’ll be back in two days. Let’s talk then,” he said reassuringly. “Come on, let’s have breakfast.”

As we started eating, I glanced up and noticed Garth walking past the shop. Cooper saw where I was looking and tensed, as if ready to get up.

“He’s gone,” I said quickly, placing a hand on his arm to stop him.

Cooper frowned. “Didn’t you mention Ryder’s men have been walking by the store for the last couple of days?”

“Yeah, but they’re not causing any trouble,” I replied, giving him a pleading look to let it go.

He reluctantly sat back down, his gaze still fixed on the storefront window, but Garth was already out of sight.

There was no need to confront Ryder’s men. They were just passing through, not stopping or watching us.

For all I knew, they were simply hanging around town like any normal townspeople would.

Pecan Pines was a small place, so running into someone from the pack was likely.

I tried to figure out if there was a specific time they passed by my shop, but they always seemed to appear at random.

I guess on one hand, I did notice Ryder's men passing by more frequently over the past week. On the other hand, I wondered whether I was just more alert now, seeing patterns where there might be none.

I could simply be overreacting, especially since I hadn't paid much attention to them before.

I glanced back at Cooper. His eyes were dark with worry. I gave him a reassuring smile.

"Nothing's happened, Cooper. There's nothing to worry about," I said.

At least, not for now. Then I remembered Cooper mentioning he saw Ryder at the cemetery.

I started to worry if something was about to happen. I made a mental note to bring Sawyer's old baseball bat to the store tomorrow, just in case.

We finished breakfast in silence, the tension still hanging in the air. Cooper's jaw was tight. He was clearly on edge and unable to relax.

"Look, even if something happens, Sawyer's here. You're only gone for two days. I can handle myself. And if anything comes up, I'll call you right away, okay?" I said,

trying to reassure both him and myself.

Cooper nodded but still looked a bit uneasy.

"And they wouldn't be stupid enough to attack the store in broad daylight," I added, convincing myself as much as him.

In a place where humans and shifters lived side by side, no shifter, let alone a lead alpha, would attack or threaten anyone openly.

These things happened in the pack lands, not in the middle of town. Ryder might be a reckless jerk, but I didn't think he'd be dumb enough to cause trouble here.

Cooper studied me, his eyes searching mine. Finally, he gave a small, reassuring smile. "You're right," he said, though I could still see concern in his eyes.

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Chapter 16

Cooper

“Hey, Cooper, are you with us, or do you intend to daydream throughout the entire meeting?” Jack, Daniel's third, snapped.

The truth was, I didn't appreciate being called back to Winter Valley on such short notice.

My thoughts drifted to the incident at the cemetery, and I couldn't help but wonder how Ryder would retaliate.

A proud wolf like Ryder wouldn't sit still and do nothing. I should be miles away from here.

“Seems to me, he's missing his boyfriend in Pecan Pines,” one of the pack's enforcers sneered.

I shot him a warning snarl, the growl rumbling low in my chest.

Finally, Daniel stepped in. “That's enough from all of you, but Jack does have a point, Coop.”

Daniel looked at me pointedly when he said this. Guilt swamped me. Daniel would only call me back if it was important.

“I’m here,” I said, reining in my angsty wolf.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, that something was about to go down back at Pecan Pines... and I should be there.

Sawyer and Miles could hold their own for a few days, I reassured myself. But right now, I needed to be present.

Jack started detailing how the Blue Fangs had picked a fight with a few of our younger wolves at a roadside bar.

It was a serious incident that could lead to war between our groups, but I already had so much on my plate.

If I had to think about fighting the Blue Fangs and dealing with Ryder's wolves...I couldn’t be in two places at once.

My mind wandered again, picturing Ryder’s smug face and Miles’ smile when I left Pecan Pines.

Meanwhile, the tension in the meeting room skyrocketed, with every wolf on edge. I forced myself to focus.

Jack’s voice was a low drone in the background, but I caught enough to know that the situation was dire.

“Cooper, are you listening?” Jack’s sharp tone cut through my thoughts.

“Yes, Jack, I’m listening,” I replied, though my heart was still back at Pecan Pines.

My instincts screamed at me to return. I thought I could somehow balance my

responsibilities here and Pecan Pines, but I was stretched too thin.

As the meeting dragged on, my anxiety grew. I clenched my fists under the table, trying to stay grounded.

Sawyer and Miles would be fine on their own, I repeated to myself. I was being paranoid, or at least that was what I kept telling myself.

For now, I had to be here, fully present, ready to face whatever came next.

“Cooper, can I talk to you in private?” Daniel asked after the meeting.

I nodded, pretty certain he was about to lecture me on my poor time management. As we walked, I thought we’d head to Daniel’s office, but instead, he led us outside.

“Come take a drive with me,” Daniel said. Uncertain, I nodded and followed him to his truck.

As we settled into the truck, I tried to preempt the lecture. “I know what you’re about to say,” I began.

“Do you?” Daniel asked, raising one eyebrow.

“I know I did a piss-poor job of being your second in that meeting,” I admitted. “You expected more from me.”

“Usually, you’re more involved,” Daniel agreed. “Now that we’re alone, will you tell me what’s really going on with you?”

I took a deep breath and began explaining the tense situation in Pecan Pines: how Ryder’s wolves were lurking and the constant anxiety I felt about leaving Sawyer and

Miles to handle it all on their own.

Daniel didn't interrupt; he only listened, his eyes focused on the road ahead.

As I talked, I started to feel a little lighter, sharing the burden that had been weighing so heavily on me. Finally, I noticed where we were heading.

