



Forever Mates (Fated Mates Collection #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I've been looking for my mate for most of my life. When I finally find my curvy goddess, I know I will never let her go again. All I want is to worship her body and give her everything she wants, but whatever I do, she pushes me away.

It isn't until I see the bruises on her skin that I lose it. Someone is hurting her, and that's something my wolf and I will not allow. Whatever it takes, Wendy will be safe and she will be mine.

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WENDY

As I do every morning, I look over my shoulder to make sure Naomi is still sound asleep beside me. Her tiny frame is tucked under the blanket, and her eyes are shut. I let out a small sigh of relief and carefully get out of bed.

“It's a wonder she sleeps through that,” I whisper under my breath as I carefully navigate the few toys Naomi has strewn all over the floor to get to our dresser.

That's one of the biggest drawbacks of sharing a room with an eight-year-old. No matter how much I ask her to, she's almost incapable of putting her things away.

I try not to bother her about it if I don't have to.

She has a hard enough time at school with the bullies.

Everyone in town knows her parents are drunks, and all the money they have goes to booze and pot, so she's always wearing tattered thrift shop clothes.

Naomi doesn't get to the trendy styles from Claire's or Justice like the other girls in her class.

I do my best to give her what I can, but I just can't prioritize everything.

When I have my clothes pulled, I carefully shut the bedroom door and head to the bathroom.

I shower and brush my teeth, trying not to focus on the bags under my eyes.

I'm only nineteen, and at this rate, I'm worried I'm going to age much faster than I should.

Most women my age get to sneak out with their boyfriends and party in the woods with their friends, but I've never had that luxury.

Honestly, I've never really had the opportunity.

I wasn't the most popular girl growing up, and my eight-year-old sister is pretty much my only friend.

I slip into my clothes, a pair of baggy black jeans, an old Fleetwood Mac T-shirt I managed to grab at the thrift shop, and an oversized cardigan that hangs off my body.

I pull my strawberry-blond hair into a ponytail, pulling a few loose curls from my bangs to frame my face.

I don't spend long in front of the mirror.

The longer I stand here, the greater the risk I have of spiraling and pinpointing everything wrong about myself.

I've done that long enough for one lifetime already, and I don't want to be late for work.

I close the bathroom door and brace myself for an interaction with my dad and Veronica, my evil stepmother. I wish that were a joke, but she clearly stole her personality from every Disney villain ever written.

The musky scent of marijuana wafts upstairs, and I clench my fists at my side from the frustration.

They don't care about us; that much is clear.

But I've begged them time and time again to at least open a window when they're smoking.

The smell of weed clings to every fabric in the house, including Naomi's and my clothes.

I'm tired of getting letters from the school about it.

An eight-year-old shouldn't have to spray her clothes with Febreze before leaving the house.

The two of them are sitting on the couch passing a blunt back and forth as they giggle and tap their feet to “Fortunate Son.” It takes them a moment to even notice me standing at the base of the stairs, glaring at them.

“The fuck are you looking at?” Veronica asks, sitting up straight and resting her elbows on her knees as she looks me over.

“Can you please turn the music down?” I plead, careful to keep my voice calm and level. I've fought with them before, and I have no intention of getting into anything before my shift at the bakery. “Naomi has a big test later today. She needs all the rest she can get.”

Veronica rolls her eyes and looks at my dad, causing him to smile and laugh under his breath. “Don't tell me how to raise my daughter,” Veronica says with ice lacing her words.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter under my breath. Bottles of vodka and gin are sitting on the table, so I know it’s not just weed they’re on. Honestly, if they were out last night, they could be on something else too. I stopped asking a long time ago.

“Where are you going?” my dad asks, scrutinizing me. No matter how many times I walk down here in the morning to head to work while they’re still partying, they can’t seem to comprehend the fact that I have a job. Unlike them, I choose not to live on disability for an illness I don’t have.

“Work.” He squints his eyes at me like he’s trying to see if I’m telling the truth. Even though I’ve never had a boyfriend—I haven’t even held hands with a guy since the second grade—he always assumes I’m going out to sleep around.

“Maybe cut back on the sweets while you’re there,” Veronica says as she exhales a large puff of smoke. “Just because the cupcakes are free doesn’t mean you need to eat the whole counter.”

She looks me up and down slowly, letting her eyes trace every curve on my body. My dad laughs and shakes his head, grabbing the blunt from her and inhaling. You would think he would defend his daughter from comments about her body, but you would be sorely mistaken. If anything, he enables her.

Veronica has ridiculed my body since the day she met my dad.

I’ve always been overweight. Trust me, I’ve had enough bullies in my day to have had it pointed out to me. My eyes are open to the fact, and I have spent enough time analyzing every single curve of my body to know this myself. Yet people always feel they need to tell me about it as if I don’t know.

Even though I’m used to it, it still hurts.

Hearing it so early in the morning, when I'm already exhausted, makes the back of my eyes sting.

But what hurts the most is the fact that my father, somebody who is supposed to love me unconditionally, more than anyone else in the world, just lets it happen.

I've wanted him to come to my defense for a long time.

He's seen how I would come home crying after school because other kids called me names and made fun of my weight.

A normal dad might have spoken to their parents and done something about it, but he's not normal.

Veronica has said some cruel things to me, and he doesn't care.

Expecting him to change now is probably silly, but that little glimmer of hope in my chest is still there.

I force myself to ignore the comment and go about my day.

It's the middle of July, and I still have a few weeks before the temperatures start decreasing, but it's a cool enough morning that I don't have to take my cardigan off.

I wrap it around myself, hiding my body from anybody around to see it.

I've done that my entire life, so unless I miraculously lose weight overnight, I doubt I'll stop anytime soon.

The moon is still high in the sky, and I can see stars dotting the blue.

I look up and admire them on my walk. Even though it's god-awful early, once I'm out of the house this is my favorite part of the day.

It's only a thirty-minute walk to the bakery, and it feels like the entire world is all mine.

We live on the outskirts of town, and once the few bars close around two o'clock, everything is quiet. I can walk along the sidewalk and feel free before clocking in for a ten-hour shift. A cool breeze rustles through the trees, and I inhale the early morning air with a soft smile on my face.

As I approach Main Street, where a majority of Swanton's businesses are grouped, I ready myself for the day ahead.

Susan and Walter will probably already be busy behind the counter, mixing dough and batter to throw in the ovens.

I've always enjoyed my mornings with them.

It's warm and comforting, something I've always wished I had growing up.

Sometimes, while the three of us are prepping for the day, I fantasize about what it might have been like to grow up with them as family.

They're both far too old to be my parents, but I imagine them stepping in and adopting Naomi and me and letting us live in their little house where we'd have our own rooms. We would have glorious Thanksgiving dinners, and Susan would let me help bake pumpkin pies, sharing her secret recipe with me to carry on for generations.

It's always been a dream, but now that I'm nineteen, nobody's going to adopt me. But I can't help wondering how different things would have been if something like that

had happened.

Laughter in the distance catches my attention, and I look up to see two men with brown paper bags covering their liquor bottles leaning against an old Ford pickup. I don't recognize them right away, but they're standing in the alleyway of Forge, one of the three bars in Swanton.

Both of them stop talking and look at me, the smiles falling from their faces. I immediately look away, my eyes glued to the gum-covered sidewalk. I don't want to cause any trouble with the drunks in this town.

"Like what you see?" one of them yells after me. My cheeks burn, and I try to focus on walking. I'm about five minutes away from the bakery, and I'm tempted to just start running.

"Hey! We're talking to you, bitch," the other one shouts, both of them laughing. I hear them setting the bottles down and slowly look over my shoulder to see them approaching. Every nerve in my body is on high alert, and I immediately take off running.

They run after me, their faces contorted into twisted grins as they force away the haze of their drunkenness and chase me.

I stupidly look over my shoulder to see how far away they are, and my foot snags on some uneven concrete, and I tumble to the ground. They're above me in no time, and I scramble to try to get away. They laugh and look down at me with grins that make my stomach churn.

I scramble to my feet, but by the time I'm standing, one is in front of me and the other right behind. They close the distance quickly, pulling me away from the publicity of standing on Main Street.

I try to fight back, but they're both too strong, even as drunk as they are. Their hands are all over me, gripping my arms and pushing me down the alleyway as I try to struggle against them.

“Let me—” I say before one of them clasps a hand over my mouth. I taste the saltiness of their flesh on my lips, and it makes me sick to my stomach. Fear overtakes everything in my body as I think about what's about to happen.

“It’s your lucky day, bitch,” one of them slurs as he pushes the cardigan from my arm.

I let out a cry that nobody can hear and brace myself for what’s about to happen, my mind reeling to think of a way out.

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WOLFF

I jolt upright in my dingy motel room bed, tossing the covers aside, covered in sweat. It feels like I've had a nightmare, but I can't remember what I was dreaming about. My heart is pounding and my skin is crawling, like something is standing over me and reaching into my chest to squeeze it.

I run my fingers through my hair and stand, trying to figure out what's going on. This doesn't happen to me. My breathing is shallow and rapid, like I've been running through the woods for hours on end.

It takes a moment to calm down. I breathe deeply and focus on everything in the room around me. My heart is still beating, but there's something different about the feeling in my chest that I can't ignore. It's the whole reason I came here.

The tug in my chest that brought me across countless state lines, leaving my pack back at home, is now stronger than ever. I'm getting closer to her. My mate .

The tug is strong now. There's a desperation in it that I can't understand. The urgency is enough for me to slip on my boots and force me out of the room. I can't explain how I know it, but she's in danger, wherever she is.

Our connection brought me to Swanton and this seedy motel. I know that she's somewhere here, but I don't know where. She's close by. Last night, when I checked in, the connection was calm, static even. That's how I knew I was in the right place.

But now I can sense her in an entirely different way. This tug, the danger I feel with

it, is entirely involuntary. It's her spirit's response to whatever danger she's in now. She's up against the wall, no hope, yet she's calling to me.

I don't waste a moment heading toward her. It's still early, and not a soul is moving around this small town. Well, maybe with the exception of my mate.

The cool morning air rushes by me, and my breath quickens as I run through the town. I ignore my surroundings and focus on this invisible tether pulling me toward her. With each step I take, I can feel the danger she's in. The tug between us pulsates like her heartbeat against her ribs.

I have to find her quickly. If I don't and something happens to her...

My wolf howls in my chest at the mere thought of losing her.

