



Hide nor Hare

Author: *Alice La Roux*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Madoc

After dedicating years to tracking down infamous jewellery thief, The Ghost, my mother's illness forces me to admit defeat.

Three years later, working as a PI, I'm hired to track down a missing young shifter who stole from his Warren and vanished.

I expect to find a runaway led astray. Instead, I discover a beautiful man living a suspiciously ordinary life.

We all have secrets, but the more I learn about Blue Aubin, the clearer everything becomes.

He's my Fated Mate.

He's also the one who got away.

Blue

I've finally put roots down and built a life for myself. I have a job, friends, a home.

Away from the High Leap.

Away from The Warren.

Away from the people who use me like another tool in their quest for power.

Paying for my freedom in blood, sweat and tears, I can't go back. I won't.

There's just one problem...No one escapes The Husk.

Total Pages (Source): 16

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

“I just don’t understand what went wrong? He seemed nice!” My friend and colleague tosses his cloth on the tabletop with a huff. I should be used to his little angry outbursts about my failed love life by now, but it still surprised me how invested he was, like my life was some trashy soap opera just waiting to be devoured for his amusement.

“Ciro...” Arching a brow, I give him a small smile and continue wiping down the chalk boards ready for the new menu launch. The bar wasn’t due to open for lunch for another hour or so, but it was all hands-on deck, ready for the changes. Nothing exciting ever happened here, so a new menu always drew a bit of a buzz, along with a few complaints from a few of our grumpy regulars.

Working in a bar had never been a dream of mine, but when I’d landed in Aurora Pines, a small town in Alaska, there weren't a lot of options. And Shep, the owner of Antler Inn, has been more than generous, giving me a job and letting me rent a cabin with a workshop from him near the lake. I say workshop, it was a shed when I first moved in, but gradually over the last year I’ve made it fit for purpose. Not that he really understands the purpose.

“What?” Ciro sounds almost indignant as he continues wiping down the tables across the room, the movement drawing attention to his peachy ass in his faded blue jeans. We were both wearing the green polo with embroidered antlers that Shep had introduced as a uniform about four months ago, but he’d added some rainbow badges to his and stitched in some cute little pink flowers down by his hip. I wore a long-sleeved thin jumper under mine.

Ciro’s light brown hair is curly on top, but it flops down into his eyes as he stands

and starts listing the alpha's attributes on his fingers. "He was an alpha, had his own business, was handsome, huge and seemed to like you a lot."

"Then you date him." Rolling my eyes, I try to drown out his friendly chattering. Ciro was twenty-one, only three years younger than me, but some days I really felt those extra years. He was also an omega, but he was born and raised in this town—he had no clue about what was lurking out in the big, wide world for people like us. The monsters in the shadows.

The other secondary genders, the alphas and betas, saw us as weak. If you were a prey shifter species, that made it even worse. I'd learned to be more selective about my sexual partners, for my safety, just as much for my pleasure.

"Go see if Mazie needs a hand changing the barrel for the IPA and check on the cake. The timer must be about to go off," Shep grumbles as he enters the bar with fresh glasses, putting them out on the shelves. He's wearing his usual checkered shirt with the sleeves rolled up his thick forearms. His salt and pepper beard has been freshly trimmed, but his hair is looking a little ruffled today.

It was only a small town, so we also opened for a lunch service each day. It suited me just fine since I'd rather work the lunch shift, hang around town for a few hours, and then do the early bar shift. I didn't mind closing shifts, but alphas could get a little handsy after a few too many beers and especially during mating seasons.

"But Shep, there isn't exactly a whole lotta choice for hot male alphas in this town." Ciro was still talking about the lumberjack who'd been stopping by every night this week trying to convince me to go out with him.

The rugged bear shifter, who'd wanted me to shift into my Leporidae form so he could stroke me, was not the one for me. It wasn't just because of his weird thing about my fur either, it was because I'm pretty sure I'd fucked his dad last mating

season. Older men were much better in bed and they had zero expectations on a repeat. “Don’t you think Blue is being too fussy?”

Shep gives Ciro a stern look, his blue eyes crinkling a little around the edges. “It’s none of our business.”

“I know, I know.” Ciro blushes, glancing away and I chuckle. His crush on Shep was practically legendary amongst the staff at The Antler. Mazie, one of the other bartenders, told me that Ciro had been begging Shep for a job since he turned eighteen, and it was only because he was friends with Ciro’s parents that he’d eventually caved. A one-sided crush was always painful, or so I’m told. I’d never had a crush on anyone, although I had come close once upon a time. Forming bonds and having relationships wasn’t possible when you moved as much as I did.

“I don’t need an alpha.” I smile, even though inside my stomach is churning. To someone like Ciro, who only wants to fall in love (preferably with Shep), get married and have lots of adorable babies, it was hard for them to understand why that wasn’t my goal in life. All I wanted was my freedom. Anything else was a bonus.

“Don’t you have a heat coming?” The curious sea otter shifter asks, his big blue eyes questioning. An omega’s first heat usually occurred between the ages of 16 and 22, and I knew that Ciro hadn’t experienced his yet.

Shrugging, I draw a sandwich on the board next to the new options. “Hmmm, rabbits work a little differently. We don’t have a heat, more like a breeding season.”

“What’s that like?” Goddess, he was like a toddler with all the questions. “And what the fuck is that meant to be?”

“You get used to it,” I lied, before leaning back to look at my art. “It’s the club sandwich.”

“That is not a sandwich. That’s just an oozing blob. What tomato looks like that?” He laughs as I flip him off with a grin.

I didn’t experience a week of intense heat like other shifters did. Instead, what I went through as a Leporidae shifter dragged on for months. It was like a pot simmering away on the stove. Some days there would be a peak of intense need, where I felt the impulse to breed, but mostly I was just super fucking horny for months. It was horrible. The only thing that made it manageable was the suppressants, which dampened the feeling that I was going to crawl out of my skin if I didn’t get laid. It made me weak. Foolish. And in this world, if you wanted to survive, you couldn’t be either of those things.

Back home, at The Warren, everything was geared around mating season so that it could be enjoyed by The Husk. All the work and preparation for hibernation was done early to account for the dip in productivity. Even lessons would pause or be reduced so that anyone who wanted to partake could. And you were expected to partake as soon as you came of age.

Fuck The Husk.

I refused to live by their rules any more. I’d paid for my freedom with blood, sweat, and tears. I was never going back.

After my shift, I drive my truck out of town, turning off down the unpaved track through the woods before arriving at my cabin. It gets dark early here, just like back home. It’s cold too, the air crisp and fresh each time the snow falls. Maybe that’s why I chose Aurora Pines—misplaced nostalgia for a place I would never return to. Leaving home hadn’t been easy, for more than just one reason, but it had been necessary. I couldn’t stay behind those metal gates any longer. Couldn’t be a puppet on their strings.

Letting myself in, I didn't bother to take off my jacket or my boots. I'm not settling in for the night just yet. There's still work to be done. Waiting for a moment, I listen out for the familiar sounds of Chonky, my cat, coming to welcome me home.

I never planned on getting a cat. Animals were too permanent, a sign that you planned to stay in one place. Chonk just sort of came with the place. Even Shep wasn't sure when or how the large cat had come to live in the cabin, but it didn't really matter. It was his home, and I was just a guest, passing through for a few years before moving on to the next stop.

Once Chonky is fed and has had his ears scratched, I head outside, following a dirt path into the woods. The workshop was almost complete, and it had cost me a pretty penny to get it exactly the way I wanted. One of the first things I'd installed was proper access to electricity and water, along with its own generators, and then a top-of-the-line security system.

I'd had to hire private contractors and fly them out here since there was no one in Aurora Pines who could handle my specs. I'd also expanded the shelter beneath the shed, turning it into a private vault of sorts.

Sitting down at my wooden workbench, I run my hand over the dips and divots I'd already made in some places. In a vice, under a lamp and magnifier, sits my latest piece. The pendant I'm currently working on is beautiful, a teardrop amethyst inlaid with diamonds. There was no doubt in my mind that it would be snapped up quickly on my website.

Shep couldn't understand why I worked shifts at the bar when I made good money with my jewelry, but that was because he hadn't been raised like I was. Jewelry was the price of my freedom, but I wanted a normal life, a normal job, and normal friends. Now that I was free of The Warren and The Husk, I was never going back. The jewels made sure I always had options. A back-up plan.

I wanted the life that was owed to me.

I deserved it.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

I didn't have freezing my balls off in a tiny town in Alaska on my bingo card for this job, but that's because if I ran away from home, I'd be heading for somewhere sunnier. Sitting inside my hired truck in the parking lot of a bar, waiting for the doors to open for lunch, I pull my coat tighter around myself.

Usually, I didn't take on jobs that took me out of state, but the money had been good and I knew tracking down Gwyn Albin, or should I say, Blue Aubin, might take me away from home for a while.

When The Husk contacted me, looking for a missing Omega, I told myself I wasn't going to get involved. Hunting down runaway kids didn't always end well. Telling someone their husband was cheating or that a business partner was embezzling from the firm was very different from telling someone that their child was gone.