The familiar building of Winter Valley Medical came into view, and Daniel parked the car.

“Why are we here?” I asked, feeling a pang of worry.

“We're here to visit the wolves injured in that bar fight with the Blue Fangs,” Daniel explained.

I nodded, understanding now. Seeing the injured wolves would remind me of the immediate threat we were facing and why my presence here was crucial.

We walked into the medical center, the sterile scent of antiseptic and the quiet hum of machinery filling the air.

As we approached the room where our pack members were recovering, I braced myself for what I might see.

Daniel opened the door, and I stepped inside. The sight of my injured pack mates hit me hard.

Cuts, bruises, and bandages covered their bodies. My heart ached for them, and the guilt of being mentally absent during the meeting intensified.

Daniel spoke to my injured pack mates and offered them words of encouragement. I

followed his lead. Eventually, we left them and got coffee in the cafeteria.

“This is why you need to be here, Cooper. Our pack needs you, focused and strong.” Or at least those were the words I expected Daniel to say. Instead, he said, “Coop, you need to make a choice.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I countered, immediately regretting the heat in my words. I took a deep breath, trying to rein in my frustration.

I continued, “I told the man I love, my future mate, that we would take things step-by-step when he asked me where our relationship was going. I should’ve told Miles the truth instead.”

“And what’s that?” Daniel asked, his voice steady and patient.

“That I love him and want to be with him,” I admitted.

The words hung in the air. I finished the rest of my coffee in one gulp and stared at the empty cup for a few seconds as the truth finally came crashing down on me.

“Daniel, I’ve been unfair to Miles and to you and our pack. I thought I could do it all, strike a balance, but the truth is, I’m just doing everything half-assed,” I muttered.

Daniel nodded, his expression thoughtful. “You’ve got a lot on your plate, Coop. It’s understandable, but you can’t keep spreading yourself so thin. You need to decide where your priorities lie,” he said.

I thought of the injured wolves earlier, of everything Daniel and this pack had done for me. I was conflicted, torn between my duty to the pack and my love for Miles.

“I know,” I said finally, my voice barely above a whisper. “I know I need to make a

choice.”

Daniel placed a hand on my shoulder, grounding me. “I’m with you, Cooper, no matter what you decide. But you need to be honest with yourself and with Miles. You can’t keep running from this,” he said.

The truth of his words hit me hard. I couldn’t keep pretending everything was fine, couldn’t keep seeing Miles on the side while trying to juggle the responsibilities of being second in command.

It was time to face reality and make a decision that would set things right.

We left the medical center and headed back to Daniel’s truck. The drive back to the pack house was silent, but my mind was anything but.

Thoughts raced through my head, a mess of emotions and decisions that couldn’t wait any longer.

The roads blurred past as I thought about Miles, about the promises I had made and the promises I would break if I kept up this pace. I knew what I had to do.

“Daniel,” I said, breaking the silence that had settled thickly between us. “I don’t think I can’t be your second anymore.”

Daniel’s hands tightened on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white for a moment before he relaxed.

“I figured you’d say that,” he said, his voice calm but tinged with sadness. “I understand, Coop. Return to Pecan Pines, be with Miles. But all I’d ask is that you stay as my second a little while longer so we can find a suitable replacement.”

I nodded, the relief mingling with the guilt that had been gnawing at me. “That works,” I said, swallowing a lump in my throat.

Daniel turned the truck onto a familiar dirt road, the pack house coming into view.

“You’re a good leader, Cooper,” he said softly. “And a good friend. We’ll find someone who can step into your shoes, but it won’t be easy.”

“I’ll help with the transition,” I promised. “I won’t leave you in the lurch.”

Daniel smiled, a small, weary smile that spoke volumes. “I know you won’t. Just make sure you take care of yourself and Miles, too. You deserve to be happy.”

We pulled into the driveway, and I took a deep breath. The pack house loomed ahead, the place I once considered home, but Miles was my home now.

As we walked inside, I felt a sense of clarity I hadn’t felt in a long time. I had made my decision, and it was the right one—for myself, for Miles, and for Daniel’s pack.

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Chapter 17

Miles

“That was false advertising. That Story Hour was not an hour at all!” Noah grumbled, trying to clean glitter off his clothes with a wet rag.

“Well, isn’t that good for the kids then? It means they had a great time. And their parents looked so happy when they picked them up too,” I said, trying to lighten the mood but feeling a bit nervous about Noah's reaction.

I winced as Noah slammed the table with the rag.

“I meant for me! This is not what I signed up for. It’s called Story Hour. So that’s supposed to be one hour only! It lasted for three whole hours! No amount of free pizza is worth... this!” he shouted, pointing at his ruined shirt.

I knew I should try to look apologetic or actually say sorry like a decent human being, but all I could do was purse my lips, trying to hold back a laugh.

He looked ridiculous with glitter all over his hair and shirt and a huge paint stain in an unfortunate spot on his pants.

Noah continued to glare at me. When I still couldn’t say or do anything other than shake with suppressed laughter, he clicked his tongue.

“Okay, okay,” I finally managed to say, holding up my hands in defeat. “How about I

make it up to you? Next week, I'll handle the kids. You just do the reading bit. You won't have to deal with any of this glitter and paint chaos."

Noah kept rubbing at his shirt, furrowing his brow as the glitter only seemed to spread even more. "Next week? Oh no, I'm not falling for that again. This isn't a regular thing. I'm leaving right after I get this stuff off me."

He now looked like a unicorn had puked on him. My mind raced as I tried to think of ways to convince him to stay for the afternoon's session.

"Come on, Noah. The kids love you, and the parents appreciate it. Plus, you'd be helping me out a lot."