We've come so far. I can't lose her now.

That would kill me. A wolf without his mate is broken.

I've seen how it's affected others in my pack, and I can't be like that.

I've waited my entire life to find her. I won't let anything bad happen.

I run faster. The fear she feels is bitter on my tongue, and I would give anything to take that from her.

The path I'm on opens up to Swanton's Main Street with dozens of closed businesses. The only sign of life are the streetlamps decorated with American flags no doubt left over from Fourth of July celebrations.

I follow it until I'm led toward an alleyway. When I stop as I approach, I hear noises

coming from within, and I know instinctively that it's her. An old beat-up pickup truck is parked across the street with a couple of bottles of booze sitting on the hood.

I can smell her fear in the air, and I approach the alley with rage boiling in my veins.

The scene that unfolds before me is enough to make me homicidal.

Two men are standing in front of a woman, pawing at her and trying to rip her clothes off her.

She's against the wall, trying to push through, but one of them holds her against it.

They're laughing like this is funny. They're looking at a helpless woman, abusing her, and they're laughing because they know what's about to come next. By the fear that's palpable in the air around me, she knows too.

"I bet she's never been touched by a man like this," one of them says as he gropes her.

"Please stop," she begs, whimpering from fear.

My wolf claws at me from the inside. He wants nothing more than to break free and unleash terror upon them. Hell, I want that too. I've killed before, and the idea of spilling their blood all over the pavement is intoxicating.

But she's already scared enough. If she's living in a small town like this, I would imagine she's somewhat sheltered. I doubt she's ever seen someone slaughtered in front of her like I would do to these men. I need to spare her from that pain if I can.

They can live for now. But I'm going to have a hell of a time with them later.

“Let her go!” I shout, my voice echoing between the walls of the alley.

Both of them look over their shoulder at me, the smiles on their faces quickly morphing into disgruntled scowls. She looks at me too. There's a mixture of terror and relief in her eyes. It takes everything in me not to focus on her right now. There will be plenty of time for that later.

Right now, these fuckers need to be dealt with.

“Are you going to make us?” the bigger of the two says, pulling his hands away from her and turning around to face me like he’s ready to fight.

The other one holds her in place, not even bothering to step up and join his friend.

Given how they seem to have this situation handled, I can't help but wonder if they've done this before.

I'll be doing the world a favor by getting rid of these two.

“Yes,” I say right before I lunge at him. My body crashes into him, and he falls to the ground with a thud. His hands move quickly as he tries to push me off him, but I hold them to the ground as he struggles against me. “It's not fun being held against your will, is it?”

I can see the fear in his eyes now. For the first time, probably in his whole life, he feels what he's inflicted on others, and knowing I've done that to him is powerful.

My wolf scratches from the inside, begging to be released to sink his teeth into his neck and rip it apart.

I feel feral with the anger rising within me.

The other man continues to hold my mate, unsure of what to do. He's clearly the underling, the weaker of the two.

“Fuck him up, Jim!” he shouts from the sidelines like this is some kind of wrestling match. No, there's no referee now. Nobody's going to come in and pull us apart. He's below me, shivering from fear, and I'm going to show him exactly how fucked he is.

I look up at the other one, my eyes lingering on her face for a moment. She's perfect. I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life. I want to focus on her, but I can't right now. Not with the fear still heavy in her eyes.

My attention is back on the man quivering below me, and I finish him quickly. I lift his head in my hands and slam it down on the pavement hard enough for his eyes to flutter shut. His body goes limp in his unconsciousness, and his friend moves his hand from my mate and inches closer.

“Jim?” he asks, his voice shaking.

“I don't think he's going to answer you,” I say with a grin as I stand and rush toward him before he can run away.

I slam him into the brick wall he was holding my mate against, and his head crashes against it.

I grab it and knock it against the wall one more time for good measure.

He slinks down and crashes to the ground, his head flopping against a pile of black trash bags.

I'm breathing heavily by the time I'm done, and my wolf still begs to be freed so he can bring an end to their lives once and for all. I'm tempted to let him out, too. It

would feel amazing. But I can't.

She's staring at me, her eyes wide with awe and fear, looking at the two unconscious men who would have done unspeakable things to her.

I immediately walk over, holding a hand up to cup her face instinctively.

She flinches away and presses her spine against a nearby dumpster.

I stop and hold my hands up in surrender, signaling I don't mean any harm.

It's dark outside, but the sun is on the verge of rising.

In the faint light of dawn, I can see her face perfectly.

She's gorgeous in every way, and my wolf feels sated just being in her presence.

Her hair is disheveled from the encounter with the men, and I gently reach forward and tuck a few curly strands behind her ear. She doesn't flinch away this time.

I see that I have to be gentle with her, which I will be. I'll protect her and make sure nothing bad ever happens to her again. If someone wants to harm her, they'll have to go through me, and I will rip their hearts from their chest before they lay a hand on her.

She's my mate, and I love her. We were made for each other.

“What are you doing out here so early?” I ask in a soft voice. Her baby-blue eyes flick up to my face, and she studies me.

She's human and doesn't feel the bond between us right away. I can sense that it's

unfinished. But even if she doesn't feel the same connection I do, she feels something. I can see it in her eyes.

“I was—I was on my way to work,” she stammers, her voice cracking. “They came out of nowhere and attacked me.”

“You're safe now,” I assure her. She nods her head slowly, and I place a hand on the middle of her back to guide her away from the dumpster. As we walk out of the alley, I look over my shoulder one last time to study the faces of the men who dared hurt her. “What's your name?”

“Wendy.”

“Wendy,” I repeat, tasting her name on my tongue. It's perfect in every way, light and easy. “I'm Wolff.”

“Thank you, Wolff.” My heart beats faster when I hear her say my name, and I have to stop myself from imagining it escaping her throat in a pleasure-filled moan. She stops walking with me as we approach the end of the alleyway, and she looks up at me with a timid smile. “They would have...”

She can't bring herself to say the words, and I nod, letting her know she doesn't have to. “It's okay. Where were you heading?”

“Sweet Dreams. It's the bakery down the block.” She takes a deep breath and shakes her hands at her side, trying to calm herself down.

“I'll walk you the rest of the way,” I offer, resting my hand on her back again and guiding her away from the alley. I want her as far away from here as possible.

She's afraid, and I don't want to force her to make conversation if she doesn't want to,

so we walk in silence. I can feel her calming down, and that's assurance enough for me. I just want to be beside her.

When we get to the bakery, we walk around back, through another alleyway. I feel her tensing up as we walk through it, and I do my best to appear nonthreatening. I watch her as she walks through the back door, and she gives me a timid wave before closing it behind her.

I know she's safe here. No strangers are going to break in through the back door of the bakery and assault her now. Regardless, I stand by the back door and watch through the window as she gives an older woman a hug and ties an apron around herself.

If it means making sure she's safe, I'll stay here all day. I've waited too long to find her. I won't let her out of my sight now.

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WENDY

Susan and Walter can tell something is wrong, but I don't know how to tell them what happened.

If Wolff hadn't shown up when he did, something horrible would have happened. It's almost like he's some guardian angel. I've lived in this town my entire life, and I've never seen him before. Somehow, he came at the perfect moment and saved me.

I work in silence, replaying the events of the morning over and over in my head, my mind lingering on Wolff and his sudden arrival the entire time. I paint his picture in my head. He's striking. Honestly, I've never seen a man so good looking in my entire life.

He's tall, almost absurdly so. I've always been on the shorter side, and having to crane my neck up to look in his eyes wasn't all that bad.

His eyes were dark yet extremely calming.

What happened was one of the most traumatic things I've ever been through, and just a few minutes in his presence took away all my fear and anxiety.

I'll probably never see him again. He's my one-time hero, and next time something like that happens, I'll have to rely on pepper spray. But that doesn't stop me from thinking about his full beard or how perfectly untidy his brown hair was—or how nice it would've been to run my fingers through.

“How's that pie looking?” Susan asks as she walks up beside me, placing a hand gently on my shoulder as she looks down at the pie dough I'm rolling out.

“Marvelously,” I reply, gently nudging her in the side. “One of these days you're going to have to teach me the filling recipe. You know that, right?”

“No, but you can keep trying.” Susan laughs, turning around and opening up the stand mixer to pull out her unofficially world-famous vanilla buttercream.

“Wow, I put in all these years of work for nothing,” I joke, turning back to the pie dough as Susan playfully kicks my butt.

Both of us busy ourselves making cake and pie while Walter is up front changing the daily special board. Today's menu features a crowd favorite: rich chocolate cupcakes with bourbon-infused buttercream and bacon crumbles. Just the thought of it makes my mouth water.

After this morning, I think I've earned a little sweet treat, and I will enjoy some of them during my break.

Six o'clock rolls around, and it's time to open the doors. Susan and Walter stay in the back icing cupcakes while I unlock the doors and flip on the neon shop sign so everyone knows they can swing by to get their morning croissant and cup of coffee.

Almost as soon as I'm back behind the register and adjusting the tie of my apron, the door opens. I look up, expecting to see one of our regulars coming in for their order extra early. My breath catches in my throat as Wolff walks in.

I must look amazed because he smiles and cautiously approaches the register. His eyes don't leave mine as he moves gracefully through the room.

I was terrified and maybe a little nervous when I met him earlier, so I didn't get a good look at him then.

I caught a glimpse to see that he was good-looking, and something about him calmed me, but looking at him now, I'm stunned.

In the well-lit dining room, he's gorgeous.

On top of that, something about him is disarming and makes me less anxious about being around him.

I've always been nervous around guys. When I was in high school and hoping to find a date for the prom, I could barely speak two words to anyone. I ended up not going because of that. But I could see myself talking to Wolff.

The only problem is that he wouldn't be interested in someone like me.

It looks like his muscles have muscles, and guys like him tend to prefer size-two models and beauty queens.

He could go to any girl in Swanton, and they would likely leave their husbands if he wanted them to.

I doubt he wants some curvy cashier at a bakery.

“Hello,” I force myself to say in the cheery customer service voice I have perfected over the years. I almost want to wince after it comes out. He saved me this morning, and he probably deserves a lot more than a hello.

“Hi,” he says with a faint smile growing on his lips. My heart skips a beat at the sight of it, and I try to force myself to remain calm. “Can I have a black coffee?”

I nod, ignoring the disappointment I feel.

Did I think he was here to ask me out or anything?