My time as an intelligence agent had shown me the very worst side of humanity. From human trafficking to prostitution to drug smuggling, there was no telling where these kids might end up, but they rarely had a happy ending.

I'd been planning to turn down The Husk when I'd been invited to a meeting at The Warren. They brought out pictures of a teenager with silver white hair and dark eyes and I thought to myself, what if I can find him? What if this is one of those rare cases that could have a happy ending? There was just something tugging at the back of my mind and I knew if I didn't take this case, I'd regret it.

I never had much experience working with The Husk. They kept to themselves like most Leporidae species. I wasn't even sure if the group that had contacted me were rabbits or hares, and it was considered rude to ask which sub species they might be.

The Husk was typically made up of the elders of that species, governing and creating laws for those shifters to live by. Abiel, their High Leap, which was similar to a chief or leader, had contacted me via email, insisting that we meet in person to discuss the case.

One of the reasons I'd become a private investigator after leaving my job at Interpol was so that I had the freedom to pick and choose my cases. When they told me it was a missing person's case, a teenager, I turned it down. But Abiel was insistent, almost scarily so, sending me daily emails. I'd also received three letters to my home and several voicemails. I knew what desperation felt like, the way it tastes bitter on your tongue as you chase any glimmer of hope. There's a type of madness rooted in desperation, and Abiel ticked all those boxes.

In the end, my mother had been the one to finally push me into at least accepting the meeting, and so I flew upstate to The Warren 297.

The day I met with Abiel in person, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. The Warren was one of several dotted across the world. It looked like a large sprawling compound at the base of the mountains, the kind I'd previously seen in my work with cults or groups who existed off the grid.

Once my identity had been checked, I'd been let inside the metal gates and directed to a parking lot where Abiel had been waiting for me. I wasn't offered a tour and, in fact, I suspect my visit had been planned very carefully to avoid putting me in contact with any other members of The Husk or the shifters that lived at The Warren. There were only alpha males in the area, despite the number of buildings, and when I'd asked about the population, Abiel had shut me down.

As for Abiel, he greeted me with kind smiles and lots of praise, which instantly set off my alarm bells. He was in his mid-40s, with dark shoulder length hair and a full, neatly trimmed beard and a soft accent. Eastern European, if I had to guess. His

brown eyes barely left me as he led me into his office, almost as if he were afraid that I might run wild inside the compound.

The Husk wanted Gwyn returned to The Warren safely. His parents were anxious and worried that he'd been lured away by friends he'd met on an online forum. Abiel insisted that Gwyn had been a quiet boy, shy and hardworking, until he'd met these so-called friends. I'd seen it before, over and over again. Teens lured away with promises of freedom, wealth, drugs or sometimes for love. They were misled, groomed, and kidnapped. If that was the case, I needed to help bring him home.

Part way through the conversation, something shifted. When I asked how long Gwyn had been away for, he was unable to give me a straight answer—only saying 'too long' or 'long enough'.

The tone shifted again when he mentioned that Gwyn hadn't left The Warren empty handed. Apparently, the teen had stolen some artefacts from The Husk. Abiel refused to disclose what the artefacts were, stating that they were of important religious or cultural status to The Husk, and I didn't push. That wasn't the job. The mission was to return a missing kid, even if something was niggling at the back of my mind. I needed money for the mortgage payments and my mother's hospital bills, and so I kept my nose out of places it didn't belong.

Except, when I started digging, following the tiny breadcrumbs Abiel gave me and pulling a few strings with an old friend back at Interpol, I learned that Gwyn wasn't the teenager Abiel had made me believe he was. I'd had to explain to an indignant Abiel that I wouldn't and couldn't force Gwyn to return if I found him. I legally couldn't, because that would be kidnapping and while I may be willing to flirt a little with the lines of the law, I wasn't willing to break them.

Coming to a compromise, I agreed to track down Gwyn, watch him for a few weeks and deliver my findings to Abiel, so that The Husk could reach out and persuade him

to return and his parents would know that he was safe.

It had been a hell of a hunt, with only scraps of information here and there, some of it making no sense. My big break had been a stroke of luck. While I'd been chasing a sighting in Canada, I'd overheard some contractors discussing a job they'd completed for a white-haired beauty. A beauty by the name of Blanco, who had made them sign non-disclosure agreements and had flown them in specifically for the work.

One of the things I'd picked up about Gwyn was the attachment to his name in some variation, so all of his aliases followed the same 'white' or 'fair' theme, either with the first name or the surname. When I'd heard 'Blanco', I'd just known in my gut it was him.

Getting the contractors to talk had been a little trickier, but nothing a bottle of expensive whiskey and some ego stroking couldn't handle. They'd built him a specialized vault, but had no clue what it might be for, although they had their theories, ranging from an Only Cams streaming hub, to a top-secret spy. I quickly realized it must be where he was keeping the artefacts, if he still had them and while I'd told myself repeatedly, I was not going to poke around, I may have put out some feelers to find out just what the stolen items were. So far, my search was turning up empty-handed.

That's how I found myself booking a rental apartment that belonged to someone who was away for months at a time, in a tiny little town called Aurora Pines. I'd already been in town a week and while I'd been settling in, I'd also been discreetly asking around town—a few questions here and there under the guise of getting to know the locals and learning the history of Aurora Pines. Not that there was all that much history in this sleepy little mountain side town.

My enquiries had led me to Shepherd Coleman, owner of The Antler Inn, a bar in town, one of only two in the immediate area. From there, I was told about the young

bar back and server who works for him, Ciro, and a bartender called Mazie, who also happened to be the cashier's daughter. Nerys, the cashier at the store, was only too happy to tell me about the relative newcomer to their town, and that's how I found him. Gwyn. Or should I say, Blue? Blue with the silver hair, who everyone adored.

From there and with a little help from my next-door neighbor, Mr. Jones, I learned that Blue was a long-term renter of a cabin Shepherd kept out by the lake. He'd inherited it after his fathers had died, and refused to live in it, but he also hadn't wanted to sell it either.

I haven't been able to determine much about Blue's relationship with Shepherd, and whether it went beyond boss and employee—but it wouldn't surprise me. Young runaways often latched onto people who showed them kindness or affection and not only had the older man given Blue a job, but a home too.

Scrolling through the images on my phone, snapshots I'd managed to take covertly while around town, I stare at the young man. He was beautiful, in a tortured poet kind of way, with dark serious eyes, sharp cheekbones and pale skin. His silver hair was either slicked back, or tied up in a small half bun.

Back at my new home, I'd examined the cabin on the internet, digging out old floor plans and using a mapping app but nothing struck me as odd or out of the ordinary. If I wanted to learn more about the vault, I was going to have to check it out myself.

Secrets keep those around you safe. The reason Shep doesn't understand why I was investing so much into the workshop was because I never told him the full purpose—I couldn't. I didn't want to repay his kindness by putting him in danger. If The Husk ever found me, I knew they would drag me back kicking and screaming. And they would use the people around me to make it hurt.

No one ever escaped The Husk. The Warren wasn't just a fortress; it was a prison. The vault underneath my workshop is more than just a secure place to store my jewelry. It also doubles as a computer room of sorts. A way of protecting myself and staying one step ahead.

I may have left The Warren, and the work I did there—but I still kept my toe in that world. The only difference now is there wasn't someone pulling my strings. I got to choose what to get involved with and what to ignore.

When a message pops up on an encrypted app on my phone late on Monday evening, I head out to my workshop and down into the vault. Starting the generator, the three screens flicker to life. The planning board on the wall is bare. It had been a while since I'd taken a job, focusing on getting the workshop finished and my online store running.

Eventually logging in, I video call my friend and accomplice, Tawny. I met Tawny on an online forum when I was a teenager, looking for ways to escape.

A hacker, Tawny was always wheedling his way into various websites and accounts,

stealing information, money, crypto, anything he could get his hands on. The tech genius liked to balance out his sticky fingers morally by helping those less fortunate than him when he came across them, and there I was, alone in the world, searching for a way out.

From behind his screens and firewalls, he helped me plan my escape and built a new life for me every time I moved.

“Blue! Baby! I have a job for you, nice and easy, but it will make that omega Muridae charity you like so much a cool \$25,000. A pair of earrings. In and out.” Tawny’s voice is excited as he hits me with his sales pitch, and it was a pattern I’d come to recognize. The more excited he was and the easier he made the job sound, the more personal the target was to him.

“Hey T, how's it going?” I chuckle, looking at the hacker's big eyes, his light brown skin looking a little pale on the screen. His long dark hair is scraped back into a loose braid and his glasses are perched on the end of his nose. “Getting much sleep these days?”

“Mehh, you know how it is.” He shrugs, looking a little ruffled. His nocturnal nature slipped out into his human side, meaning he often kept strange sleeping patterns, currently being made worse by his new neighbor—who liked to listen to loud music and have guests over at all hours.

“How’s that neighbor of yours?” I probe. He’d been a little tight-lipped about the hot but inconsiderate man next door recently.