Noah raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. "Helping you out a lot, huh? And what do I get in return, besides becoming a human glitter bomb?"

I grinned, thinking fast. "I'll make sure there's no glitter or paint next time. And... I'll treat you to dinner at your favorite restaurant. Deal?"

Noah paused, considering the offer. I leaned forward, hoping my eyes weren't shining like a predator catching its prey.

"So, what do you say?" I pressed.

He sighed, finally cracking a small smile. "Fine. But if there's glitter next time, I'm out for good."

I laughed, relieved. "Deal. No glitter, I promise."

Noah shook his head, still trying to clean himself off. "You better, or you're on your own."

The door jingled, saving me from further argument. Mrs. Jenkins arrived, her arms laden with food trays. "I'm here! Freshly baked pigs-in-a-blanket, as promised."

"You shouldn't have!" I exclaimed, genuinely shocked at the amount of food she brought.

Mrs. Jenkins quickly went over to the counter, laying out the food trays. As she opened them, the smell of freshly baked treats filled the store.

Noah dropped the rag he was holding and quickly went over, hovering behind Mrs. Jenkins.

She handed him two pigs-in-a-blanket in a napkin, and he nodded in appreciation, moaning at the first bite.

His earlier annoyance about the extended story hour seemed to vanish as if it had never existed.

I made a mental note to thank Mrs. Jenkins later, because it looked like Noah decided to stay for the day.

But more than that, she really was doing too much. She had been doing more than enough ever since we reopened the bookstore, dropping by almost every day with enough food to feed a small army.

And when she found out today was the first day of our weekly story hour, she had been so excited that I couldn't stop her from running out while listing things to make and bring.

Mrs. Jenkins looked around, a frown crossing her face for the first time.

Her eyes moved from the paint-splattered floor mat to the small tables cluttered with paint, paper, water, and glitter, and finally to Noah's glittered top.

"Is it all over?" she asked, her voice tinged with disappointment.

I nodded, feeling a bit sheepish. "Yeah. Well, the morning session at least. Sorry about the mess. The kids got a little... enthusiastic."

Mrs. Jenkins sighed, but her expression softened. "Well, it looks like they had a lot of fun. That's what matters, right?"

Noah, his mouth full of food, nodded and said dryly, "Absolutely. Fun for them, at least."

"But there's still an afternoon one in a couple of hours," I said to Mrs. Jenkins, throwing a glare at Noah.

Mrs. Jenkins looked a little sad. "Why didn't you tell me there were two sessions? I could've come earlier."

"The first one was at 9. I didn't want to inconvenience you," I explained.

Mrs. Jenkins tutted, waving off my concern. "Don't be silly, I'm awake by 6 a.m.! And I want to help out as much as I can."

She turned around, humming as she continued opening food trays and taking out packets of small disposable plates from her bag.

"You really don't need to help out so much. I don't want to trouble you," I said seriously.

Mrs. Jenkins turned around, her expression softening. "Miles, I'm bored at home. I like being here. So just let me help out when I can, hmm?"

I felt a cozy warmth spreading in my chest. "Alright, thank you, Mrs. Jenkins. It means a lot."

Noah chimed in, "Yeah, you can come over whenever you want, Mrs. J," except he said it with a mouthful of chewed-up processed meat and bread. I shot him another look.

The door jingled open again. Without turning around, I started to say, "Sorry, the afternoon Story Hour only starts at 3," but then I saw it was Garth and Bruce with three other guys—all of them wolves loyal to Ryder.

I frowned, wondering what the hell they thought they were doing in my store, looking like they were ready to cause trouble. They couldn't be, especially not with a human around.

I walked forward, standing protectively in front of Mrs. Jenkins. Noah did the same.

Garth smirked. "What? We're here to buy some books," he said, glancing around the store with an innocent expression.

Bruce nodded, adding, "There's just been so many people around lately. But the past couple of days seemed pretty empty."

What was he talking about? Ever since we reopened, we've been busier than ever. What did he mean by the last few days...?

Oh.

It finally clicked.

Sawyer had to stay at home on mandatory bed rest after he aggravated his injuries during his physical therapy session. Cooper had been in Winter Valley since the day before yesterday.

I shouldn't have dismissed it so easily when I kept seeing Ryder's men around all week. They must have been keeping tabs on the bookstore.

I clenched my fists, trying to stay calm. "If you're looking for something specific, I can help you find it. Otherwise, I'd appreciate it if you didn't disrupt our store."

Garth shrugged nonchalantly. "Just browsing," he repeated.

I stood my ground, watching as they sauntered further in, their intentions clear.

I narrowed my eyes at Bruce. "So what, you think now's a good time to come in? When my brother and Cooper aren't around?"

Bruce smirked. "Don't know what you're talking about. Like I said, we're just here to shop."

He walked over to a display of books we had just set up yesterday and tipped it over, spilling the books onto the floor.

As if it were a signal, the rest of them spread out and started pulling books off shelves, dropping them carelessly.

Noah shouted, "Hey, stop that!" Mrs. Jenkins also began to shout at them, but they paid her no heed.

“Noah, take Mrs. Jenkins to the office,” I ordered, my voice tight.

Bruce laughed and knocked over a lamp, shattering the glass all over the floor. Noah nervously grabbed Mrs. Jenkins’ arm, trying to lead her to safety, but she yanked her arm away, grabbed a pig-in-a-blanket from her food tray, and hurled it at Bruce’s head.

The room fell quiet as all eyes followed the snack as it slid down Bruce’s torso, bounced off his shoe, and eventually rolled away under a nearby shelf.