Absolutely not. But a little fantasy was brewing in the corner of my mind that I was hoping I could live in for a little longer.

But he's probably just here for the food like everyone else who comes through.

“Of course, take a seat. I'll bring it out in a minute!” I smile wide and watch him as he walks away. He sits down in the corner of the dining room, choosing a seat that faces the cash register directly.

I can feel his eyes on me as I pour a steaming cup of coffee for him.

My skin burns as I feel it, and I can't help but wonder why he's paying so much attention to me.

Knowing he's watching me makes me self-conscious.

I straighten my spine and instinctively suck in my stomach a little bit to control my body more as I walk across the room to him.

It feels like every shake of my body is amplified, so all he notices is how my arms jiggle or the chubbiness of my cheeks.

I set the coffee down on the table, and he grabs it with a thankful nod, looking up at me with a smile. “How much do I owe for it?”

“This one's on me,” I say, stuffing my hands nervously in my apron pocket. “After you helped me this morning, I can't charge you. If anything behind the counter

catches your eye, let me know, and it's yours too."

He looks me up and down and nods his head. "Will do." He gestures to the seat across from me and holds a hand out for me to join him. I look back at the register, seeing that nobody is around to serve right now, and take a seat.

"Do you live around here?" I nervously ask, keeping my hands folded in my lap under the table.

"No, I'm from Oregon," he says, leaning forward and sipping his coffee. It's piping hot, and he doesn't even flinch as he drinks it. "Have you lived here long?"

"My whole life, so yes." I laugh, moving my eyes between him and the door to jump behind the counter the second a customer comes through.

"And how long is that, exactly?" He raises an eyebrow, and something about the question excites me. I smile and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

"Nineteen years." He nods his head slowly, and I'm unsure whether this is a good or bad thing.

He looks young, but he's definitely older than me.

If I had to guess, I'd say he's in his mid- to-late twenties.

I know a lot of guys go out with younger girls, but maybe he's not one of them.

Or maybe I'm being delusional and getting ahead of myself. "How old are you?"

He waits a beat before responding, leaning forward and whispering like it's a secret. "Thirty-four." I'm shocked, and I make no effort to hide that, which makes him laugh

as he leans back. “It's not that surprising, is it?”

“I'm sorry, but it is.” Both of us laugh, and he sits up straight, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly. “Why are you all the way out here? Oregon must be a three-day drive at least.”

“I came out here looking for something,” Wolff says. It's vague, but he owes me nothing. I owe him my life, so he can keep whatever secrets he wants.

“And did you find it?”

His eyes light up as he nods. “I did. I've been looking for a long time, too.”

The bell on the front door chimes and pulls me away from his eyes.

I excuse myself and go back to the register to take customer orders and earn my paycheck.

After a while, our morning rush begins, and dozens of customers walk in.

I fill orders of bagels and croissants with various coffees.

Susan comes up from the back to help me fulfill each order when it gets too hectic.

The entire time, Wolff remains seated in the corner of the room. He sips his black coffee, and when finished, he doesn't get back up to ask for anything else. Every now and then, when I have a spare moment to look around, I catch him watching me, and my entire body runs hot.

Tara, a high schooler who comes in for the afternoon shift to relieve me, walks in a bit before three o'clock for shift change. We chat for a minute, and I update her on

everything that's been going on in the kitchen, giving her an ETA on the evening's batch of cupcakes.

I box up a few cupcakes from the back, making sure to take some extra for Naomi. She's always ravenous when she gets home from school. When I walk back out the front, apron hanging in the kitchen, ready to leave, Wolff stands and joins me by the door.

"I can walk you home," he says. I want to protest and tell him that it's broad daylight and nothing's going to happen to me, but the eagerness in his eyes stops me. I've never had anybody look out for me the way he's trying to, and something about it urges me to say yes.

"Thank you," I say as we walk out of the bakery together.

We're silent for most of the walk, which strikes me as a little odd. I can feel him looking at me like he's studying me. A part of me wants to ask what's going on, but all I can really focus on is the fact that he's going to see where I live.

I live on the outskirts of town and the wrong side of the tracks by anyone's standard.

My house is tiny and looks like it's falling apart on the outside, just as it is on the inside.

The yard is always crowded with junk. My dad tends to pick up every broken chair he finds on trash day, insisting he's going to fix them to resell for some quick cash.

Only he just leaves the junk in our yard and never touches it after bringing it home. It's a pretty effective business model.

It's hot enough on the walk back that I have to take off my cardigan, and I feel self-

conscious about showing more of my skin.

I'm sweaty, and it's humid outside, and I'm afraid I look disgusting to him.

But Wolff doesn't seem to care. It's simultaneously refreshing and incredibly nerve-racking.

He has to want something from me, but I just can't figure it out.

Eventually, we get to my house, and I stand in the driveway, pointing at the front door with a meek smile. "This is home."

"Do you work tomorrow morning?" he asks.

"Yep, same time." I sigh. The idea of walking back to work with those two assholes probably still on the loose terrifies me.

"I'll pick you up here in the morning then," Wolff says with a warm smile.

"Oh no?—"

"I don't mind," he says, cutting me off before I can even protest. "I just want to make sure you're safe."

I can tell there's no use fighting him on this.

Honestly, I'm not sure I even want to. Here is this tall, gorgeous man who looks like he was carved out of a mountain and placed on Earth next to me, and he wants to walk me to work tomorrow.

It's a little unnecessary, but knowing I'm going to see him tomorrow is exciting. And

for the first time in a long time, I'm looking forward to something.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:28 am

WOLFF

When I wake up in the morning, it hits me that I don't actually know when she leaves for work, so I make sure to be standing by her driveway nice and early. My wolf is howling in my chest, excited and eager to see her again.

Being around her is intoxicating, and I just can't get enough of it.

I can tell she's warming up to me, too. When we first met, she was apprehensive and a bit standoffish, but now she enjoys being around me.

Soon enough, I'll tell her the truth about our bond, and after that, we can return to my pack in Oregon and be together forever.

I've dreamed of this my whole life, and I couldn't be happier.

Wendy walks out of the house in the morning in a long skirt with a slit on the side that reveals a little of her calf as she walks, paired with an oversized T-shirt tucked into the waistband.

My eyes fall to the exposed skin, and I can't help but wish the skirt were a little shorter.

I would love to see more of her. Everything about her is tantalizing, and I know the moment I can finally claim her as my own will be earth-shattering.

Until then, I let my imagination wander.

I smile as she approaches, wondering if she dressed up a little more because she knew I'd be here. "You look lovely," I say as she strides up beside me, and we begin our early morning journey to work.

"Thank you." She blushes and looks at the ground.

"So where do you want to go for lunch?" I ask, watching her with a smile on my face. She looks up at me and wrinkles her eyebrows, showing an adorable little crease between them as she does.

"What do you mean?" she asks with a subtle laugh.

"Well, I'm going to take you on a date on your lunch break," I answer as if she already knew that. The smile on her face grows, and she has to look away from me. I can see the blush on the corner of her cheeks, and it takes everything in me not to wrap my arms around her and kiss her right here.

"You want to go on a date with me?"

"I do," I instantly reply. She bites her lip and looks down at the ground.

I can feel her hesitation, but I don't quite understand why it's there. Either way, I know that the two of us are meant to be together. I won't give up easily.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you. I want to get to know you more."

"Okay, there's a diner not far from the bakery," Wendy says, biting her cheeks to keep her grin at bay.

"Perfect. We'll go there, then."

I can feel the excitement radiating off her for the rest of the walk to work.

It excites my wolf, and I consider spending the first part of the day running through the woods and letting him free.

He won't be calm until we have more of Wendy, but that might at least calm him down.

Last night was almost unbearable due to the exhilaration.

I'll be glad when she is mine completely.

Wendy walks through the back of the bakery with a soft wave, and I settle in against the building behind it to keep an eye on her through the window. She is busy preparing baked goods, and when six o'clock rolls around, I'm already waiting by the door to be let in.

The rush is a little busier today than it was yesterday, so she doesn't have much time to talk to me. But eventually, an older woman walks around the counter, and Wendy eagerly takes off her apron and walks around to join me.

"My lunch break is an hour," she says as we leave the bakery together. She leads us to a diner a block away, and we walk in.

It's small but busy. It seems everyone in town decides to come here for their lunch break. The host at the front tells us to find a seat and someone will be with us soon, so I lead both of us to a booth at the very back of the room.

I sit with my back to the wall, facing the crowd, and Wendy moves to sit across from me, but I stop her. "Why don't you sit beside me?"

She hesitates for a moment and agrees, joining me on the same booth seat.

My wolf howls and scratches from the inside, but with her close, it seems to calm us both.

I can smell her perfume, which is soft and feminine, with a faint rose essence and a hint of sugar.

Plus, the smell of fresh coffee and baked goods clings to her, making her smell delicious.

Her smell is intoxicating. It awakens something in me that I struggle to fight back against. My wolf is taking control, and I want nothing more than to lay my hands on her and feel every inch of her body. I need to have her, and the longer I resist, the weaker I get.

A server comes to take our order. I get steak and eggs, and she gets a club sandwich with fries. It's busy, so they warn us it might take twenty minutes to arrive. I'm in no rush to leave.

"How long will you be in town?" Wendy asks, resting her elbows on the table and turning to look at me with a slight smile.

"That depends," I say, looking her up and down slowly. My desire for her is starting to overtake me, and I don't know how much longer I can fight this. "Do you think you'll want to go out with me again?"

She laughs, and the sound is music to my ears. "We've barely been out once."

"Well, ask me how long I'm staying when you know."

“Where did you come from?” Wendy asks, shaking her head. “I’ve never met a guy like you, and all a sudden, it’s like you stepped out of a romance novel.”

“I think you just bring that out of me.” She blushes, and I sit up, resting a hand on her thigh instinctively. She flinches, and I almost move it away, but after a moment, her muscles relax, and she looks down at it with a half-smile on her lips.

I thought touching her would quell the feeling inside me, but it doesn’t. I can smell her arousal, and it’s all I can do not to lift her and fuck her right here.

My wolf begs me to lean over and claim her, to fully accept this bond between us.

I could mark her right now, and she’ll feel everything I’m feeling and then some.

The desire is there, but I force those thoughts aside. That’s my wolf taking control, and I force him back down, telling him that we’ll have her soon enough. We have to take our time.