Tawny grumbles something to himself, sinking into his oversized hoodie, making himself look smaller but cozy. Making a clicking noise with his tongue, he looks irritated. “Still an annoying fucker.”

“Go on, tell me more about the job.”

Instantly perking up, the corner of his mouth lifts into a wide grin. “So, about 3 hours away from you there’s a nice little dinner going down this weekend.”

“T...” Narrowing my eyes, I look at my best friend.

Holding his hands up, his expression sheepish. “I know, I know you hate public thefts. But the Mayor's wife is a real piece of work and they’ll all be at dinner downtown. So, you just need to slip into their hotel room and slip right back out.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. “You want me to steal from a mayor?”

On any job there were risks, but on public, high-profile jobs, those risks went through the roof. They had time, money and resources that the average person didn’t and that made them dangerous. It didn’t mean I couldn’t do it, just that a little more precision was required.

“Trust me—they deserve it.” Tawny’s face darkens, his thick dark brows knitting together as he frowns. “This is just one part of what I’ve got planned for them.”

Rubbing my temples, I sigh. “Can’t Tuesday do it?”

Tawny hadn’t been the only online friend who’d also helped me escape. I met Tuesday by chance, on a forum about black market jewelry and valuing pieces. He’d been distant at first, but then we’d had a run in on a heist. He’d wrongly assumed I wanted the pieces he was after. I thought he was stalking me. Turns out we were both partly right.

Tuesday, curious about me, had chosen a job he knew I might be casing as I’d asked a few pointed questions in the forum. Since he’d arrived on the site first, he assumed

which pieces I wanted, and took everything from the safe. Once we'd confronted one another and he realized it was only the one diamond pendant, he offered it to me in exchange for my contact details and that had been that.

"Tuesday is currently pouting with both of us," he says, rubbing the back of his neck, looking guilty. I have no idea how Tuesday and Tawny met, but without the two of them, I wouldn't be free today.

"Why?"

"Because I may have told him that you moved."

I blink. "Yeah, a year ago..."

It wasn't always safe to share my current location. If you've ever heard the phrase 'even the walls have ears', well, the dark web was like that, but worse. You never knew who was watching, lurking, looking for an easy way to make a little cash. There was no honor amongst thieves.

"Well, it turns out he didn't know." Tawny pushes his glasses up his face with his middle finger. "And now he thinks we're excluding him."

"What the fuck?" I scrub my face. It wasn't like Tuesday to care about things like this. He was always a bit of a loner. Just wandering into my life whenever it pleased him, creating a bit of chaos and then wandering right back out again. I don't know if you've ever encountered a pissed off cat, but they weren't much better in their human forms.

"You know what he's like. He's a Maine Coon." Tawny rolls his eyes, the emphasis on 'Maine Coon' meaning 'high maintenance'.

“Cat shifters are grumpy assholes.” I grumble, leaning my head back. When I designed this place, my secret little hideout, there was a part of me that hoped one day I might be able to invite Tawny and Tuesday here in person. I’d never done that. Had friends over for dinner, or even to work on a job. It was all done online apart from the times I ran into Tuesday. But without anyone else, the vault felt too big. Too cold. “I’ll drop him a message.”

“So...are you in?”

I narrow my eyes at the screen, almost feeling sorry for the mayor’s wife. Whatever Tawny had against the woman, it wasn’t going away anytime soon. “When’s this dinner?”

“Saturday.”

“Can’t. I have work.”

“Blue. C’mon man. Easy money for a good cause.”

He was right. A quick in-and-out job at a hotel might seem like more effort than it was worth to me, but to the omega charities I supported, that money made a huge difference.

“Urgh. I’ll text my boss, if he gives me the day off—I’ll do it. If he says no, then you’re outta luck.” That was a fair compromise, right? I knew Shep would likely give me the day, since I rarely took any leave. I had no reason to. No family, and my friends were virtual. There wasn’t much to do in Aurora Pines, so what did I need days off for besides rough patches in mating season?

“Deal.” There’s a loud thumping and Tawny looks over his shoulder, a flash of anger on his face.

When he doesn't say anything, I ask, "Any news from The Warren?"

One day they'll give up.

They have to. I am never going back.

"Only the usual. Every now and again they offer up that bounty for you, but I bury it pretty deep so they hardly get any uptake." Tawny's face softens, the anger from whatever the noise was fading. "I'll keep you as safe as I can."

"I know."

C iro sighs as he pops the cap off a bottled beer for Parker Johnson. That man liked a cold drink with his lunch, probably to drown out his wife's nagging when he got home. That woman was never happy about anything.

"Do you think we might get to see him today?"

"He's not a bloody Monet painting. He's a person." I chuckle. "And people have to eat."

There's only a handful of places you can get lunch made for you in this town, so the chances of running into Mr. Tall and Mysterious were pretty big. Every night this week folks in The Antler have been buzzing about the newcomer, speculating about the handsome man renting out Jeremy Biles' apartment while he's off traveling the world for six months.

They say he's 6 foot five with short reddish-brown hair and a touch of gray at the temples. Nerys, a gossipy woman from the general store, thinks he can't be any older

than 35, with what she calls ‘kind soulful eyes’. What the fuck does that even mean?

I have yet to see our handsome stranger, nor am I really that interested either. Every time someone new arrives in town, my senses are on high alert, wondering if it’s The Husk coming to find me and drag me back to The Warren.

Over the last three years, I’d moved so much, never staying too long in one place or leaving a trace behind, but Aurora Pines was the longest I’d lived anywhere. I thought it might finally be safe—safe enough to make friends and maybe put down a few roots. I didn’t want to be proved wrong.

Quickly, I learn that the rumors prove to be true. And it turns out I am interested. Very much so. Not only is the new edition to the town drop dead gorgeous with copper colored hair and gray eyes, but he’s also extremely patient. It hadn’t taken long for some of the locals to latch onto him during lunch on Thursday, sitting at his table, asking questions like it was a quick fire around.

What was his name?

Where was he from?

How old was he?

What did he do for work?

Why was he in Aurora?

Was he staying long?

Was he single?

Was he looking for love or perhaps a partner for his next rut?

That one garnered the most attention, all eyes swiveling to the rugged, sexy man in the black jeans that hugged his ass and thick thighs. Eventually taking pity on him, I shoo them away from his table, including an overeager Ciro. He could explore his daddy issues elsewhere and leave the stranger to eat his cheesesteak sandwich in peace.

“I apologize for them. They mean well,” I offer up with a one-shouldered shrug as I place his food order down, not missing the way the stranger’s gaze moves over my face.

I wasn’t oblivious to my looks; they were one of the most used tools in my arsenal, but I knew I was like marmite—you either loved me or you stayed well away. People were drawn to my dark eyes and unusual silver hair. There was something about the grungy but painfully pretty omega they couldn’t seem to resist.

The man sitting before me was almost my polar opposite, big and broad with lightly tanned skin and gorgeous fiery hair that was going gray at the temples. He was a wash of color, whereas I was the absence of it.

“We don’t often see new faces in Aurora Pines, so you’re a bit of a novelty.” It’s the truth, there’s not much worth moving to a tiny mountain town that’s buried in snow for half of the year.

“Were you born here?” He asks with a head tilt. In this light, his eyes look almost like ammonites, swirled through with a darker gray. Pretty.

“No.” Replying slowly, I flash him a smile. I don’t know this stranger and I don’t know how much is safe to share even if something about him makes me want to. Instead, I settle for a generic comment. “I was once the one sitting in your place. The

new shiny toy. Ahhh, how quickly they grow bored.”

“You still look pretty and shiny to me.” He groans and I laugh. His cheeks flush as he buries his face in his hands. I’ll take the compliment, the ‘and’ with the blush making it even sweeter. “So, you have the inside scoop on how to survive one of Nerys interrogations?”

“I know a thing or two,” I wink. Flirting comes easily, especially with eye candy like this before me to feast upon. There’s a reason I always made decent tips and always had someone to share my bed if I wanted. Not that they did. I never brought anyone back to the cabin.

“Good, because some days a man just wants to buy a bag of chips, beer and maybe some strawberry lube without it being a discussion on my plans for the evening.” The way his eyes crinkle at the corners tells me he’s teasing, but I can get on board with the flavored lube.

There’s a tightening low in my stomach as I catch hints of wood smoke and moss. Mating season was just around the corner and already I could feel that familiar itch beneath my skin. Something about his scent is recognizable, tickling at the back of my brain, daring me to remember.

“Maybe I could persuade you to share your hard-earned knowledge over dinner on Saturday.” Leaning back, he spreads his thick jean clad thighs. The corner of his mouth lifts while mine waters. Tree trunk thighs are a weakness of mine. That’s how those bear shifters kept luring me in.

Sighing dramatically, I hold my serving tray to my chest. “While I admire your audacity, I’m afraid I already have plans this weekend.”

“I would say confidence. Audacity makes it seem like I don’t have a shot.” With

another charming smile, he swipes his thumb against his bottom lip. “That’s a shame, I feel like we’d have a lot to talk about.”