Bruce glared at Mrs. Jenkins, who returned his stare with equal intensity.

I had to hand it to her; her glare was so fierce that if Noah hadn’t pulled her into the office, I felt like Bruce might have thought twice about carrying on. Instead, his expression turned slightly mocking as he watched her go.

Noah locked the office door from the outside. I could hear Mrs. Jenkins banging the door loudly and shouting, but Noah told her not to open the door no matter what.

“Shouldn’t have done that,” Bruce sneered at me. “You see, if she had stayed here, we wouldn’t have been able to do this.”

They continued their rampage even more aggressively, knocking over displays and kicking aside the setups meant for the kids’ activities.

They even went for the bookshelves with glass doors, which shattered with a loud crash, sending glass flying everywhere.

“Hey!” Noah shouted again, ready to lunge at them with his glittered rag.

I grabbed him and pulled him behind the counter with me, my hand searching for

Sawyer's baseball bat that I had stashed under there yesterday.

I felt my anger rising as they overturned Mrs. Jenkins' food table, sending her food trays crashing to the ground. That was the last straw.

Gripping Sawyer's bat tightly, I swung it as hard as I could, aiming for the guy who had overturned the table.

The bat connected solidly behind his knees, and he crumpled to the ground with a loud groan of pain. The others turned to me, surprised at my sudden aggression.

Someone grabbed me by my collar yanking me backward. Before I could react, they threw me against the wall.

My face smashed into a picture frame, and I winced as I felt the glass shatter under the pressure, sharp edges pressing into my skin.

"Hah, so you've got some claws on you, huh?" Bruce sneered, his voice dripping with mockery.

Bruce's hand clamped around my neck, pinning me against the wall. I tried to break free from his hold, but his grip was too strong.

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Noah lunging at Bruce, wielding a thick hardbound book.

The loud thud of the book hitting flesh echoed in the room, but Noah was quickly overpowered and pulled away.

The door jingled open again, and through the cracked glass, I saw a reflection. It was Ryder.

“Let them go,” Ryder ordered.

Bruce’s grip on my neck loosened, and he turned me to face Ryder. I felt something warm trickling down the side of my face but ignored it.

I took a step forward, anger boiling inside me, but Bruce's hand clamped down on my shoulder, holding me back. Ryder shook his head, and Bruce finally let go completely.

Even though I was free, I couldn't resist shoving Bruce back in frustration.

My eyes darted to the side, and I felt a wave of relief seeing Noah standing in the corner, cradling his elbow, but otherwise appearing unharmed.

“Are you crazy?” I shouted at Ryder, my voice trembling with fury. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Ryder looked around the store with a bored expression, seemingly indifferent to the chaos his men had caused.

His nonchalance made me even angrier. How could he be so reckless and not care about the consequences?

They not only wrecked the store but also put Mrs. Jenkins at risk. The town sheriff in Pecan Pines wouldn’t be happy about pack business spilling into town and endangering humans.

Ryder stepped closer, his gaze cold and unyielding. "Convince Cooper to leave town," he said, his voice low and threatening. "Or your family will get hurt again."

Anger flared within me, and I couldn't help but taunt him.

"You're threatened by him, aren't you? Scared he'll be a better lead alpha than you could ever be."

Ryder's eyes narrowed, a flicker of something dark crossing his face. He took another step toward me, but then his eyes shifted behind him.

Outside, on the sidewalk, a small crowd had gathered—parents and their kids, all here for the afternoon's Story Hour.

Ryder clicked his tongue in annoyance, clearly aware of the public attention now on us.

"Remember what I said," he warned, his voice cold as he motioned for his men to leave. They walked out of the store, leaving behind the mess they had made.

As the door jingled shut, I took a deep breath, feeling the tension finally begin to ease.

I quickly glanced around at the damage—books scattered everywhere, broken glass, and overturned tables.

But first, I needed to address the parents waiting outside, so I hurried out, trying to put on a reassuring smile.

"Sorry for the wait," I said, trying to sound calm and collected. "We had a bit of an unexpected... situation. But we'll have to cancel Story Hour."

Back inside the shop, I found Noah gently urging a very agitated Mrs. Jenkins to take a seat. She was fuming, her face flushed with anger.

"That mutt! He had no right!" she exclaimed, her voice trembling with fury.

When she saw me, her expression softened a bit, and she handed me my phone. "I hope you don't mind, I called your friend while I was in there."

Mrs. Jenkins continued to curse Ryder and his men under her breath. I took my phone, but as I did, a drop of blood fell onto the screen.

Reaching up, I touched the side of my face and felt the sticky warmth of blood. I pressed my hand over the wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

With my other hand, I tried to scroll through my phone to call Cooper, but my fingers were shaking uncontrollably.

The reality of what had just happened—the danger and the threats—hit me all at once. My vision blurred slightly, and I had to steady myself against the counter.

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Chapter 18

Cooper

My gut told me something bad was about to happen, and I was right. I gripped my cellphone close to my ear, listening intently to what Noah was trying to tell me.

"Let me talk to Miles," I said immediately.

"He's still a little shocked. Look, just get here as fast as you can," Noah suggested.

"I'm just a few hours away," I said, ending the call.

My heart pounded as I tried to picture what had happened. When I went back to Pecan Pines to see Sawyer, I was considered an outsider.

If one of Ryder's wolves jumped me, they could write it off as me causing trouble and Ryder's wolves bringing me to heel.

But messing with Miles, a fellow pack member and a local who owned a business in town? That was unacceptable. Even worse, I kept picturing Miles, hurt and scared.