I squeeze her thigh and slide my hands inside ever so slowly. Her arousal deepens, and she opens her legs a little wider for me. She’s biting her lips as she looks at me, and I stare down at her legs with anticipation tingling in my body.

“Has anyone ever touched you like this?” I ask, my voice a faint whisper that she has to lean in to hear all the way. She looks around the room nervously to make sure no one’s watching us. Everyone is too involved in their conversation or their lunch to care.

“No,” she says.

I pull my hand from her thigh momentarily and search for the slit at the side, sliding my hand inside to touch her soft, warm skin. She gasps from the sudden contact, and

I look at her with a smile. It takes her a moment, but she relaxes against it.

My eyes scan the room as my hand inches closer to the warmth of her pussy. I can feel the heat radiating from her body and sense a bit of fear mingling with her excitement. The last thing she wants is someone to see us, and I'm going to make sure we're okay.

My wolf is eager, and I don't fight back against the urge to feel more of her.

My cock throbs in my pants and strains against my zipper.

Wendy's panties are a little wet as my finger traces the outside.

She sucks in a breath, and I watch as her chest rises and falls rapidly while my finger slowly works its way closer.

“Do you want me to touch you?” I ask, sitting up and massaging the front of my pants while I press my finger hard against her, letting her feel the relief of pressure. She gasps and nods. “Say it, Wendy.”

“Yes,” she quickly replies.

I slide her panties aside and feel the wetness against her slit as I trace my finger along it.

My wolf is stirring, practically frothing at the mouth, knowing she's this turned on for me.

It's a green light to so much more that the two of us can do in time.

Soon enough, I'll be able to taste her around my tongue, feel her all around me, and

surround myself and her.

She's my entire world, and I don't have much time left to wait for her.

I slide a finger inside her, watching as she grips the table above us.

Her breath quickens, and she bites her lip hard enough for the pink flesh to look white.

She looks around frantically before turning to look at me with lust filling her eyes.

I gently curl my finger as I slide it deeper inside her, feeling how her warmth envelops it.

She lets out a hushed moan, and it awakens every nerve in my body. My cock throbs against my pants, and I would give anything to free it right now. "I'm going to make you feel good," I whisper in her ear, leaning in as if I'm just giving her a simple kiss on the side of the head.

She spreads her legs wider, and I imagine my finger is my cock, and I'm filling her with it, listening to each moan as she takes all of me in. She loses herself, momentarily forgetting we're in public, surrounded by other people in the restaurant.

Wendy catches herself and stops, looking down at the table nervously while the pleasure starts building between her legs.

I flick my thumb over her clit while I slowly move my middle finger in and out of her.

She closes her eyes, and her body tenses while I rub circles around her clit.

She wants to cry out and moan, and I crave that badly.

Hearing her in the throes of pleasure will be a delight, but for now, she's quiet.

It doesn't take long before I can feel her clenching around me, and she shakes ever so slightly. She covers her open mouth with her hand as she tries to force herself to remain in control. I milk every last drop of her pleasure as I move my hand swiftly to wring out all of her orgasm.

When she's done, I pull my hand away and look at her while I bring my finger to my lips. Tasting her juices on my tongue is relieving. My wolf simmers down inside me. I haven't had enough of her, nowhere near so, but it's enough to hold me over until I can mark her.

By the way she's looking at me, I can only hope that'll be soon.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:28 am

WENDY

I blink a few times, trying to wake myself up. Yesterday, I met a really cute guy, and he saved me from something horrible. This has to be some kind of dream to rationalize all of it. Surely, there's no way the Greek god of a man I met just fingered me in Mel's Diner.

Right?

No matter how hard I try, I can't ignore the fact that this is very real. It's incredibly bizarre and unusual for me to experience anything even remotely like this, but it's real.

Wolff is real.

I can't understand what it is about me that he likes. Any girl would be more than lucky to have someone like him, so why would he pick me, of all people? I tried to stop myself from questioning it because he's such a catch.

No guy has ever shown interest in me, then he pops up out of the blue and is completely enamored like I've cast some kind of spell.

But then there's this connection I feel to him. It's comforting and warm, and I don't want to be far away from him. Even the fact that he sits in the bakery and watches me while I work is a nice gesture. Most people would think that's crazy, but I just can't get enough of him.

It feels safe, and that's terrifying on its own.

I've never felt safe before, and I'm unsure how to handle it.

My mom left when I was young, abandoning me and leaving me with my asshole of a father and monster of a stepmother.

I've been living in fight-or-flight mode practically my entire life, and here is this man making it seem like I don't have to do that anymore.

What will happen if that ends? I don't want to go back to the way I felt before. I never believed that good things could happen to me, and something good is sitting right beside me.

Our server finally comes with our food and sets it on the table in front of us. Her eyes linger on Wolff before looking back at me, and I'm suddenly self-conscious and wondering why he would want to be with someone like me all over again.

Obviously, I just met him, so I don't know how this whole relationship is going to work.

But I suppose, living in a delusional world where he and I are together for a long time, I might have to get used to people looking at us like this.

There will always be someone who thinks he can do better than me.

I just have to figure out a way to stop thinking about that.

“What do you do for work?” I ask as he picks up his fork and knife to dig into his steak and eggs. I pour some ketchup on my plate and tentatively eat some french fries. Trying to have a normal conversation after he just fingered me in public is

surreal, and I don't know how to act.

“I guess you could think of me as somewhat of a handyman around my town,” Wolff replies hesitantly.

I raise an eyebrow and watch him as he takes a big bite of his food and savors it. “You told me you're from Oregon, but you never said where exactly in Oregon.”

“It's a small town nobody's ever heard of. It's near Tillamook Forest, nestled in the woods,” he says with a shrug.

“Compared to Swanton, how big would you say it is?”

“It makes this place look like New York City,” he says with a laugh. “Everyone knows everyone there. Honestly, half the town is related in some way too. It's very close-knit.”

I take a bite of my sandwich and chew it slowly, all too aware of the fact that I'm eating in public. Nobody cares, but it always feels like everyone is watching me.

“That must be really nice. You grow up in a place like that, and you have this wonderful built-in community with all your neighbors and friends.” I've always wished Swanton were like that, but it's not.

Here, the only thing people in town know about me is that I'm the daughter of one of the town's most notorious drunks, and they pity me for that. Rumors spread like wildfire through this town, and anybody caught in the crosshairs is nitpicked to the point of wanting to flee.

“It has its perks. But when there's disagreements between pa—town members, things can get... messy,” he says between bites. “Do you see yourself staying here long-

term?"

"Don't get me wrong, I would love to leave.

It's one of my goals in the future, for sure," I begin, dreading what I'm about to have to tell him.

The moment he knows how much baggage I have, he's going to have to decide whether or not I'm worth staying for.

"My sister is only eight years old, and I'm kind of her main caregiver right now. Not legally, anyway. Let's just say my dad and stepmom aren't exactly in the right state of mind most of the time."

He sits upright and sets his utensils down as he looks at me, his eyebrows scrunched together.

I can't tell if he's angry or just really interested in what I'm saying.

Either way, it's the first time someone's taken this much of an interest in me in a long time.

The last time this happened was high school, and it was Penelope Rogers trying to invite me to a party that didn't exist. She just wanted me to show up alone so she could make fun of me.

"What do you mean?" Wolff asks. "Does he hurt you two?"

"No!" I shake my head fervently and rest my hands on the table.

Maybe it's not the entire truth since there have been times in the past when he's been a

little rough, but it's not intentional.

That's just the alcohol. "He's not abusive or anything, he's just absent.

He spends pretty much every spare minute of his life in the bar, and Naomi's mom, Veronica, is always there with him. I could barely get her to put down the bottle when she was pregnant."

"And they don't do anything to take care of her now?" He's definitely angry now, and I wish I hadn't said anything. We were having a good time, and now I'm here trauma dumping my shitty life on him. I wish I could take back all the words.

"They do, sometimes. Every now and again, they'll 'dry out' and go above and beyond to take care of her.

They buy presents and spend time with her, you name it.

But then they pick the bottle back up, and it's like she doesn't exist." I sigh and lean back in the booth while he watches me with something unreadable behind his eyes.

"Honestly, it's not that bad anymore. We've both come to terms with them, and I make sure Naomi's okay.

That's why I want to make sure she gets through high school, then when she's in college or working on her own, I can leave."

"I'm sorry you have to deal with that," Wolff says, shaking his head. "But I think it says a lot about you that you're willing to stick around. Not a lot of people would sacrifice something like that for their sibling."

The way he looks at me with such intensity when he says that warms my heart.

It's as if he sees me in a way nobody else does, and I don't know how to act under the spotlight.

I fidget with my fingers and look away, blushing and trying to fight the smile.

I don't want to get too invested in this because when something inevitably happens that fucks all of this up, it will hurt so much more.

We finish our lunch, and he walks me back to the bakery so I can clock back in for my shift. As expected, he sits on a stool while I get to work in the kitchen, baking some pies while Walter operates the counter.

After a while, Susan stands beside me and grabs a rolling pin from my hands and forces me to look at her. “Who's that tall hunk of man you just went out with over there?”

I laugh and blush, not knowing how to answer that. “His name's Wolff. We didn't go out. We just had lunch. He's just passing through town, anyway.”

It's not entirely true. He did explicitly tell me it was a date. I just don't want to hype anything up to Susan right now.

“He ain't have nothing better to do than sit around here looking at you?” She nudges my shoulder playfully and raises an eyebrow.

“What? Is he supposed to spend all day at the bar like everyone else in this godforsaken town?”

“It seems to me like he's taking somewhat of an interest in you.” She looks between us, and a smile grows on her lips. “Plus, he's been walking you to and from work. There aren't a lot of men like that out there, let alone around here. You need to lock

that down.”

I laugh and back away, shaking my head at her. Maybe there's some truth to what she's saying, but I'm not the type of person who can lock anyone down. I wouldn't even know how to begin to do something like that. I barely know what she even means.

“As I said, he's just passing through town,” I say with a disappointed sigh. “He's probably got some kind of girlfriend in Oregon anyway.”

“You have two options. Clock out right now and go on a proper date with that man, or I temporarily fire you until morning,” Susan says, crossing her arms in front of her like she's laying down the law.

She breaks character and steps closer, placing her hands on either side of my face and staring deep into my eyes.

“You're too good for this place. You deserve to be happy, and if going out for one wild, steamy date with a handsome man is going to make you happy, do it. We have far too few moments of joy in this life already.”