“Is there anything else I can get you Mr....”

“Smith. Jonah Smith.”

Something about the name feels off. He doesn’t look like a Jonah. I make a mental note to ask Tawny to do a little digging to find the skeletons in Mr. Smith’s closet before I let myself be sucked into those brooding eyes. What was the point in having a hacker best friend if they couldn’t vet your potential dates?

“And you are?” There’s something sharp in his gaze, like a predator latching on his prey, and a shiver runs down my spine. My skin warms slowly, the heat oozing through me.

“You can call me Blue.” It’s not my real name, the name given to me by the High Leap, but it’s a name I chose. The person I want to be.

“Beautiful Blue,” he murmurs, and fuck if it doesn’t make my cock twitch. Would he say it like that as he fucked me?

“Well, I like that even better.” Smiling, I walk away with a wave, but I can feel his eyes on me. And who can blame him? My ass is fantastic.

I barely make it through the next hour of my shift as his stare keeps landing on me, perusing like I’m some sort of artwork on display. It does nothing to help the semi I’m rocking or the building heat spreading through my limbs.

When I’m back in the storeroom, fanning myself in an attempt to stay cool, I wonder what the hell that was? Was I closer to mating season and my ‘heats’ than I first

thought? My body feels like someone shoved a cattle prod up my ass and let loose with the electricity. That was never a good sign. Now was not the time to fall into lust with anyone, not when I had a job to do this weekend. Distractions result in mistakes. Mistakes mean they'll find me. Find me equals no more freedom.

Heading to my locker, I pop out two heat suppressants and toss them back without bothering with water. The bitterness makes me gag, but it also serves as a reminder to get my head on straight. Handsome men weren't worth the risk.

Goddess, I bet he looks incredible naked.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

I must've lost my fucking mind.

I wasn't supposed to be flirting with my mark. I was supposed to be gathering intel. I told myself I was only going to The Antler to confirm that he was Blue Aubin. That he was the Leporidae shifter I was looking for.

Expecting to stumble upon a desperate, lonely and maybe angry young man, instead I found a confident, gorgeous man with the most unusual eyes I've ever seen. They were so dark, they were almost black and when I looked at him, it was like he was luring me in, swallowing me deeper into his abyss.

I don't know what was running through my head when I invited him to dinner. I guess I must've thought it would give me the opportunity to do a little digging, to find out if he was happy with his life.

Abiel wanted him back. The tale he spun me about a wayward teen easily led was crumbling at the seams when I was faced with a man who smiled easily and looked very much at home in Aurora Pines. He seemed happy. How was I supposed to convince him to return to the war?

More intel was needed, and perhaps that would involve befriending him. Flirting a little more. And if he decided to take me up on my offer of dinner...well, we'd cross that bridge when we reached it.

His rejection could be beneficial. If he was out of town on Saturday, that would give me the opportunity to take a look around a little more. I was already planning a little visit to the cabin tomorrow just to scout it out, but Saturday would give me a bit more

time.

Something was off about this job. A part of me wanted to turn around and go back home, my instincts whispering that the pieces of the puzzle don't fit. However, leaving wasn't an option, I needed the money.

Three years ago after The Ghost slipped through my fingers on a job in Germany, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Sickness in shifters was rare, so the treatment had to be aggressive. Aggressive also meant expensive.

My job at Interpol had taken me to places all over the world. I lived in cities some people would only ever read about online or in books. For a while I even had a base in Berlin in Mitte. It was only a small apartment that never really felt like home. It only had a few pieces of furniture and nothing personal, but when I received the call about my mother and I had to move home, it was harder to pack my life into those boxes than I thought it would be.

I loved my work, but I couldn't be halfway across the world when the woman who raised me needed me. My brothers, Kingsley, Arlo and Finn urged me not to worry and they tried to convince me not to return home but what kind of son would that make me? Besides, they had their own lives too, Arlo had been dealing with the end of an abusive relationship and Flynn was a single parent to two small girls. Kingsley was the youngest, barely out of college, how were we supposed to put this on his shoulders?

As the oldest, it was on me to make sure everyone was cared for. So, using all of my savings, I made the move and covered the treatment, making sure my mother was cared for. My brothers had done a lot of the running around while I got all my ducks in a row, and between us we made it work.

What they don't really talk about, is the after-care required. While my mother

underwent treatment, her quality of life dropped. She needed help and support beyond what we could provide at times, despite me moving in to be with her.

Even now, though she was in remission, it didn't mean her life went back to normal. The treatment had made her weak and ruined her immune system, so we decided she needed help at home—that was another expense to add to the list. I wasn't bitter about it because I would give every penny I had and the shirt off my back for the woman who raised me but it did mean I needed to make adjustments.

Being a Private Investigator (PI) started because it was a way to stay close to home, well...closer and it allowed me to pick and choose my jobs depending on how well my mother was doing at the time. The money was also decent. A big job might mean that I didn't need to work for the rest of the month so I could spend that time with my mother. I think that was one of the biggest lessons I've learned about her sickness, time is finite. And time is worth more than money.

After lunch at The Antler, I head back to my rented department. Inside I've taken over the dining table with my paperwork, there's a mix of notes, photos and even blueprints. It's everything I have on Blue but it still doesn't tell me what I want to know.

Abiel doesn't know where I am currently. I hadn't wanted to give him any updates until I knew for sure that my lead panned out because I didn't trust him. Information in the wrong hands could be dangerous and while he played the role of caring and concerned High Leap, I had no way of knowing just how important the stolen items were or how far he might be willing to go to get them back. I couldn't risk giving him the wrong information and someone innocent being caught up in this wild chase spanning three years and crossing state lines.

I did however, still have to give him some sort of update. Sending him a brief email, I just explained that I might have found a lead and it was taking me out of state for a

while with a promise to check in as soon as I found something concrete.

At a loss for a few hours until I could scope out the cabin during the evening shift at the bar, I decided to check in with a contact back at Interpol. Jason Landrey, my ex-colleague and the closest thing to a close friend I have answers after only two rings.

“Hey, just calling to thank you again for the favor.”

Jason had sent across some files to help with my search and done a bit of a background check on Shepard Coleman, coming up with nothing out of the ordinary.

“Don’t mention it man. Like seriously, don’t.” Jason chuckles.

Is it strange to miss someone’s laugh? We worked together for so long but now it was the occasional phone call and a beer when both of us were in the same city—which happened very rarely.

“I’m just joking with you, Mad Dog. How’s things in Aurora Pines? Cold as fuck?”

The use of my old nickname makes me grin. I’d earned it for being relentless, like a dog with a bone, despite being a fox shifter. It was also a play on my name, Madoc, rooted in Welsh history and meaning good fortune or blessed. Besides The Ghost, I had an excellent track record for closing cases.

“How did you know?” I glance out the window. While there was no snow falling currently, there was a dusting of it on the streets outside. From the apartment, I had a fantastic view of the mountains and the snow-covered trees. It almost looked like a painting.

“Because the town spends half the year buried in snow.” He had a point. A part of me regrets that I won’t be here to see the spring. I bet it looks beautiful when all the snow

melted and the greenery and the flowers came to life. My mother would like it here. It's peaceful. Maybe I could bring her one day.

"So, are you going to tell me about the job?" Jason nudges, and I realize I miss this, too. Having someone to brainstorm and talk through ideas with. Going it alone as a PI wasn't as glamorous as Interpol, and a heck of a lot lonelier.

"Just a standard missing person case." Rubbing my forehead, I grunt quietly.

This entire case was giving me a headache, a steady throbbing as the intelligence analyst part of my brain was questioning everything. Overthinking. Connecting the dots when I was only being paid to find a person who I had already found.

He makes a humming noise, and I can picture him now, nodding along while sat at his desk, dark hair flopped over into his big brown eyes. "But something about this isn't quite standard, is it? I recognize that tone. I worked alongside you for five years man—give me some credit!"

"Do you know much about Leporidae shifters? Or The Warrens?" I don't know why I'm asking, I should just stop digging. Stop making more work for myself but it's like a compulsion.

"The Warrens or Burrows are sites where Leporidae live and there are Warrens in almost every large city." Jason clicks his tongue. "In Europe, they're bigger compounds. More of them tend to live together."

That was what I knew too. I couldn't ask Jason to do a deeper dive, it might trigger something and I didn't want to put him at risk like that.

"The Warren 297 is the one that reached out and this missing person case is for them." I admit, getting to my feet and pacing around the living area while I tried to

work through my scattered thoughts.

“Huh, I thought that species hated outside intervention or help?”

“Me too. But the missing person might have also stolen from The Husk.”

There’s silence down the line before he murmurs, “Oh shit.”

The Husk, as the ruling group of Leporidae, commanded a certain level of respect. It was either incredibly ballsy or insanely stupid to steal from them.