Noah said Ryder's guys trashed the place and mentioned a slight tussle but didn't give me any more information when I pressed.

I drove to Pecan Pines in a hurry, my mind racing with a mixture of fear and anger. When I arrived, there was still a small crowd in front of the store.

I wanted to growl at them, remind them to mind their own business and scatter, but then I recognized one of the onlookers—Lee. I peered inside the store and saw that Miles and Noah weren't alone anymore.

Ben and Griffin were inside, helping to clean up the mess. To my surprise, Sawyer was there as well, despite his leg acting up. Seeing them gave me some solace. Miles wasn't alone—he had people to back him up.

"Did you see what happened?" I asked Lee as I approached him.

"No, but I heard about it. What a mess. Coop, are you going to let Ryder get away with this?" Lee asked me angrily.

Me? By all accounts, I was still an outsider.

The Pecan Pines pack shouldn't be looking at me for answers, and yet, Lee had a point. Ryder had crossed a line he shouldn't have.

Did he really think he was going to get away with this?

"We'll see," I said to Lee. "If you'll excuse me, I need to see if my mate's alright."

I knew exactly what I had to do, but I wanted to hear Miles' opinion first.

Pushing past the crowd, I entered the store. The place was a wreck—shelves overturned, merchandise scattered everywhere.

The smell of wolf musk, aggression, and fear still lingered in the air. Miles looked up as I approached, his eyes wide and a little glassy, but he was unhurt.

Relief washed over me, but it was quickly replaced by a simmering rage when I saw

the bruise on his cheek.

I walked up to Miles and gently touched his cheek, my fingers grazing the tender skin.

Miles looked up at me, then placed his hand over mine, his touch warm and reassuring. He flashed me a small, brave smile.

"I'm alright, Coop," he said softly.

I felt a swell of emotion, my anger melting away in the warmth of his gaze. "Miles," I whispered. "I'm so sorry this happened."

"It's not your fault," he murmured, his fingers squeezing mine gently. "You're here now, and that's what matters."

I leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to his forehead, letting my lips linger for a moment. Then I turned to Noah.

"Tell me what happened," I said, wanting to have all the information on hand.

Noah stepped forward, his expression grim. He started explaining, and Miles chimed in every now and then, seeming to have gotten over his initial shock.

Sawyer seemed surprised when Noah mentioned that Miles had suddenly turned aggressive during the incident, but I wasn't.

My mate was no pushover, and when his turf was threatened, I knew he would do anything in his power to defend it.

"Those were Ryder's exact words?" I asked Miles. "That he'll hurt another member

of your family again if I don't leave?"

He nodded grimly.

"Coward," I muttered under my breath.

Going after those I cared about instead of directly confronting me was unacceptable. I took a deep breath, trying to calm the fury brewing inside me, but it was no use.

Ryder had made it personal, and I was the only one who could put a stop to it.

"Thanks for being here," I said to Noah, nodding to Griffin, Ben, and Sawyer.

They had probably dropped everything to come here and help out. I looked at my mate.

"This is the final straw. I'm going to make sure this doesn't happen again."

"Cooper, what are you planning?" Sawyer asked carefully.

"Now that I'm no longer part of a pack, I'm going to do what I should've done in the first place. Challenge Ryder for his position," I said.

Miles gripped my arm and looked into my eyes. He furrowed his brows, and I could see the worry on his face. "Cooper, you left the Winter Valley Pack?" Miles asked.

"I did. I just need to help Daniel find a replacement, but essentially, I'm a free agent now," I said. I took Miles' hands in mine. "Miles, I've made my choice, and I choose you. I'm sorry for making you wait."

Miles flushed at that. "That's great, Coop, but you seriously better win this fight

first.”

“I will,” I told my mate with utmost confidence.

“Cooper, did you forget what happened ten years ago when you faced Ryder in the challenge circle?” Sawyer demanded.

“He nearly killed you, son,” Ben said softly.

Griffin was silent next to Noah, who seemed unsure of what to say. Both Ben and Sawyer seemed against the idea.

They didn’t think it was smart to go after Ryder again, but Miles had a look of approval in his eyes. His confidence in me was all that mattered.

“I was young and inexperienced back then,” I told Sawyer and Ben. “But now? I’m different. I’ve grown up, and Ryder? He’s just grown old and cowardly.”

“He had to threaten me and order his minions to trash my shop because he’s terrified of facing Cooper one-on-one,” Miles pointed out.

“You have that stubborn look in your eyes,” Sawyer said with a sigh. “You’ve made up your mind, haven’t you?”

I nodded. Ben began to protest, but Sawyer cut him off, “Then there’s no stopping him. All we can do is watch from the sidelines and make sure it’s a fair fight.”

Ben had a resigned look on his face, but eventually, he conceded. “Very well, I’ll ring up Lee, Hannah, and the other old-timers. You’re not alone in this, Coop. Nearly half the pack would be cheering for you,” Ben told me.

“I’ll do my best,” I said, but I only had eyes for Miles.

"I see you haven't learned your lesson, pup. I spared you ten years ago after your humiliating defeat because I was merciful. Don't expect the same now," Ryder taunted across the challenge circle.

Even though I had only sent out the challenge two hours ago, Ben had fulfilled his promise and spread the word to the rest of the pack. I wasn’t expecting everyone to show up, but they did.

I was honestly surprised by the turnout. Practically half the pack stood on my side of the challenge circle, while the other half, Ryder's supporters, stayed on his.

"You crossed the line when you sent your men into Miles' store in broad daylight," I said, my voice steady despite the anger burning inside me.

"I teach disobedient wolves their place when the need calls for it. Just ask Ben or Sawyer," Ryder said with a sneer.