I think about it for a second and nod my head, wrapping my arms around her and trying not to tear up. Having someone who cares about me is special, and I love Susan like she's my own mother.

I take off my apron and hang it up in the back before walking into the dining room and sliding into the seat across from Wolff.

He is ecstatic about the news of our new date, and before we leave, he stops by the counter and asks for a bunch of different pastries from the display.

Walter and Susan both joke with him and laugh as he tries to pay, but they don't let him.

When he's done, we walk out of the bakery together, and I look up at him with an excited smile. This is last minute, and I have no idea what we're going to be doing. But I'm very eager to find out. If it's anything like the diner, I know I'm going to be very satisfied.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 8:28 am

WOLFF

Wendy and I walk to my hotel so I can get my car.

I found a wonderful spot a few nights ago in the woods nearby while I let my wolf free and went on a run.

I still remember how refreshing the air felt as it ran through my fur and how freeing it was to run through the woods, completely unmarked territory by any other local packs.

Knowing my mate was nearby only made it better.

Now, I get to take Wendy there. I can feel how connected she is to me, and I know I have to tell her the truth. That's what I plan to do. Before confessing everything, I'm going to make sure this is the best damn date she's ever had.

We roll down the windows in the car and let the hot summer breeze through.

I can't help being charmed as the strawberry-blond curls of her hair blow wildly, and she tries to tuck them behind her ear to contain them.

I reach my hand over the center console and hold hers while keeping one hand on the wheel.

She smiles and rests an elbow on the side of the car, looking out at the world passing us by with excitement glimmering in her eyes.

“Where are you taking me?” Wendy asks as I park the car along the side of the road near the woods. I can see why she would be alarmed to go on a date here.

“Do you trust me?” I ask, running out of the car and racing to the passenger door to open it before she does. I extend a hand for her, and she takes it as I help her out of the car.

“I do,” Wendy replies, her tone surprised as if she struggles to believe it herself.

“Then follow me.” I grab a blanket out of the trunk of the car and guide her into the woods, keeping my eyes glued to the path to make sure she won’t hurt herself on anything ahead of us.

“I’ve never actually been out this way before,” Wendy comments as I hold a low-hanging branch up for her to walk under. “It’s beautiful, though. By the time I finish work, I usually have to be home for Naomi, so exploring the area hasn’t been much of an option.”

“Then I suppose it’s a good thing I’ve explored for us both, then,” I joke. We continue walking until we reach a sunny meadow in the center of the woods. No one else is around, and I’m very thankful for that. I want as much privacy as possible.

A nice breeze rolls through the tall grass, and I know I’ll smell anyone coming close if they’re venturing out here like us.

I spread the blanket out on the ground and both of us take a seat.

Wendy crosses her legs in front of her and pushes the front of her skirt out to cover any skin, being modest.

I smile at her as I think about what we did in the diner. It’s cute that she’s still shy.

Soon enough, I'm going to break down those walls, though.

I open the box of pastries I got from the bakery and break it down to spread them all out. Wendy looks down at them with a soft smile, and I gesture for her to choose which one she wants. There's an array of cupcakes, croissants, tarts, and muffins to choose from.

“In your expert opinion, what would you recommend?” I ask after she takes a raspberry tart for herself.

“Well, I did make the cupcake this morning. But you're under no obligation to choose that.” She laughs and bites into the tart, closing her eyes as she savors the flaky dough and sweet filling. I watch her, then eagerly pick up the cupcake she made.

“You know what they say the fastest way to a man's heart is,” I say as I peel the wrapper and take a bite.

I moan out loud as the banana-flavored cupcake envelops my mouth, with a caramel sauce filling that only enhances the flavors.

She's looking at me with eagerness in her eyes, and I sit upright while nodding my head. “Okay, so you're incredibly talented.”

She blushes and shrugs off the comment. “I was just following Susan's recipe.”

“I think there's more to it than that,” I immediately say, taking another big bite of the cupcake. “I can tell it's something you're passionate about. It's rare that people can find something they love and have a chance to work with it.”

“I do love it. I've always dreamed of opening my own bakery one day,” Wendy admits, finishing the last bite of her tart and dusting off her hands before leaning back

and looking toward the clouds above.

“I’ve always had this dream that maybe Susan and Walter will leave the business to me one day. They know how much I love it, and I know most of their recipes. They play their cards close to the chest, though.”

“Well, if you ever want to experiment with your own recipes, consider me your guinea pig.” She looks down at me with a wide smile and bites her lip softly. What happened in the diner is still lingering between the two of us, and we haven’t spoken about it yet.

I’m torn about what to do. I know I need to tell her the truth about what I am.

The news is going to shatter everything she thinks she knows about the world.

The connection we have is real, and she feels it as much as I do.

But is she going to think I’m crazy? Will she be terrified of me and think I’m a monster?

For the first time since meeting her, I’m nervous. I don’t know how she’ll react, and it could ruin everything between us. Just the thought of her rejecting our bond makes my heart ache.

My wolf is desperate to claim her. He’s inside me, trying to force the words out of my throat so I can mark her and make her mine once and for all. I have to fight back against it, and I try to as best as I can. But with every moment in her presence, I feel myself getting weaker.

Her eyes move from mine down to the pastries still spread out before us. I can sense that she wants another, but she hesitates. She licks her lips and takes a deep breath,

looking back out at the beautiful meadow sprawling around us.

I glance at the chocolate-covered croissant I think she was looking at and pick it up. I move closer, and her eyes fall on me once again as I lift the croissant and bring it to her lips. She smiles and hesitantly opens her mouth, taking a small bite of it.

Neither of us says a word as her teeth sink in and chocolate sauce drips from the inside onto my fingers.

I can sense her contentment as the flaky, buttery crust melts on her tongue.

After she swallows, she looks at my fingers with little bits of chocolate sauce still sticking to the tips and grabs my hand, slowly bringing my finger to her mouth.

Her tongue traces my skin, and I stare at her in awe as she wraps her lips around the tip to suck off the rest of the chocolate. My cock strains in my pants, and my wolf is on the verge of taking complete control.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” I whisper as I pull my hand away from her and lace it through her curly hair to pull her head closer to me.

She doesn't push back as I press my mouth against hers.

She sinks into the kiss, opening her mouth and letting my tongue dance with hers.

I can taste the sweetness on her tongue, and it only drives me further.

My wolf is stirring, simultaneously relieved about the kiss and desperate for more of her.

I lay her down on the ground, climbing on top of her and pressing my lips harder

against hers. The kiss starts off slow and gentle, but both of us grow more frenzied with each swish of our lips. I let my hands climb down her body, feeling the softness under my touch as my mouth falls to her neck.

My teeth graze against the soft flesh, and it's tempting to claim her now, to mark her and make her mine forever. My tongue swishes over the skin before I pull myself away. I can't do that yet, but my wolf is trying hard to make me.

Wendy moans in my ear, and my cock throbs, desperate to be free of its prison. I part her legs with my knee and trace the skin of her thigh with my hand. I can't get enough of her. I want to explore every inch of her body more than anything.

I pull her skirt up slowly, revealing more of her creamy skin with each inch. I can tell she's nervous, but the awestruck look on my face helps her become more comfortable.

My hand moves between her thighs, and she stops me, looking up at me with worry in her eyes. "I'm a virgin," she whispers.

"That's okay," I say with a big smile. "I am too. I've been waiting for you for a long time."

My mouth crashes against hers, and she grabs my neck to pull me closer as I position myself between her legs.

I press my groin against her, letting the friction relieve some of the desire building between her legs.

She moans into my mouth, and I can taste her pleasure enough that I have to squeeze my eyes tight to fight the frenzy building in my chest.

When I've had enough, I sit up and unbuckle my pants, freeing my hard cock once and for all. She stares at it with her mouth hanging open. I immediately pull her panties down and stare at her wet pussy with the hunger growing stronger.

I spread her legs and examine her, studying every single curve and fold and committing it to my memory. This is my mate. I've waited my whole life for her. I've saved myself for her, and I finally have her now.

I lower my face between her legs and inhale the scent of her arousal, tracing my tongue along her folds as she lets out a desperate moan. She covers her mouth with her hands to try to stifle it, but I look up and shake my head.

"I want to hear you," I say as my tongue laps against her clit.

"Wolff," she whispers in a slow exhale. Her body shakes as I continue teasing her with my tongue, letting the pleasure build before it slowly recedes. I slide a finger inside her, knowing that my cock is going to replace it soon enough.

I move my finger in and out while circling her clit with my tongue, listening as her breath quickens, and her entire body trembles from my touch.

"Oh my god, Wolff!" Wendy cries out in a moan, sitting up on her elbows as she looks down at me between her legs, the pleasure overtaking her as she comes on my tongue. I don't stop until she's breathing heavily on the ground and her moans die down.

"You taste incredible," I whisper in her ear as I climb back up her body. I kiss her, letting her taste her own pleasure on my tongue mixed with the sweetness of the cupcakes. It's a perfect mixture of her that I could enjoy every hour of every day for the rest of my life.

She feels me hard above her and spreads her legs to invite me in. I position myself right outside her entrance and look into her eyes as I slowly push myself inside. Wendy gasps, and I stop, not wanting to hurt her. She bites her lip hard, and I wait for her to give me a signal to keep going.

“Is this okay?” I ask in a strange voice, trying to ignore my wolf begging to fully sheath myself inside her.

“Yes,” Wendy moans, nodding eagerly as I slowly let her pussy envelop me. It feels incredible. I've always imagined this would be a magical moment, but it barely does it justice. It feels like I've come home for the first time.

The connection I feel to her only grows, and I know this is exactly where I'm supposed to be.

My cock throbs inside her, but I wait a few moments for her body to adjust to me before thrusting in and out of her. I'm slow and gentle, knowing this is her first time. I want to make it as pleasurable as possible.

I look in her eyes, seeing how her pupils dilate even more as I continue pumping inside her. I wonder if she feels the same thing I do right now. If the connection she feels to me is growing stronger, like she's accepting our bond.

“You feel so fucking good,” I moan as my cock stiffens more. She clenches around me, on the verge of another orgasm already. She bites her lip and closes her eyes as she tries to keep quiet below me. “Let go, Wendy,” I whisper.

She opens her mouth, and pure ecstasy is freed from it as she cries out. It's enough to send me over the edge. My cock throbs as I unleash myself inside her.