“I mean, those guys always gave me cult vibes so just be careful Mad. Don’t trust anything they say.” Jason’s voice is tight, solemn, as he tries to offer advice we both know I’m not going to take. “Just do the job and get out of there.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

When I drive out to the lake, in my rented truck, it’s already dark. I hadn’t originally planned on hiring a vehicle, but it turned out to be a necessity when I realized I was coming to Aurora Pines. A lot of the area was mountainous or made up of dirt tracks and walking trails.

Following one of the dirt tracks towards a hiking trail parking lot, I pull up and park. There are no other vehicles nearby, probably because it’s not quite a busy season for camping and hiking just yet.

Stripping my clothes off and cursing the chill in the air that promises fresh snow, I shove them into my backpack and into the truck. Stretching out my shoulders and my neck, I get ready to shift.

The familiar tingling sensation starts in my core and spreads outwards, warming my body as the tingling turns into prickling and everything begins to morph. My bones and ligaments twist and shift as I become my other self.

It's not an entirely painless process and the reason why the majority of shifters choose to live in their human forms most of the time. There are even cases of people who have become trapped as their animal selves, refusing to endure the shift back, afraid of the sensations.

When the process is finally finished, I exhale and center myself. I love being a fox. It's the form where I feel most at home. Everything is simpler, easier and instinct driven. I'm still there, but it's like some of the inhibitions have fallen away.

As a fox, the world is much brighter, the darkness no longer the same obstacle as I start to run. The Coleman cabin is on the other side of the lake and since I'm limited on time, I can't stop and enjoy the run even though that's what my alpha nature demands.

The dirt beneath my paws feels fresh and soft, as I run, freer than I have felt in weeks. The woods were my domain, where my inner predator felt most powerful. Sticking close to the tree line as a precaution, I race around the edge of the lake, following the curve until I get nearer the Coleman cabin.

If you close your eyes and picture a lake almost so still that it appears glasslike. Soft gentle ripples break the surface here and there, looking like you could almost reach out and run your fingers along the ridges. Pine trees stand proud and tall, wide and towering, with all different hues of rich greens sprinkled with snowy tops. A pebble embankment rises up out of the water, slowly morphing into grass and there sits the cabin.

There are three small steps leading up to the porch that wraps around half of the cabin

and overhangs the lake. The roof is covered in a dusting of snow, just like the surrounding tree. It's not very large, and it needs a little bit of love, but it's still postcard worthy.

There are no lights on, which is not a surprise, as I know Blue is currently working his evening shift at The Antler. I don't have much time because from what I've observed, he typically doesn't work until closing. If it's a quiet night down at the bar, he might finish early and I don't want to be still in the woods when he does.

Besides, this is only a preliminary observation.

I walk around the entirety of the cabin, taking into consideration floor plans that Jason sent me across and referencing them with some older plans I found online. I know that the majority of the cabin is open plan with a bedroom and bathroom installed upstairs. They were late editions, only added earlier this year and, from what I understood, had been Blue's doing.

Thanks to the creatures that live in the woods and around the lake, the scents here are jumbled, an intricate weaving of smells, but I can still pick out something sharp and sweet. It's stronger than the others, but I still can't quite pluck that thread.

Releasing pheromones or spreading your scent was not the 'done' thing. It was considered rude. Most people used scent inhibitors or suppressants when they were in public, so even though I've been close to Blue at The Antler, I still hadn't been able to pick up his scent clearly enough to get a read on it now.

After circling the cabin a few times, and taking a closer look at the foundations of the building, I head back to my truck, taking a different route through the trees this time.

The contractors had talked about an underground vault, but nothing I'd seen suggested that it was beneath the cabin. There were no signs of disturbance to the

cabin foundations or the surrounding grounds. It was also too close to the lake for it to be a wise choice for a vault. Which means it had to be built elsewhere in the woods, but where?

I didn't have the time to explore, not when Blue could return at any moment. Granted, he would only see my fox form, but I wasn't prepared for that just yet. I might need this secret later.

Just what was Blue hiding out in the woods?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

I 'm taking a break from folding napkins to fan myself when Ciro hip checks me with a wry smile. Leaning in, he grumbles. "Enjoy your time off. Traitor."

"I'll be at work on Monday. Don't act like I'm abandoning you." I chuckle as I go back to folding. I was distracted today, probably the anticipation about tonight making me restless. Saturday mornings at The Antler were usually one of my favorite times of the week. It was my turn to help bake the pastries and cakes for the weekend's menus.

Back when I lived at The Warren, I was never allowed near the kitchens. That was a role reserved for the omega females. Everyone had their place, and you never stepped a toe out of line or tried to move from it. You never got to try new things. I hated it.

Growing up, I was given a very specific role and so my education was tailored to that. The Husk wanted to use me for a distinct role, and so I was taught physical skills, like gymnastics, running, sparring, and technical skills. I wasn't anywhere near as talented as Tawny, but I wasn't some clueless newbie when faced with code.

But coding wasn't cake. I liked baking, it turns out. Learning to cook when I first left The Warren, I'd signed myself up for an online class to learn some basics. I'd never even boiled an egg before I left the compound in Russia. On jobs, there was never enough time to learn, and I'd lived off fast food or the food that had been given to me along with my kit. After my escape, when I moved a few times, I felt more comfortable booking an in-person class. Neither of those had covered cakes or pastries.

Shep had been extremely patient with me when I first started working here. He let me

make lots of mistakes, and he taught me just as many things. I think that's why I've stuck around as long as I have. Here, I've had the time and space to learn new things. To just be Blue Aubin, no questions asked. The townspeople welcomed me so easily, as if I'd always been a part of Aurora Pines.

"But you're my work bestie! What am I going to do without you?" Ciro throws an arm around my neck and tries to bury his face in my shoulder, mock crying. Loud, fake sobs as the scent of saltwater and lilac washes over me in his embrace. The feeling of him against me is over stimulation and I try to shove him away.

"I heard that!" Maz yells as she wipes the bar down. "You can clean the lines on your own tomorrow."

"Awh Maz, Mazieeeee. You know I'm just joking." Dropping me like I'm a hot stone, burning through his flesh, Ciro tips his lips with his finger in speculation. "Well, with you gone, maybe the red-head with the big tiddies will finally look my way."

Shep chooses the wrong moment to walk into The Antler, choking on his coffee. "The big what?"

His eyes narrow as he hands out the cups of takeout coffee he brought with him. We had a machine behind the bar, but nothing was ever as nice as Lachlan Dower's coffee over at Little Bean, the only coffee shop in town.

"Have you seen his muscles?" Ciro leans on a nearby table, resting his chin in his hands and grinning at Shep mischievously. "He must work out. A lot. Maybe naked. Do you think he works out naked Blue? Those pecs look like they'd be a good place to rest my head."

The appreciative sound he makes is echoed by Mazie, and both Shep and I stare at

them. Had my colleagues lost their mind? A small feral part of my brain snarls, mine! But I ignore it. I had no right to Jonah.

“How would I know?” I roll my eyes, setting aside the napkins and moving onto the condiment bottles, keeping an eye on the time so I know when to check on my chocolate brownies. I have less than four minutes.

“Mazie, if Jonah comes in this weekend, keep Ciro away from him.” Shep gives Ciro a stern look, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say there’s just a hint of jealousy in that glare of his.

With a mock salute, Maz grins. “Yes, sir.”

“Spoilsport.” Ciro tuts. “I’m allowed to flirt and have a little fun if Blue’s out of the picture, aren’t I?”

Tossing my hands up, I abandon the ketchup and start heading into the kitchen, the smell of gooey brownies wafting out into the bar. “Why do I keep getting dragged into this conversation?”

Ciro snorts, crossing his arms and giving me a look that seems to say I’m stupid. “Because Mr. Smith comes in and only has eyes for you?”

“He does not.” I refuse to blush or let myself get caught up in silly fantasies. Sure, he asked me to dinner, but that meant nothing. Not really.

“He waits for you to serve him,” Ciro argues, pointing a finger at me, his other hand on his hip. Wasn’t he just full of sass today?

“He only talks to you.” Maz adds with a shrug as she cuts lemon slices. Today her dyed blue hair is braided, falling half way down her back.

Shep clears his throat before giving me an apologetic look. “He also stares at you when he thinks you aren’t looking.”

“Et tu, Shep?” Shaking my head, I rub my temples, even though there’s a small warmth blooming somewhere in my chest. A tendril of ‘what if’ that I’m ignoring until Tawny gets back to me with his background check. “You’re all delusional.”

When I leave after the lunch shift with a few of the brownies I’d made today in a takeout carton, I’m feeling pretty good about this mission tonight. Jonah had stopped by for lunch, and did I maybe notice he took extra care to talk to me? Maybe. Was I more conscious of eyes on me than normal? Possibly. Did those thick thighs of his make me a little horny? Definitely.

Once I’m back at the cabin, I take a quick shower and get myself into the right frame of mind. Tonight might be an easy in-and-out mission, but I wasn’t about to get sloppy now.