"You beat them up on pack lands, but threatening a pack member, one of your own, in front of the normals? Are you that desperate to assert your authority?" I retorted.

Murmurs broke out after my words. Some wolves probably hadn’t heard about what happened to Miles' store.

“This is my town. I lead this pack, and I can do whatever the hell I want," Ryder said. "You should've fled town when you could, Cooper. Now your mate will have to bury you after this. What a pity."

Did Ryder really think his taunts would get to me?

I flashed him a cold smile instead and was rewarded when I saw hesitation flicker across his features.

"Enough talking. Only one body will be buried today," I said.

We began to circle each other. With a snarl, Ryder shifted first, his body contorting and transforming into a massive, black-furred wolf.

I felt the familiar surge of power course through me as I shifted, my own wolf form emerging to face him. Ryder lunged first, his movements unexpectedly swift for someone his age, but I was ready.

I dodged, feeling the rush of adrenaline sharpen my senses. He came at me again, and this time, I met him head-on. Our bodies collided, and we entered a dance to the death.

I could hear the gasps and murmurs of the pack as we grappled, each of us trying to gain the upper hand. I ignored the noise and focused on the fight.

Everything depended on my victory. I wasn't going to let Miles spend the rest of his life grieving over me. I had confidently told Sawyer and Ben I could easily beat Ryder, but he was surprisingly a difficult opponent.

It was clear he hadn't stayed idle and kept himself in shape. But I had something Ryder lacked—a reason to fight. Miles' face flashed before my eyes, giving me the drive to push harder.

I sank my teeth into Ryder's shoulder, tasting blood, and he let out a pained yelp, staggering back.

The fight was far from over. Ryder bared his teeth, his eyes blazing with fury. With a

growl, Ryder charged at me again, but I easily dodged his attack.

We clashed repeatedly, neither side giving ground. My wolf wanted to go all out, but recklessness was what led to my defeat ten years ago. Patience was the key to winning.

We clawed at each other and exchanged bites, but I noticed Ryder was panting a little. He didn't have the same stamina he had a decade ago.

Adrenaline surged through my veins. I could go a dozen more rounds.

The pack watched in tense silence, their loyalties divided. Finally, I saw my opening. Ryder overextended in his attack, and I seized the moment.

With a powerful swipe, I knocked him off balance. He fell to the ground, and I was on him in an instant, pinning him down with my full weight.

Ryder struggled beneath me, but the fight had drained from him. The realization that he had lost flickered in his eyes.

He lunged at me, a desperate strike, but I locked my fangs around his throat and ripped it out in one smooth motion. I looked at the spectators, searching for Miles.

The pack was silent for a moment, then slowly, cheers and howls erupted from my side of the circle. Ryder's supporters looked uncertain, but the resolve in the eyes of those on my side was clear.

Change was coming, and it started now. That was the message I wanted to send to everyone.

Finally, I saw my mate, standing at the edge of the circle, his eyes filled with pride

and relief. I shifted back to my human form and walked over to him.

"It's over," I said softly, pulling him into my arms.

Miles hugged me tightly. "I knew you could do it."

When I took on Ryder, I knew I would be taking on the responsibilities of a lead alpha if I won. There was so much work to be done.

However, with Miles by my side and the pack ready for change, the task seemed less daunting.

I looked over my shoulder at Ryder's corpse. Dad, I finally avenged you, I thought, closing my eyes momentarily. Are you proud of me?

"You know he is," Miles said, and I realized I had uttered the words out loud.

I smiled fondly at my mate. Ryder's reign was over, and I was looking forward to the next chapter of our lives.

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Chapter 19

Cooper

1 Week Later

We drove up to our new apartment building, and as I found a parking spot, Miles turned to me. "Do you think Sawyer will be fine on his own?" he asked.

I reached across the console for Miles's fingers and gave them a reassuring squeeze.

"He will be," I assured him. "Besides, if he's ever lonely, he can ring either of us up, and we'll invite him over for dinner all the time."

It had been a busy week, with me officially being reinstated as the Pecan Pines pack lead alpha.

A lot of pack reorganization had to be done. Ryder really had no idea how to manage a pack.

He ruled by fear, relying on intimidation and brute force to keep everyone in line. It was a short-sighted approach that left the pack fractured and demoralized.

He mismanaged the pack's resources, using them to maintain his power rather than to support and improve the community. The main pack house and training grounds were in disrepair.

Our emergency supplies were poorly maintained, and the younger wolves lacked proper guidance and education. Everything was a mess, and we had to start from scratch.

The first step was to rebuild trust within the pack. I had the support of the older pack members, especially those who knew my father.

The newer pack members still hadn't decided what they thought of me, but my future actions would speak for themselves.

Most of Ryder's supporters had left the pack, but some, like Garth, had stayed and pleaded if he could remain on a trial basis.

After hearing his story and realizing that he had no place to go, I reluctantly agreed. I believed in second chances, but if Garth and the others crossed a line, they would immediately be exiled.

Miles suggested we organize community meetings where I could listen to the grievances and concerns of fellow pack members. We would also have to rewrite some of the pack rules Ryder had altered to his advantage.

It was a slow process, but after just a week, I could already see the pack beginning to heal and unite. Honestly, I didn't know how I would have survived the week if it hadn't been for my mate.

In the present, we exited the car, and I started to unload the boxes from the trunk, but Miles grabbed my hand.

"Not yet. I want you to see the place I picked out for us," Miles said, his tone infectious with excitement.

I smiled and let him lead me to the unit. We walked through the entrance and up the stairs, the building having a welcoming, homey feel.