“Wolff, yes!” she screams, her voice echoing through the trees. She tightens around

my throbbing cock, and I can't hold back. I pump harder and faster, letting my wolf take full control as I fill her with my cum.

She's whimpering with each motion, and I stare down at her with satisfaction and pleasure roaring through my body. When both of us are finally settling down, I slow down and pull out of her, looking down at her and feeling content for the first time since meeting her.

My wolf is calm and sated for now, but I know that's only temporary.

I lie down on the blanket next to her and drape my arm over her chest, letting it caress her cheek as I turn her face toward me.

“What did you mean when you said you've been waiting for me?” she asks. There's a faint smile on her face, and that adorable crinkle in her brow is back.

I know this is it. This is my moment to tell her the truth. She felt our bond when we made love, and I know I can explain it. Maybe she'll accept it right away.

“You know, there's more to this world than meets the eye,” I whisper, tucking her hair behind her ear. “There's more than just humans, I mean.”

She wrinkles her eyebrow and laughs. “You mean like aliens and cryptids?”

“Shifters. People who have a human form as well as an animal they shift into,” I explain, sitting upright as she watches me cautiously. “I'm one of them. I'm a wolf shifter. That's why I'm here, too. I was looking for you.”

Wendy sits upright and stares at me with all the amusement gone from her eyes. My nerves are on edge, and I reach for her to calm her, but she flinches away.

“Shifters have mates. You can think of it like a soulmate, but it's the person you're supposed to be with.

It's like our other half. I felt the bond between us all the way from Oregon, and I came to find you,” I explain, the look on my face urging her to hear me out.

“I came to find you and take you home. I can bring you to my pack. I have a home there. I have a family that will welcome you.”

Wendy gets to her feet and backs away from me.

She's looking at me like I'm insane. It hurts, but I can't blame her.

It's a lot to take in, and I know she must have a million questions she doesn't know how to ask.

But this is what I feared. My mate, the woman I love more than anything in this world, is afraid of me.

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WENDY

I can't believe what Wolff is telling me. It seems completely illogical and, honestly, a little crazy. But the way he's looking at me, the way he seems so earnest about it, I can't help but wonder if it's true.

Perhaps there's some truth to the bond we share.

The connection I feel to him is unreal. As much as it pains me to admit, I've been wondering why he would be interested in someone like me, and this makes sense.

It hurts knowing that it's not his choice, but if it's anything like he's described, it must be intense for him.

The idea of him having a place for me in his town is intriguing.

A part of me would love to just hop in his car and leave this shit hole town behind, but I can't do that.

I have Naomi to worry about. If I leave her, what's going to happen?

She can't fend for herself the way I did growing up.

Maybe that's on me for sheltering her, but I just wanted her to grow up different from how I did.

Naomi needs me here. I can't leave her, not even for someone like Wolff.

“Can you take me home?” I ask, finally saying something after what feels like hours of staring at him in silence.

He stands and nods, quickly packing up the blanket and leftover pastries from the ground. We walk toward his car in tense silence. He must know I'm questioning myself, and him, for that matter. I can sense his stress as he walks in front of me, and I wish I could take it away.

I just don't know what to feel right now, and that's killing me. Everything was going so wonderfully, and now this is standing in our way.

We get in his car and he drives toward my house, neither of us saying anything again.

Wolff is sad, and it breaks my heart to think that.

He's brought me so much happiness in the past two days that I feel awful knowing I'm the root of the sadness.

But I can't help it. I have a life here and priorities.

I can't just leave them and run off to Oregon with him, no matter how badly I think I want to.

When we pull up to my house, I get out of the car and stand by the passenger door for a moment, watching him with tears in my eyes. “I'm sorry,” I say, resting my hand on the car while I look at him.

He sighs and looks down at his hands and his lap, nodding his head slowly. He doesn't know what to say, and I can't blame him. I'm sure he expected me to react in a much different way to that news.

I back away, waving timidly at the car before he drives off into the distance and leaves me standing in the driveway with tears streaming down my face.

Wolff is perfect, and I wish more than anything I could give him what he wants.

Susan was right. I don't think I will ever find a man like him around here again.

It's late enough in the afternoon that Naomi should be home, so I try to collect myself before walking through the front door.

The last thing I need is her asking me questions about why I'm sad.

I'm supposed to be the strong one. No matter how badly I want to bury my face in the pillow and cry myself to sleep, I have to hold it together.

I open the door, and before I can even close it, my father comes bounding my way with his face contorted in anger. "Who the hell was that?" he shouts, spittle flying from his mouth.

He's not usually home right now. I'm caught off guard by him being here in general, and I don't know what to say. I stand by the door, closing it and leaning against it, shaking my head in confusion.

"Who the fuck were you just in that car with?" he shouts again, moving closer. He's swaying back and forth, clearly drunk.

I don't understand why he's so angry right now.

I wasn't standing on the front lawn making out with Wolff.

I simply got out of the car and waved goodbye.

He doesn't know that I just lost my virginity in a meadow not even thirty minutes ago, and I've given him no reason to think something like that might have happened.

Besides, I'm nineteen years old, and that's none of his business.

“Answer me, you dumb bitch!” He moves closer and wraps his hands around my forearms, digging them in tight enough that I can already feel a bruise forming. I try to yank my hand away, but he holds it tighter to keep me still.

“You're hurting me!” I shout, feeling the tears stinging my eyes again. Maybe I was silly to think I could come home and have a little bit of peace after what just happened between Wolff and me. Because I sure as hell didn't expect this.

“No daughter of mine is going to be out whoring around,” he says, dragging me through the house toward the stairs. I try to fight back and stand my ground, but he just digs his nails in tighter.

Eventually, I give up and follow him up the stairs. He opens the bedroom door and shoves me inside. I fall to the ground and land on a few old wooden blocks Naomi has had since she was a toddler.

Naomi screams when she sees me, and I turn my attention away from my dad on whatever tirade he's on now and try to think of something to tell her about this. The fear is etched on her face, and I know there's nothing I'll be able to do to take it away from her.

The door slams, and I hear it locking from the outside.

I'm immediately brought back to my childhood.

He and my stepmom would have friends over for parties and lock me here in my

room so I couldn't disturb them.

It hasn't happened in ages, and I've done everything in my power to make sure it never happened to Naomi.

But here we are. I'm really regretting not running away with Wolff now.

I stand and rush over to Naomi, who is curled up on the bed crying. I wrap my arms around her and hold her close, rocking back and forth to soothe her.

“Don't worry. It's going to be okay,” I whisper in her ear.

When my dad's like this, there's no talking to him. I can hear him stomping around outside the room, slamming cabinets and kicking furniture that just so happens to be in his path.

Hours pass and both Naomi and I are hungry, our stomachs growling loud enough that we can hear each other's with ease.

We sit silently on the bed beside each other, not daring to ask for dinner.

Eventually, Naomi falls asleep, and I lie beside her, closing my eyes and trying to forget all about this day.

A day that should have been wonderful turned sour very quickly. It only confirms something I've known about myself for a long time: I'm not meant to have good things.

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WOLFF

I hardly sleep all night. The look on Wendy's face when I told her the truth replays in my mind, and I wish I could take it back.

Perhaps there's a way I can lie to her and tell her I was joking, but I don't think that would resolve any problems. If I'm going to be with her, she has to know the truth about me.

I end up going into the woods again and shifting, letting my wolf free to roam as I try to calm my mind.

It's usually the perfect balm for any of my problems. I can run free and forget about anything in the world.

There's nothing as calming as running through the woods, hunting foxes, and allowing myself to give in to the feral nature of my wolf.

But even that doesn't help me today. My wolf yearns for Wendy almost as much as I do.

I had her. However fleeting it was, she was mine.

Maybe I told her too soon because I could feel her desire for me even after I told her the truth.

A part of her wanted to go with me. I don't know if it's because she was afraid, or if

she didn't believe me, but she didn't tell me what she wanted to do.

When the morning comes, I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling, thinking about my options.

I know Wendy wants space. I want to give that to her, too.

Asking her to give up her entire life here to come live in a strange territory with people she doesn't know is a lot.

Maybe I didn't think about how this would affect her as much as I should have.

I've been waiting for her my whole life, but she is only just learning about my kind and our mating bonds.

Perhaps I moved too quickly. I was just so caught up in the moment yesterday.

I look at the alarm clock beside the bed and see that it's almost 4:00 a.m. I haven't had a wink of sleep since I left her, and my exhaustion is starting to set in.

But even though I want to give her space, I can't forget about what happened to her the day we met.

I don't want her walking alone right now.

If I'm unwelcome accompanying her, I'll at least make sure she gets to work okay.

I get dressed and make my way over to her house.

It's a little after four o'clock, and plenty of lights are on.

Faint music is audible from the house, and I don't have to think long to know that's probably her dad and stepmom still up partying.

It's a wonder she can get any sleep in a house like that.

Not long after I arrive, the front door opens, and Wendy steps out in a pair of loose-fitting jeans and a long-sleeved sweater.

It's not like the cardigan she wore the first day I met her, something she could remove if it were too hot.

It's like something you would wear on a cool autumn morning.

Right now, it's about eighty degrees, and the humidity is unbearable.

Why would she choose to wear something like that?

I can only imagine that working in the bakery with all the ovens on will make it much worse.

She starts walking, and I stay out of sight, tiptoeing through the tree line to ensure she doesn't hear me snapping twigs or crunching on leaves. She seems preoccupied, and I wish I could climb inside her mind to see what she's thinking.

Is she still thinking about last night? I'm too far away to see her face, but I can only imagine she didn't get much sleep last night.

As she's walking, I see her hold her hand to her stomach and wince as if it's hurting her. I stop moving and watch for a second, wondering what could be causing that pain. She looks uncomfortable and somewhat exhausted as she keeps moving, and I need to know what's bothering her.

Despite my better judgment, I walk out of the tree line and approach. She doesn't see me right away, preoccupied with whatever is bothering her.

“Wendy,” I say as I approach, wanting to alert her so I don't startle her. She stops moving and turns around to look at me with a surprised look on her face.

“What are you doing here?” She looks around nervously, as if she's worried someone will see us together. “You need to leave.”

“Not until you tell me what's wrong,” I say, moving closer and reaching a hand out for her. She pulls away from me and turns around to continue walking toward the bakery.

I stride up beside her and reach out to grab her arm to stop her so we can talk.