Dressed in lightweight clothes, all black, I grab my bag and head out to the workshop. I keep all my tools and gear inside the vault in a black rucksack that can be left behind if anything goes awry. I’d learned that lesson the hard way over the years, after numerous scrapes and close calls where I thought I might never escape in one piece, let alone be able to grab my possessions. Belongings were replaceable. I was not.

I still remember my first job and what a disaster that had been. The Husk wasn’t known for being very caring or nurturing towards the young in The Warren, and my Warren had been no different. They left me outside of a jeweler’s in London with nothing more than a phone, a multi-tool, 50 pounds and a mask. My mission was to break in, steal a necklace, and find my way home back to Russia in less than three

weeks. I was eight.

Did I get the job done?

Of course I did.

I was chosen for a very specific role for a specific reason. I was one of the best.

Using the phone to jam the alarm signal, I got in through a basement window. It was the exit that was the issue, and I triggered an alarm I didn't account for.

The noise had startled me and I panicked. I was eight. Police cars pulled up outside the shop, lights flashing as voices shouted in a language I didn't understand back then and I knew that I couldn't go out the way I had come in. There was no hope of leaving via the front door either, not unless it was in handcuffs.

Instead, I found myself climbing out of an upstairs window, but the lock had been jammed, painted over repeatedly over the years. So, I'd smashed it, only I wasn't thinking clearly and succeeded in slicing my forearm open as I scarpered out of the window and onto a flat roof. From there I'd run across the roofs, clambering and climbing over what must have been half of London until the sirens were quieter. Only then did I think about how to get down. I'd eventually shimmied down a drainpipe in someone's garden, landing on their shed roof before jumping down and escaping the garden via a side gate.

I'd been worried about the DNA evidence left behind, but then I remembered I was part of The Warren. My birth was probably never registered anywhere. I was a no one in the world. I didn't even know who my parents were, all the children born inside The Warren were surrendered to the nursery. Since we could move warrens, swapped and changed out like trading cards, there's no way to know if I was even born in Russia.

All of this had been before I could fully control my shift, otherwise I might have turned into my hare form and hidden. Or maybe even darted out the front door since I was exceptionally fast, even at that age.

High Leap Abiel had been furious at my carelessness, and I was punished for an entire week when I eventually found my way back. They'd whipped me, leaving angry welts across my back and down my legs before confining me to my room with nothing more than bread and water. That was, if they remembered to feed me.

Did I mention that I was eight?

I feel like that's an important fact to remember. It's what I pin my anger on every time I ever feel slightly nostalgic about the life I once had. I was a child and instead of taking care of me, they turned me into a tool. They were right in one regard. I never made the same mistakes again. I became the best jewel thief they had.

Swapping out my truck halfway to my destination, I leave it parked outside a rental apartment that I'm barely going to spend any time in. But it provides me with an alibi and a paper trail if I need one. Tawny also rustled up a few fake receipts to show that I went out for dinner at a restaurant down the street whose cameras are unfortunately off line for the evening.

When I pull up outside the hotel, I look up at the building and start trying to visualize how tonight will go. It's an impressive building, seven floors, historic architecture and the cars that pull up to the valley at the front just scream money. It's clearly a hotspot for the wealthy and the privileged. I'm not surprised the mayor and his wife are staying here this evening. After all, it's not like they're paying for their hotel room out of their own pockets.

Using the information Tawny provided, my plan is to find a back way into the building. Checking in as a guest was too risky, especially with my appearance. My

white hair and dark eyes always stuck in people's memories, which was no good when you wanted to remain incognito.

I'd already spotted several kitchen staff smoking out by an alley and realized that this might be my best way in. The other option was to enter the office building next door, which stood higher than the hotel, and enter the room from the roof.

Usually, I'd be all for the dramatic flair. There was something about using ropes and spy maneuvers that made me feel more important and skilled, but tonight I really did just want to get in and out. Then I could crash back at the rental apartment. I made sure he'd booked one with a hot tub on the balcony, just in case I had time for a soak. Ideally, I wanted my own bed, but that might look suspicious if anyone in town saw me return early when I'd made a big song and dance about being out of town for the night.

After watching the alley door for two hours, making a mental note of who the regular smokers were and how often they seemed to take a break, I moved my borrowed car and parked a few blocks away. If I followed the two waiters who seemed to come out fairly regularly back inside, then I should be able to blend in with them in the busy kitchen.

With my bag slung over one shoulder, I briskly walked back to the hotel and chuckle to myself as everything goes to plan. It's almost incredible how easy it is to slide into the kitchen without anybody batting an eyelid. They probably have a regular turnover of waiting staff, so they never bother remembering their faces, only seeing the black clothes before turning back to their tasks.

Using the back stairs that staff usually use for room service orders, I make my way up to the first floor and slip out into the corridor before getting into the elevator, blending in with a group of hotel guests. Pushing the button for the top floor, I stand at the back of the elevator, behind everyone else, and wait for the various stops.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes when we finally reach the top floor, because, of course, the mayor and his wife are staying in one of the penthouse suites.

As the doors open, I clock security. Only one lonely bodyguard standing outside of the door at the end of the hallway. The rest of the security measures must be at the swanky dinner with the couple.

Letting the doors close, I go down onto the floor below and get out. Once I'm outside the room directly under theirs, I slot in an earpiece and tap it twice.

"Hoo's calling?" Tawny snickers.

"I swear your shitty owl jokes never get any better."

"I'm an owl, I'm allowed to make shitty jokes." He sounds cheery, clearly happy that the mayor's wife was going to be down a very expensive diamond set by the time the sun rose tomorrow. "You're cranky today."

Swallowing, I ignore the statement. I'd been feeling a little off kilter this week, unable to regulate my temperature or my moods, but I'd been doing my best to hide it. It felt like ants crawling under my skin, like something needed to give, but I didn't know what.

"Are you sure room 308 is clean?" I ask, keeping my voice low so as not to draw any attention from anyone in a nearby room who might be able to hear me.

"Of course it is." My ever-confident friend scoffs. 'Clean' was our code word for empty, and Tawny may have done a little room rearrangement earlier to ensure that no one checked into 308 tonight. "Is your mating season due, is that it?"

"Maybe," I reply noncommittally as I tug my gloves on, although I know that's likely

it. I'd been burying my head in the sand, in denial the last couple of days, but I was also taking suppressants like they were candy.

Once this job was done, I'd either need to find a willing alpha to burn off a little steam with, or spend a few days in the cabin with my favorite toys, just to take the edge off. The mating heat was always worse in the beginning and towards the end, like your body was demanding you breed and punishing you for not.

The peaks or episodes that I'd mentioned to Ciro were unpredictable, and similar to the heat he'd experience, except they wouldn't last as long because they came more frequently. When people joke about people fucking like bunnies, they don't realize how similar all Leporidae breeds are, including hares. The insane mating season is the reason why.

With my pocket toolkit, I pick the lock and let myself into the room. I didn't want this to take any longer than it had to

Unlike Tuesday, I wasn't naturally a climber, but I was good at leaping and bounding. It came in useful on nights like tonight where I'd need to free climb up to the floor above and sneak in through a window.

Sliding open the room window, I sit on the wide ledge and look up. The good thing about decorative old buildings as they often had lots of nooks and crannies where I could place my fingers and toes and pull myself up. The trickiest part would be opening the window from the outside while not falling seven floors to my death. Well, that might be a bit dramatic. But I wasn't in a position to risk any broken bones, so falling wasn't an option.

Leaving my backpack in 308 and only taking what I need, my pocket kit, some rope tied around my torso for the descent and a small black velvet bag for the jewelry, I climb out onto the ledge.

Tonight must be my lucky night. It turns out, Mayor Thornhill likes to leave his windows propped open. I'm able to get my fingers into the gap and push it open easily before climbing inside.

They've even kindly left a lamp turned on, making my job even easier. The suite itself is quite large, with a living room and several doors leading off on either side. Personally, I feel like the decor is a little dated, but I'm not a fifty-something politician.

Tapping my earpiece again, I contact Tawny, who's waiting eagerly.

"T, I'm in. Where's the room safe?" I ask as I open the door closest to me and find an empty room, no luggage. How many rooms did they even need for a one-night visit?

"Oh, she won't have put them in there. When they travel, she brings along a special case with all her jewelry." Tawny makes a huffing noise, as if the case somehow offends him.

Opening the next door, I find the main bedroom, suitcases stacked at the bottom of the open wardrobe, and there are clothes strewn on the bed. Makeup is scattered across the dressing table; they must have been running late earlier.

"It should be either in the wardrobe's bottom or you might find it under the bed." I can hear the sound of keys clacking, and I know Tawny is working away on something else while he chats with me.

"I thought rich people were supposed to be paranoid, but it all seems obvious and easy?" I whisper, moving very quietly to the wardrobe but only finding empty cases. They have obvious sides of the bed, a range of skincare on the bedside table on the side closest to the window.

Tawny clicks his tongue as even talking about the mayor's wife disgusts him. "Let's just say, Clarice Thornhill isn't the brightest crayon in the box."

"Sounds personal, T."