Miles stopped at a door on the third floor and pulled out a key, grinning as he unlocked it.

"Welcome home," he said, pushing the door open.

The apartment was spacious and bright, with large windows letting in plenty of natural light. The living room was cozy, with a leather couch and a coffee table already in place.

To the left, an open kitchen with modern appliances and a small dining area. The walls were painted a warm light blue color, and the hardwood floors added a touch of elegance.

Miles led me down the hallway to the bedroom. It was equally impressive, with a large bed that looked incredibly comfortable and a window overlooking a small park.

The bathroom was sleek and modern, and there was even a little nook that Miles had set up as a reading corner, complete with a comfy chair and a small bookshelf.

Miles turned to me, his eyes searching my face for a reaction. "Do you like it?" he asked, a hint of nervousness in his voice.

I pulled him into a hug, feeling the stress of the past week melt away.

"I love it," I said. "I can picture us living here together, making it our home."

Miles beamed at me, his earlier nervousness replaced with joy. "I'm so glad. I wanted it to be perfect for us," he told me.

"It is perfect," I said.

I tipped his chin and kissed him, deep and true.

"Forget the boxes for a little while longer," Miles said and I grinned, knowing what he was thinking about.

We shed our clothes and ended up on our new bed. I spoiled my mate with kisses, taking my time worshiping his body.

We hardly had time for each other the past few days so I wanted to take advantage of this moment.

Miles groaned when I reached his dick. I licked and sucked, making sure he enjoyed himself.

When he was close to bursting, I slid off the bed, grabbed the lube in the pocket of my jeans before returning to him.

After prepping Miles, I moved between his legs and entered him. Miles moaned as I pumped in and out of his ass. In moments, we were both sweaty and on the cusp of climax.

The next time I thrust into him, Miles gasped, screaming out my name as I filled him with my seed. I came, seconds later. Collapsing next to him in our bed, I pulled him close.

Miles looked content, sleepy almost, but he smiled when I kissed his neck. I nuzzled his neck, feeling his pulse quicken under my lips.

"I love you, Miles," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

"I love you too," he murmured, his eyes half-closed as he relaxed into my embrace.

I bit down gently on his neck, marking him as mine. Miles gasped softly, his body shivering at the sensation. He quickly recovered and left his own bite mark on my shoulder.

The bond between us flared to life, a powerful, shifter magic weaving our life forces and souls together. I could feel the connection deepening, growing stronger with each passing second.

Miles sighed contentedly, his hand finding mine and squeezing it.

"We're bound now," he whispered, a smile playing on his lips.

"Forever," I agreed.

As we lay there, the bond between us pulsing with a gentle warmth, I couldn't imagine anyone else being my mate. Miles was my everything.

The challenges of my new role as lead alpha were daunting, but with Miles by my side, they seemed manageable. I held him close, our breathing syncing as we drifted towards sleep.

"Thank you, Miles," I whispered.

"For what?" he asked, his voice drowsy.

"For being mine," I replied, kissing his neck where I had marked him. "And for making everything worth it."

Miles smiled, his eyes closing as he nestled closer.

"Do I look okay?" Miles asked worriedly, looking down at his shirt and jeans. "Maybe I should've worn a jacket."

"You look great. What are you worried about? We're just here to meet Daniel," I pointed out.

Miles bit his lower lip. "I know he's like a father figure to you, Coop, but to the rest of us, he's a visiting leader of another pack. I wanted to make a good impression."

Of course, I hadn't thought about it that way and suddenly understood why Miles was so worried. I kissed him gently and squeezed his hand.

"Just relax. It'll be fine," I said.

After helping Daniel find my replacement, he suggested we establish a friendly relationship between our packs.

I liked the idea immediately, especially since, right now, as we were rebuilding, my pack wasn't at its strongest.

We entered the diner, the familiar smell of coffee and pancakes wafting through the air.

I spotted Daniel sitting at a corner booth, his eyes lighting up when he saw us. I led Miles over and made the introductions.

"Daniel, this is Miles," I said, gesturing to my mate.

Daniel stood up and shook Miles' hand, giving him an appraising look.

"So you're the wolf Cooper left our pack for," Daniel said sternly.

I rolled my eyes. Daniel was just joking around, but Miles didn't know that.

"I am," Miles said, shaking Daniel's offered hand firmly.

"I see you've finally sealed the deal," Daniel said, eyeing the mate mark on Miles' neck. Then he smiled warmly, the expression transforming his face completely. "Congratulations are in order, I believe."

Miles visibly relaxed at that. "Thank you, Daniel."

"Come, let's sit down and talk," Daniel said, motioning for us to take our seats.

We slid into the booth, and a waitress promptly came over to take our orders. Once she left, Daniel turned his attention back to us.

"So, how are things going with the pack?" he asked, his tone shifting to a more serious one.

"We're making progress," I said. "There's still a lot of work to do, but having Miles by my side makes things a lot easier."

Daniel nodded, glancing at Miles with approval. "That's good to know. A strong partnership can make all the difference," he said.

Miles smiled, squeezing my hand under the table. "We're doing our best."

As we continued to talk, I could see Miles growing more comfortable. Daniel had a way of making people feel at ease, and it was clear that he recognized the strength of our bond.

It was a good start to what I hoped would be a strong alliance between our packs.

When our food arrived, the conversation shifted to lighter topics, and I found myself enjoying the meal and the company.

Daniel shared stories from Winter Valley, and Miles and I talked about our plans for Pecan Pines.

By the time we left the diner, I could tell that Miles felt much better about the meeting. As we walked back to the car, he turned to me with a smile. "That went well, don't you think?"