As soon as I make contact with her arm, she hisses and pulls her arm away from me like it's hurting.

She stops walking and looks at me with worry in her eyes as I push the sleeve of her sweater up to reveal a dark bruise in the shape of a hand wrapped around her forearm.

Seeing it sends me into a spiral I can't control. My wolf howls, begging to be free to find whoever did this to her and rip their throat out. I can taste the copper of their blood on my tongue, and I won't be happy until I've had my fill of it.

My breath quickens, and I clench my jaw tight, trying my best to hold back my wolf before he breaks free, and I shift right in front of her. I let out a guttural growl and have to back away from her because of what's about to happen to me.

“Wolff, take a breath,” Wendy says, rushing up behind me and resting a hand on my back. “It's not worth getting this upset about.”

I look over my shoulder at her and see the concern in her eyes. I nod, trying to take a few deep breaths to calm myself down. I might disagree with her. It is worth getting this upset about. Someone laid a hand on her and left a mark on her body, and because of that, they deserve to die.

But seeing the look in her eyes, the fear brewing behind the concern, calms me down. Knowing that she's seeing you like this, in such a primal state, is unnerving. I already scared her yesterday, and I don't want to do that anymore.

“Tell me who did this to you,” I demand, gesturing to her arm.

She hesitates for a moment, clearly not wanting to give them away because of my reaction.

I can see the doubt crossing her mind. Does she think I'm going to find them and kill them on her behalf?

Honestly, there's a chance I might. “Wendy, tell me right now.”

“He didn't mean to do it,” Wendy says in a meek voice that breaks my heart.

“Who didn't mean to?” I take a step closer, feeling the intensity in my chest grow stronger with each passing moment.

“My dad.” A moment of silence passes between us, and I immediately turn around to start walking back to her house.

He laid his hands on her, and he's going to pay for it.

Before I can even get ten paces away, Wendy rushes behind me and grabs both of my arms to stop me.

“Wolff, please! You can't go back there. I don't want you to hurt him.”

I turn around and look at her, seeing the desperation in her eyes. I don't understand why she would try to protect him. She's told me about what kind of a monster he is. How could she stand in front of me, someone who wants to actually protect her, and tell me not to do that? It doesn't make sense.

“He hurt you, Wendy,” I argue, shaking my head. “I can't let him hurt you. I have to protect you.”

Wendy watches me, and realization crosses her face. I can see her finally realizing what this bond means to me.

“I can protect myself, believe it or not. If you care about me like you say you do, you'll let this rest,” she says. She squeezes my arm with her hand and stares at me with a silent plea in her eyes.

“Only if you promise me not to come back here,” I say, shaking my head. I point at her house, which is barely visible now through the tree line. “If he lays a hand on you again, I won't be able to hold myself back. You have to leave, Wendy.”

She shakes her head, and I can see the water pooling in her eyes. “I can't do that, Wolff. I can't leave my sister.”

Of course, how could I have been so foolish. She told me that she's Naomi's main caretaker, which is why she can't leave. Leaving now would leave her young sister at the hands of these two monsters, who don't care about either of them.

It all makes sense now. Wendy was willing to sacrifice her own happiness just to make sure her sister was safe. It's noble, and I admire her for that.

But I won't let that stand in the way of her happiness. Wendy deserves the world, and I'm going to give her that. Her parents won't stand in the way of it anymore.

I move closer and cup her cheeks with my hands, forcing her to look up at me. She raises her eyebrows in surprise, but thankfully, she doesn't pull away from me. I lean forward and press my lips against hers, feeling the relief of having her close to me once again wash over my body.

“Wendy, I swear to you I'm going to fix this,” I say when I pull away. She wrinkles her eyebrows and stares at me in confusion. “You won't have to worry about any of this anymore.”

I run my fingers through her hair and offer her a reassuring smile that seems to comfort her. Wendy smiles back and nods, the tears welling in her eyes once again.

I have an idea of what I can do to make all of this better. I just hope Wendy will be on board with it.

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WENDY

No matter what life has thrown at me, I've always been my own rock. But that doesn't mean I haven't wanted someone to help me. There are many things I can't do on my own, so I often ignore them. The main example being my nightmare of a family situation.

I'm pretty much resigned to living at home until Naomi turns eighteen. Honestly, as bad as it sounds, I've always hoped that something might happen to my dad and Veronica, allowing me to get custody of her. The sooner the two of us are away from them, the better.

Wolff said he would help me, but I don't think he can.

He promised me he wouldn't hurt either of them, and if he goes back on his word, that's going to say an awful lot to me.

I don't think he'll be able to do anything to alleviate these problems. Dealing with my dad is, to say the least, difficult, and I doubt he'll be able to handle the situation.

Honestly, killing him might be the only thing that would work, and I don't want that on my conscience.

I try not to think about it while I work.

Susan and Walter can tell that something's wrong, that I'm distracted by something, but they don't mention it.

Susan knows about Wolff, and it's clear she's assuming my reaction has something to do with a bad date.

Maybe she thinks the wound is still too tender to ask about it.

Every time the door opens, I expect to see Wolff walking through the front door, taking his usual seat in the corner of the room.

Every time I see someone else's face, I get disappointed.

I try to force a smile on my face and maintain a friendly customer service demeanor, but I don't think I'm as cheerful as I normally am.

Whatever Wolff is doing is hopeless. I'm going to have to go home after my shift and see my father and Veronica in the living room partying once again, and I'm going to have to forget about what happened yesterday.

I'll have to do that until Naomi is old enough to at least get a job so we can move out together.

As time ticks on and he doesn't show up to join me in the bakery, I start to worry. Whatever he's doing has to be a lot because it's taking him hours.

I'm so lost in my own head thinking about everything going on that I barely notice when my shift ends.

Tara walks over to me and nudges me on the shoulder to remind me that I get to go home.

Leaving work is never a relief, to be honest. I would rather work nonstop at the bakery than go home some days. Today happens to be one of those days.

My life is typically unpredictable, but I usually know what I'm walking into. Either my dad and Veronica are in the living room shit-faced drunk at three o'clock, or they're not home. Right now, I have no idea what's waiting for me.

For all I know, I might walk in on a giant wolf ripping them to pieces. I reluctantly hang up my apron in the back and walk out the front door of the bakery, bracing myself for whatever I may find at home.

Almost as soon as I walk out, Wolff walks around the corner of the building with a wide smile on his face.

My entire body freezes, and I feel a range of emotions.

Should I be afraid right now? Seeing this grin on his face makes me think something good will happen.

But perhaps the two of us have different definitions of what constitutes good.

“Care to tell me what's going on now?” I say, cautiously approaching him with my arms folded across my chest.

“I told you I would take care of everything, and I have,” Wolff replies, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and guiding me toward his car. “Just come with me. I'll explain everything later.”

He opens the passenger door for me, like a gentleman would, and I slide into the car, wondering what I'm getting myself into.

The last time I was here, I was heartbroken and confused, just trying to wrap my brain around something that seemed so impossible.

I've still never seen Wolff shifting, but I think I might have come close to it this morning.

If he really can fix the situation with my parents, I would be very interested to know more about this part of him. If not, then I guess we'll have to say goodbye for good.

“What is—” I start asking before he holds a finger up to silence me.

“You'll have to have a little patience. I promise you, everything's going to be fine,” Wolff says, grabbing my hand and squeezing it.

It's comforting, even though I am currently in some level of purgatory due to my lack of understanding here. I stare out the window, and the closer we get to my house a knot forms in my stomach that makes my entire body tremble.

We turn the corner, and I close my eyes, leaning my head against the headrest, repeating a peaceful mantra to myself over and over to fight against the building anxiety.

“Wendy?” Wolff asks cautiously, turning off the car and resting a hand gently on my forearm. I open my eyes and look directly at him, refusing to address the fact that I'm even at my house to begin with. “We're here.”

I take a deep breath and look forward, spotting something unusual on the front porch. My dad and Veronica are both standing with their tattered suitcases at their side. I have to blink a few times to make the situation make sense.

They don't have the money to go on a vacation, and all their respective relatives cut them off a long time ago. Where the hell could they be going?

Wolff gets out of the car before me and runs around to open my car door. Veronica's

eyes fall on me as I step out, and I brace myself for some rude comment that doesn't come. Wolff holds a hand over the small of my back as he guides me toward the two of them on the porch.

Naomi is nowhere around, but when I look for her, I see her peeking out of the front window with a curious look on her face.

“What's going on?” I finally ask, looking between the three of them to figure out where I stand in the situation.

Neither my dad nor Veronica seems to want to speak, but Wolff clears his throat and crosses his arms in front of him, urging them to say something.

“The only reason you're staying here is because of Naomi, right?” Dad asks, his voice flat and emotionless. I can hear him slurring his words slightly, letting me know he's already started drinking today. “If you want her so bad, we're not going to stand in your way anymore.”

I shake my head because I still don't understand what this means. Veronica rolls her eyes and cracks a knuckle, gripping her suitcase.

“We've signed Naomi's parental rights over to you. You're her new guardian,” Veronica explains, her voice tight and constricted, like she's angry about it.

Ever since Naomi was a baby, she never did anything to take care of her. The only thing she would be remotely upset about is losing a dependent for her tax return and welfare checks.

“I'm sorry, come again?” I look up at Wolff who is once again smiling down at me.

“You're Naomi's guardian now, so you can do whatever you want. You don't have to

stay here with her,” he explains, pulling me closer to him and kissing the top of my head. “You can come home with me now. There's plenty of room for Naomi at my house. Both of you will be well taken care of.”

I don't know how to feel. I'm shocked and confused, but I'm thrilled. My dad has been making my life a living hell since the day I was born, and I won't have to put up with him anymore.

Naomi won't have to put up with him. No more being locked in a room and going to bed without dinner.

No more walking on eggshells for fear he's going to drag her away and toss her in the bedroom, leaving bruises on her like he left on my arm.

Naomi and I can be happy for the first time in ages.

I look up at Wolff with a giant smile on my face as a cab pulls up for Veronica and my dad. Neither of them bothers saying goodbye before climbing in and leaving.

“Let's go pack. I want to hit the road as soon as possible,” Wolff says, smacking me on the butt playfully and urging me into the house.

One of the only benefits of being poor is not having a lot of possessions to pack when it's time to move. Naomi and I fit just about everything we care to take in a couple of duffel bags. It only takes about an hour before we're climbing in Wolff's car, ready for the road trip of a lifetime.