Dropping onto my hands and doing a quick sweep under the bed, I find it. A small black metal case, no longer than 10 inches by 6 if I had to guess. Dragging it out from under the bed, I grin.

It's a combination lock. Too easy. If I have to use force to break it open, the bodyguard might hear me, so instead, I use a little trick I learned in The Warren. Pulling the shank so that there's tension, I slowly rotate each dial, one digit at a time. The digit that feels loose with tension applied is the number I'm after. When I settle on 591, I press the button and the lock pops open.

"This is all going smoothly. I was expecting more than just the combination lock."

"I told you. Not the brightest."

The lid opens and there are a series of smaller black boxes, obviously for different jewelry.

"Was there anything you'd like me to take besides the diamond set?" I ask, opening the boxes to look inside. Besides the diamonds, there were sapphire earrings, an emerald ring, and gold bangles. Why would she travel with so much jewelry when they were only in town for one night?

"There should be an opal cross in a small box. It's on a rose gold chain." Tawny doesn't hesitate, and my suspicion that this job means something to T solidifies.

It turns out to be the last box I open. The cross has a diamond center and a small row

of inlaid stones around the edges. It's pretty, the opal flecks all different colors but with an almost peachy undertone in this light. I'm not sure why Tawny wants it, but that's also none of my business.

"Got it."

I can hear him clap his hands with glee down the line. "Call me when you're at the drop-off point, and I'll make sure your charity gets the donation."

"I know you will." Tawny had been the one who gave me the idea of donating a share of my spoils to charities that supported omegas like me. Omegas who left behind their lives and had to start again with nothing, or who fought to be treated as equals. I always made sure I had a nest egg and a back-up plan, but these days, the profits from the jobs I did now went back to help others. No one deserves to be alone in the world.

A shudder goes through me, my stomach cramping as my skin breaks out in a sweat and I bury my hands into the plush rug with a groan.

"What's happening? Are you okay?" Tawny hisses. "Blue? Answer me!"

"I'm fine. I'm fine." I wince as another shooting pain works its way up my spine and my stomach clenches. Clenching my teeth, I try to breathe through it. "It's just my heat season."

Tawny swears before murmuring. "That didn't sound fine, Blue."

Heats were unpredictable, especially if you were enduring them without an alpha to soothe the process. When an unmated omega experienced a heat or mating season, the urge was to breed but also to be somewhere safe. Familiar. In a few hours, I would be desperate to be back at my cabin. The thought of spending the night at the rental apartment makes me feel nauseous, as I take a few more deep breaths before

running a hand through my hair and getting to my feet.

The clacking keys fill my ears as I pocket the jewels and prepare to climb out of the window and back into 308.

“Drop the jewelry off and then go straight home. Don’t bother hanging around, I’ll make sure there’s no trace of you anywhere near here.” Tawny has gone into bossy best friend mode, and I know there’ll be no persuading him otherwise. Not that I want to. My own bed sounds like heaven right now.

“Yes, sir.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

Following the same routine as earlier in the week, I park my car at the end of the hiking trail and put my clothes into a bag I can easily carry between my teeth when I shift. I don't always bring a change of clothes with me, but it feels a bit odd to be breaking into Blue's cabin and looking for some sort of secret vault while being buck naked. If I was naked with Blue, the last thing I wanted to be was working.

The more time I spend with him, the more something just doesn't add up. I've been putting off that phone call to Abiel because, in all honesty, I don't want to tell him where Blue is.

He seems genuinely happy with the life he's built himself here, and it's not like he's going around flashing his money, so whatever he stole it doesn't seem like he's cashed it in. I don't know what to think. He's still an enigma right now. A puzzle I'm itching to solve.

When I reach Blue's cabin, I watch for a while hidden in the undergrowth just to make sure that he really has gone. I learned this week that he's going out of town to meet with some friends for dinner a few hours away, so I should be safe, but you never know.

Forcing another shift that makes my muscles ache, I pull my clothes on and grab the multi tool from my bag before using it to pick the lock.

Letting myself inside, I hesitate for a moment in the doorway as I hear something move in the darkness. When something warm and furry brushes against my leg, I freeze, glancing down I exhale when I realize it's only a cat. A fucking huge cat.

I've been on riskier missions in my time, but for some reason, this is making all my senses go wild. My heartbeat is so loud I swear it's all I can hear.

Shutting the door, I make sure the curtains are closed before I turn on one of the lamps. I don't want to light the place up like a damn beacon on the edge of a lake, but a soft lamp will probably be written off as something that Blue forgot to turn off before he left.

Thanks to my recon earlier in the week, I'd already had a glimpse of the cabin, so I already knew the inside was cozy, but it was another thing seeing it lit up.

The gentle glow from the lamp creates an intimate feel, the soft furnishings and comfortable looking couch making this cabin seem even more like a home. A place someone enjoyed coming after a long day at work, where they might kick off their shoes and sit out on the porch as the sun went down before cuddling up on the couch to read their favorite book.

Briefly, I wonder if Blue had this back at The Warren. I hadn't seen much, if anything, on my visit, but the people I did see were all dressed very similarly. I can't imagine there's much room for individuality, or expressing yourself in an environment like that.

Something uncomfortable tingles at the back of my neck, and for the first time since I started this job, I wish I wasn't a private investigator. I would give anything in this moment to just be Madoc Stirling, for the relationships I was building in this town to be real, to meet Blue as a genuine version of myself. Spying like this feels all wrong, my stomach twisting as I flip through some paperwork left on a nearby counter. The invasion of his privacy is making me feel nauseous, but I needed to give Abiel something. Anything.

Heading over to the bookcase lining one of the lounge area walls, I try to see if I can

find anything out of place. I even pull out a couple of the older looking books to check if there's a hidden panel or some secret area behind, but nothing.

Next, I check the rest of the living room, pulling back the rug to inspect for loose floorboards. Carefully, I slide out the sofa, but that turns up nothing either. I make sure everything is returned to its original position. I even examined the kitchen to see if any of the cupboards or units have false backs. If there is a vault hidden here, I'm not sure where.

The sharp sweet smell is stronger inside the cabin, and I can finally pick up the hints of his scent. Fresh snow, and green crisp apples tinged with bitterness, but in the best way. Sour and sweet. I should have suspected that's what he'd smell like, given his sassy attitude and flirty nature.

When I open the bedroom door, the scent is stronger, with an underlying sweetness that is almost sticky like honey, and I inhale it like a greedy bear. Is he an omega? That would explain the graceful way he moves and his more slender frame.

Mine, the alpha part of my brain snarls as I move beside the bed and get down on my hands and knees to check underneath. The smell of him is stronger here, saturated into the fabric. Mine. Mine. Mine. I want to bury my face in the sheets, but I know that's a line I can't cross. Don't be a weirdo Madoc, I tell myself sternly as I catch myself fisting the sheets.

My cock is hard, just the smell of him driving me crazy. The animal part of my brain fights to take control as I palm against my erection through my sweatpants, the pressure bringing me no relief.

I can't focus like this.

All I can think about is his smaller, lithe body twisted in these sheets.

Smooth pale skin bathed in moonlight, cock hard and leaking, like mine is now just picturing it. Dark eyes staring up at me, with the corner of his mouth lifts into a coy smile that I've come to recognize well.

Fuck.

My hand tightens on the sheet, but it isn't enough and I find myself grabbing his pillow and burying my face in it.

Fresh snowfall. Winter air. The ground crunching beneath your shoes while the sun warms your face. My hand is inside my trousers without further hesitation. I'd not bothered with boxers, since I had to carry everything with me in my fox form. My cock is almost painfully hard now as I wrap my hand around it and give myself a slow tug. I was going to hell for this.

Mine. Mate. Mine. Mark it. Mine.

My alpha nature demanded I take. Consume. Claim. Mark.

My instincts were running wild, feral with need, as I inhaled more of my mate's scent. Mine. Mine. My shaft is slick with my traitorous desire, and the sounds are downright sinful as I jack myself. Faster. Faster. Fuck. He was going to ruin me and he wasn't even here to see it.

Oh, but if he was. If those beautiful dark eyes were looking up at me...I'd go crazy. If he'd let me touch him, taste him, push inside his ass...The thought alone of being buried inside his tight heat is enough to send me over the edge.

My balls tighten, my knot threatening to expand as my release barrels into me, sucking all the air out of my lungs with it. Hot cum splashes over the pillow, thick creamy jets and bursts of pheromones begin to trickle into the room, wrapping around

everything, lacing it with my desire. I was so fucked.

What the fuck was wrong with me? How could I do this? Almost 10 years working for Interpol and 3 as a private investigator and I'd never messed up this badly before. I stare down at the streaks of cum across the pillow. What on earth was I supposed to do now? The urge to leave it, let him know that I was here, and that I was claiming him is strong, and that's how I know I need to move. Need to clean this up. The longer I left it, the more my beast demanded I do it again.

Stripping the pillowcase, I shove it into the bag I brought with me for my clothes. I wish I could say with certainty that I wouldn't use it again to jerk off later, but I'd be lying. Opening the window, guilt beginning to pour in, I pray the room airs out before Blue arrives home.