I nodded, feeling a sense of contentment wash over me. "Yeah, it did," I said, leaning in for a quick kiss. "Why don't we go home and, you know, continue enjoying our new bed?"

"We can't. We're supposed to meet Sawyer, Griffin, and Noah at the pack house. Remember? Uncle Ben will also be there, wanting an update about our meeting with Daniel," Miles reminded me.

I groaned but nodded. "After that, then."

"After," Miles agreed with a grin.

Chapter 20

Miles

2 Months Later

“Y ou think he’s okay?” I frowned, staring at the ceiling while resting my head on Cooper’s bare chest.

“Hmm? Who is?” Cooper tilted his head, his fingers gently playing with my hair.

I could feel his hungry gaze trailing down my body, making it clear he wasn't too concerned about the subject at hand.

I sat up, propping my arm on his torso. “Sawyer,” I said, looking at him intently, trying to catch his attention.

Cooper's fingers moved to trace up and down my arm. His feathery touch was sending a shiver through me.

I pressed my hand against his chest firmly, hoping to get his attention. Although I wasn’t sure if it was the right decision on my part.

The warmth of his skin, still faintly sticky from what we had been doing earlier, sent a rush of heat spreading within me.

Cooper hummed in response, though I couldn't tell if it was because he was finally

paying attention or if my touch distracted him.

I really should have put my shirt back on before this conversation.

As I continued to glare at him, Cooper finally paused his wandering hands.

“He does seem a little different lately,” he admitted.

I pursed my lips, relieved that Cooper noticed the change in Sawyer too. “Do you think we should do something?” I asked.

Cooper's hand slid from my shoulder up to my nape, gently caressing his mark on me.

He hummed softly, seeming lost in thought. I wanted to urge him to focus, but I could see the gears turning in his eyes.

“Maybe he needs something,” I wondered.

Cooper raised an eyebrow. “Like a pet or something? Didn’t you guys used to have a dog?” He asked.

I snapped my fingers, a sudden idea sparking in my mind.

“Exactly! He loved that dog.” I sat up quickly, moving over Cooper’s body and straddling him. “Maybe a new pet could cheer him up, give him something to focus on.”

Cooper chuckled, his hands resting on my hips. “Are you suggesting we surprise him with a puppy? That could be interesting,” he mused.

I nodded, my mind racing with possibilities. “Yeah, or maybe we could take him to a shelter, let him pick out an animal himself. It could be a good distraction, something

to care for.”

Cooper smiled. “That’s actually a pretty good idea. But enough about him,” he said, pulling me in for a kiss.

His hands moved grip my waist and ass, grinding our lower bodies together, sending a jolt of pleasure straight to my core.

“I need to leave for the bookstore soon,” I murmured, biting my lip to suppress a moan.

“Doesn’t it only take ten minutes to get there from here?” he whispered in my ear, his breath warm against my skin.

I felt the tips of my ears heat up. It was true—walking would take ten minutes, and driving would take less than five.

But I didn't say anything; if I opened my mouth, I wasn't sure what kind of sound I'd let out.

Cooper's voice was low and teasing as he continued, “Or we could just skip breakfast. That way, you can still make it on time.” He licked my earlobe, sending shivers down my spine.

My cheeks flushed with warmth as I buried my face in the crook of his neck. I gripped his shoulders and started rolling my hips against him.

The sensation was intoxicating, and I could feel Cooper smirk against my skin as he trailed kisses from my shoulder to my nape.

“Guess we’re skipping breakfast then,” he murmured.

When I finally arrived at the bookstore, it was well past lunchtime.

Feeling a bit embarrassed about being late, I brought food for everyone and placed it on the new counter table by the storefront window.

It was part of our newly added café section, not yet open to the public, but Mrs. Jenkins was here, helping put some finishing touches on the area.

We had offered her a job since she was always here every day. Although she initially declined, she agreed to provide baked goods for the café.

"Sorry I'm late," I said, glancing around.

Mrs. Jenkins waved off my apology with a smile. "No worries, dear. Sawyer's in the office, catching up on some admin work."

It wasn't unusual to find Sawyer in the office nowadays. In the past, he only showed up when necessary, but things had changed after the incident with Ryder.

Now, Sawyer was here almost every day. I didn't mind it. In fact, I found myself missing him ever since I moved out of our house.

But I couldn't help noticing other changes in him. He seemed his usual self around us. Yet sometimes, I would catch him staring off into the distance or suddenly becoming quiet.

I wanted to talk to him, to ask if he was okay, but I knew Sawyer too well. He was the type to deny it, maybe even get defensive.

So, I decided to wait, to be there when he was ready to talk.

I took a moment to look around the store. The small café was a new addition, and we

were still making repairs from when the place was trashed a few months ago.

We now planned to install shatterproof glass for the rare books we used to keep in locked bookshelves—a practical decision given our recent experience.

I also thought about how Cooper was still making regular trips to Winter Valley to see his old lead alpha, working on building a friendly relationship with his former pack.

It wasn't easy, but it was important, and I respected his dedication.

As I watched Mrs. Jenkins work and thinking about the changes we'd made, I felt a mix of pride and unease.

I was always someone who liked having a plan and knowing what was coming next. But life had a way of defying those plans, and I'd learned that the hard way.

I knew there were still uncertainties ahead—Cooper's transition to lead alpha in Pecan Pines, Sawyer's lingering struggles—but for the first time in a long while, I felt okay with not having all the answers.

In this moment, surrounded by the comforting scent of books and the quiet hum of life in the store, I knew that everything was going to be okay.

THE END