Naomi is understandably a little upset about it.

She's young, and I know she still had hope that things might turn around, that her parents loved her enough to change.

Today, she learned that they don't. Hopefully, I can be enough for her.

With Wolff by my side, I know we will do everything to make sure she's cared for.

After a few hours of driving and a very large celebratory meal at a diner near the interstate, we're back on the road and Naomi is passed out cold in the back seat. The sun has set, and stars twinkle above us as if guiding us toward the home we will share in Oregon.

I look over my shoulder to make sure Naomi is still sound asleep before leaning in and kissing Wolff on the cheek.

“Now that it's over, will you tell me how you did it?” I ask, forcing the sad puppy dog look on my face to convince him. He hesitates and shakes his head, clearly not wanting to give away his secrets. “If we're about to start a life together, we need to have it on a clean slate. No secrets.”

He nods, reluctantly glancing toward me before looking back at the road. “I didn't want to tell you because I was afraid it would hurt your feelings. But I paid them off.”

I sit upright and look at him, my eyebrows furrowed while I try to come to terms with what he's saying. “How much?”

“Fifty grand, all cash.” He carefully looks between the road and me to gauge my reaction. I just lean against the seat and think more about it.

My parents essentially sold Naomi to me for fifty grand. That's heartbreaking to know. Most parents would rather die than give up their children, and mine took a relatively small amount of money, all things considered, and will more than likely piss it all away within the year.

They've done a lot of awful things, but selling away their parental rights really takes the cake. That being said, I'm not mad about it. Maybe everything worked out exactly how it was supposed to. If they weren't such shitty parents, I wouldn't be on my way to Oregon with my soulmate.

They might be assholes, but I'm glad that's how they turned out. If it weren't for that, my future would look a lot less enticing.

I grab Wolff's hand and squeeze it, silently letting him know I'll be okay. He holds it for the duration of the drive, and I know there's not a chance in hell he's ever going to let it go.

WOLFF

The farther west we drive, the more connected I feel to my kin once again. Driving out to find Wendy is probably the best thing I've ever done with my life, but I've missed Whispering Pines desperately.

Wendy and Naomi are both very excited about what the future holds for them.

I had already told Wendy about shifters, and since Naomi is going to be living with us, we had to tell her about it during the drive too.

She had a lot of questions, which is understandable.

For that matter, Wendy also had a lot of questions.

She never had a chance to ask them when I told her a few days ago.

I tell them all about the pack, letting them know who the alpha and beta is, explaining what the dynamics are as well.

Whispering Pines is a self-sufficient town where my entire pack lives.

It's a territory we've carved out in the Tillamook Forest, hidden away from the common paths that humans would take to get there.

There are a few other territories in the area, some of which we are allies with and some we aren't. I warned them about some of the dangers of living in a place like this,

but they don't seem that fazed.

They grew up in a volatile household and learned to take care of themselves.

I'm confident they will be able to hold their own with my pack.

When we finally arrive, they can't contain themselves as they jump out of the car and look at the beauty sprawling out before them.

Whispering Pines looks like a town from a storybook.

All the houses are made of wooden logs and stone, perfectly laid out in front of sprawling gardens, which allows us to grow our own food.

If we chose to, none of us would ever have to leave. Everything we need and then some can be found in our little town.

Some of the other pack members are waiting for us when we reach the center of town. All of them knew I would find my mate, and when I told them I was on my way back with her, they were ecstatic. All of them know just how long I've been waiting for this.

Wendy's a little nervous to meet them, but everyone is very welcoming. They all hug her and hold her close, complimenting her beautiful hair or her adorable smile. They tell us how we make such a perfect couple.

A few of the kids in the pack walk up excitedly when they see Naomi standing behind the two of us and they invite her to play.

She's hesitant at first, but I nudge her gently on her back to let her know it's okay.

The kids here aren't going to make fun of her like they did back in Swanton.

Here, it's an actual community. Everyone relies on each other and we have no tolerance for malicious behavior.

“If you'll all excuse us, I have to show Wendy to her new house,” I say, practically dragging her away from some of the pack members. Everyone has tons of questions about her, and she almost seems flustered under all the attention. She's relieved when I pull her away.

“I never expected everyone to be this nice,” she comments, wrapping an arm around my waist as I lead her to my house nestled in the woods.

Her jaw practically hits the ground when she sees how big my house is.

For one man, it was way too much. But I always knew I would have a big family filling it one day.

So I built it to be extravagant. It's two stories with five bedrooms, an oversized kitchen for cooking feasts nearly every night, and a luxurious pool with a hot tub in the backyard.

The interior is more simply designed. I always had a sense that my mate would want a say in what the house interior was like, so I've decorated sparingly. As we walk through each room on the tour, Wendy points out all the different things she would love to do with the space.

When I show her the kitchen, her eyes go wide. “This will be the perfect place for some of those baking experiments,” I say, resting my hand on the large kitchen island. “Just let me know what you need and I'll get it for you.”

“All of this still feels like a dream,” Wendy says as she traces her finger along the virtually untouched stovetop. I'm not much of a cook, so I steered clear of it for the most part. “But it's a dream I never want to wake up from.”

“The good news is that you don't have to,” I say, wrapping an arm around her waist to pull her close for a kiss. She wraps her arms around my neck and leans her body against me, letting my warmth wrap around her. “There's one last thing I need to show you.”

I grab her hand and lead her upstairs to the primary suite.

This is where I focused the majority of my time building the house.

In the center of the room is a king-size bed with luxurious cotton sheets and a simple red comforter.

At one end of the room is the entrance to the primary bathroom, complete with a Jacuzzi tub and sauna.

On the other end is a stone fireplace with two armchairs resting in front of it.

“Our mating bond isn't complete yet,” I say, taking her hand and leading her toward the bed. We sit on the edge of it as I look into her eyes. “I found you, but the next step is accepting the bond.”

“How do we do that?” Wendy asks, not hesitating.

“Before we do, I need you to understand that there's no way to break this bond. Once we're connected, our spirits will be intertwined until we die,” I say, keeping my voice low and calm, hoping to portray the serious nature of it all.

“That's okay. I want that,” Wendy replies with a smile. “My life was bleak before I met you, and now I have an incredible future ahead of me. All of that is thanks to you. I don't want to go another moment without being bound to you.”

I lean forward and kiss her, running my fingers through her hair. “To accept the bond,

I have to mark you. While we make love, I'll bite your neck, and it'll open the bond between us."

"Will it hurt?"

"Not at all. Actually, from what I hear, it's very pleasurable," I say, grinning at her.

She looks at the oversized bed behind her and lies back, beckoning me forward with a finger. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

I stand and smile before leaning forward and unbuttoning her jeans, tearing them off her and tossing them aside. She tries to cover herself instinctively with the oversized shirt she's wearing, but I don't let her. She's about to be mine, and I want to see every inch of her.

"You're so sexy," I say as I lift the shirt over her head, studying every curve of her body. I trace my fingers along her skin reverently, admiring just how soft she feels.

I unhook her bra and free her breasts so I can massage them with my hand. I lower my mouth, taking her nipple and swirling my tongue around it. Wendy moans and runs her fingers through my hair as she holds me against her.

Her breath quickens, and she spreads her legs wider, desperate for some kind of relief, the more I tease her. She'll have that soon enough. I want to savor every moment of this.

When she's completely naked, she lies back on the bed, and I stare at her body, practically drooling while I undress.

"Good god," Wendy says with a slight laugh. "You're so hot. How did I get so lucky?"

“I'm asking myself that same question,” I say as I slip out of my pants, freeing my stiff cock.

I climb on top of her and grind myself against her, letting her feel just how turned on I am for her.

She's already wet, and it's extremely enticing.

My wolf knows what's about to happen, and he's ready to take over and claim his mate once and for all.

I kiss her neck while I explore her body, my hand Landing between her legs as I slide a finger inside her.

Wendy moans, closing her eyes and holding her mouth open as tiny whimpers escape her throat.

I rub her clit with my thumb, watching her entire body shake as electric jolts of pleasure course through her.

“I'm ready,” she whispers as she's getting close to orgasm. I pull my hand away and wrap it around my cock, letting her juices slather it before I position myself at her entrance.

“I want to look at you,” I say, hovering above her face as she opens her eyes to meet mine. I slide inside her, and this time, there's no discomfort or tension in her body. She welcomes me in with ease, letting me move as deep as I can, filling her entirely. “I love you, Wendy.”

I don't stop pumping as I watch her eyes widen, and the smile grows on her lips. She tries to speak through the moans but struggles.

“I love you, Wolff,” she finally manages to say, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me close to her. I kiss her, feeling how I get closer to orgasm with each thrust.

Her moans grow frantic with each movement, and I can feel her tightening around me, right on the verge of coming. I lower my mouth to her neck, grazing my teeth over the soft flesh, waiting for the perfect moment to sink them in.

Just as I'm about to tip over the edge, I bite her. It feels like I'm being pulled through a wormhole as every cell in my body simultaneously experiences the ecstasy of our lovemaking. I'm dizzy and lightheaded, but I keep pumping as I hold my teeth against her.

“Oh my god, yess!” Wendy cries out, writhing against the bed as she spreads her legs wider for me.

The intensity of the orgasm is unlike anything I've ever experienced. It's like I can feel what she's feeling on top of what I'm feeling. It's intoxicating, like a wheel of pleasure that doesn't stop turning.

I don't know how long we stay like this, but eventually, the pleasure dies down, and I pull my lips from her neck to stare at her beautiful face. She's hardly containing herself as she wipes sweat from her brow.

When both of us are finished, I pull out of her and lie on the bed beside her. I trace a finger over the bite mark on her neck and feel the small divots in her flesh. Anybody looking at her will know she belongs to me now.

“Do you feel any different?” I ask, staring at her with an eager smile.

She nods her head and runs her fingers through my hair lovingly. “It's like something was missing, and I found it. I felt like that for a long time, but I guess I was just

waiting for you. I feel whole now, you know?”

“I do,” I say, leaning in and kissing her again.

I know exactly how she feels. I've been searching for this feeling my entire life, and after years of looking and a cross-country journey, I finally found it in her.

Wendy is here with me now, and she's going to be here until the day I die. But looking at her now, with my mark on her neck, I know she was well worth the wait.

Thank you for reading *Forever Mates*. Don't forget to check out the rest of this collection!