When I finally get over my appalling behavior, I force myself to return to the task at hand. The shame I'm feeling right now isn't going to help me close this case any faster, but it was making me realize just how much I was in deep trouble.

There's nothing under the bed or in the wardrobe and when I pull the dresser out, I don't find anything suspicious there either, even if it is a fucker to slide the heavy antique furniture back into place.

There's something off about the cabin, but it's not a secret vault. It's that despite how cozy and homely the space is—there's nothing personal here. There are no photos of family or friends, no artworks or prints. The most personal belongings are his clothes and his books, if they even are his and not just remnants from when Shepard's family used to live in the cabin.

Why is there nothing that could be a clue into who Blue really is?

The bathroom turns up nothing either, and while I contemplate the attic hatch, when I

put my head up through there, I see that it's only a small crawl space with some boxes stored. The vault must be elsewhere.

My phone rings, the loud noise filling the small cabin. When I see the number, I press the button and ignore it with an eye roll. I swear it's like he knows what I've been doing and the guilt unfurling low in my gut suddenly feels heavier.

But it rings again.

And again.

Unrelenting, like the man himself.

Taking a seat on the end of Blue's bed, avoiding glancing at his clean pillow, I finally clicked the answer button.

"Mr. Stirling, I'm beginning to think that you're avoiding me. It's been two days since you last replied to my messages." Abiel's smooth voice comes down the line, making my skin crawl.

It's clear he was used to being in charge, the authority he tries to use on me doing nothing more than rankling my alpha side. Foxes were curious, mischievous creatures. We didn't like being kept on leashes, we weren't dogs.

"Not at all, High Leap Abiel." I keep my tone flat, emotionless. I'm not ready to share my findings or my suspicions, and I don't appreciate being treated like an underling.

"In your last email, you suggested that you might have something and since then you have declined each of my calls." The accusations are heavy in his words. He knows I'm hiding something, and he's not afraid to call out my bullshit.

The sanctimonious tone makes the hair on the back of my neck rise, and fighting back a snarl, I scrub my face and exhale slowly.

“I’ve merely been following up on a lead.” Goddess, every time I spoke to the man, I wanted to throttle him a little more. “I’ve been a little preoccupied doing the job you’re paying me for.”

Abiel chuckles, “So, you do remember that we’re paying you for information.”

Remember? It was the only thing keeping me from telling Blue everything. I had to keep reminding myself that my mother needed me—my family—needed me to do this. Without my income, everyone else would be desperately scrabbling to make sure our mom was cared for and their families were still supported. Otherwise, I’d be on my knees on the cabin floor begging for forgiveness the second Blue came home.

“Is there something I can help you with, High Leap?”

“Your lead, was it him?” The disgust dripping from the word ‘him’ almost makes me wince. I hadn’t picked up on anything besides fatherly concern when I met Abiel in person, but this aggressive desperation had a sour taste that was starting to become more obvious. Why did he disdain Blue so much? He swung between referring to him as a wayward child, and some sort of nefarious young man led astray.

“I’m not sure yet,” I lied. Blue is the missing person they’re looking for; there’s no doubt about that, but I also know he’s not going to return unless he’s dragged kicking and screaming back to The Warren. I won’t let that happen.

The best-case scenario is that I can locate the stolen artefact or artefacts, whatever they might be, and can convince Blue to mail them or hand them to me and I can give them back on his behalf.

The Husk will never stop chasing him, not if they think he has something that belongs to them. Every interaction I've ever had with them told me that they were secretive species who hate outside intervention, so if they've contacted me, that means they are desperate. And desperate people do crazy things. I've seen it over and over again in my line of work, both at Interpol and as a PI.

I'm so consumed with my phone call, trying to buy myself extra time and swallow down the growing anger I feel towards Abiel, I almost miss the sound of a truck rumbling up the dirt track.

Fuck! Blue was back. I thought I'd have until tomorrow morning at least. What had happened? Cursing my own stupidity for waiting until it was late to explore the cabin, I tried to end the conversation with Abiel. "As soon as I have a confirmed update, I'll call you Abiel."

"Madoc, you better answer the next time I call." He clicks his tongue disapprovingly, and I try not to picture myself pulling it out of his head. "The first time."

"Yes." I hiss through my gritted teeth.

There's a moment of silence, as if he can sense my reluctance down the line. "I mean it. I am a patient man, but even I have my limits."

"Of course."

Dashing back through the cabin, I ignore the cat's whines and pleas for more food as I let myself back out of the front door and start walking towards the trees. At least this way, if he spots me, I might be able to claim that I was taking a late-night walk around the lake and stumbled upon the cabin, unsure who owned it. Ignorance was bliss when you were new to town.

I mean, yes, I knew Shepard owned a cabin out here but there were several cabins along the lake and on the mountain, so how was I supposed to know that this one was Blue's?

My heart hammers away in my chest, like a hummingbird high on the anticipation as the sound of a truck gets closer.

Part of me hopes he'll see me. There was no denying it any longer. I wanted him.

I'd enjoyed talking with him, flirting with him. Being around him was easy and felt natural to me. There was something about Blue that was open. Something that meant I couldn't get him out of my head.

I'd started thinking about him all the time, and not just because of this job. Mine. My alpha side was possessive of him, trying to lay claim when we had no right.

I was on the road to obsession, and the worst thing was, I knew it. Every part of my sanity was telling me to get out of there, hand everything over to Abiel, and just go home to my mother. But I couldn't make my feet move. I couldn't leave here. Leave him. Not until I knew he was safe.

Lingering, I move slowly. A car door slams shut.

Footsteps. They falter.

"Jonah?" Turning, I see his eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "What are you—stay back."

He lifts a hand, the other one clenching his stomach. His already pale skin is even paler and covered in a soft sheen of sweat.

“Blue? Are you okay? What’s the matter?” I dash forward, but he stumbles onto the porch steps, his hand still outstretched as he wards me away. “Are you hurt?”

“No...just, just stay there.” His words are shaky as he squeezes his eyes shut and takes a long, shuddering breath. “I’m going into heat.”

You wouldn’t have known that I’d already emptied my balls once this evening the way my cock instantly fills, pressing against my already damp sweatpants. Mine. Breed. Mate.

Taking a tentative step forward with my hands out, I’m hit with that crisp apple scent I’d come to recognize as his, but it’s stronger, almost overpowering as the sweet notes seep into my skin. “You smell so good.”

“You shouldn’t be here.” He moans softly as I approach, pushing to his feet and stepping back again so that he’s almost at the front door. “Stay back.”

“Let me help you. Let me take care of you.” I mean, every word. I wanted to ease his discomfort and his pain, to see him through this rough patch of his heat season.

That line I didn’t want to cross earlier, I’m ready to jump over it to pretend like it never existed if I get to touch him, hold him, love him even if only for a few days. That’s how deep my obsession with Blue ran. I was infatuated. It was like my brain was caught up in this manic fixation, and the only thing that would alleviate it was the thing that caused it.

I step forward again until I’ve joined him on the porch. His skin glistens with sweat. How long has he been suffering?

Unsure what specific breed of shifter he was, I knew he was Leporidae and in my time working as an Intelligence Officer, I’d picked up a thing or two. So, I knew that

unlike most species, they didn't have a typical heat. Instead, they had a mating season, punctuated with 'mini heats'. Most omegas usually managed this through the use of suppressants, but for whatever reason, Blue was struggling. I couldn't just abandon him like this.

"If you really want me to leave, I will." I reach out slowly and cup his face gently. Alpha pheromones can bring relief to a distressed omega in heat. Very carefully, I start releasing mine, letting them wash over him in soft waves. "But if you want to explore whatever this is between us, I can help you through this."

"Are you always a fucking good guy?" He asks with a huff as he nuzzles into my hand, absorbing my pheromones as much as he can through the skin-to-skin contact.

Brushing my thumbs possessively over the scent glands on his neck, leaving my mark on him and wishing it were like indelible ink, I huff a bitter laugh. Using your pillow to jerk off and then covering it in cum like some savage creature doesn't qualify me as a good guy, I think to myself. "I wish, if I told you all the awful things I've done then you would definitely be kicking me off your porch."

"Shut up" he growls, clearly lost to the heat haze as sanity fades into instinct and he grabs my shirt in his fists. "You're perfect."

Yanking me towards him, our lips crash together in a kiss that sets my entire body ablaze. Mine. Mine. Mine.

It was inevitable.

It was predestined.

There was no more denying what I felt for him than there was convincing me that the earth was flat. He was mine. He was always supposed to be mine from the first

second I saw that picture of him back at The Warren. I should have known that our red string of fate may have a few knots, but I was bound to him whether I wanted to be or not.

“Jonah,” he whimpers and I wish it was my name on his lips.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

It's official.

Sanity has left the building as I stand on my porch kissing the new stranger like we've been practicing this for an eternity. Like we've always belonged together this way.

Jonah kisses like it's the most important thing in the world, like he's desperate to make the connection last longer. Cupping my face, his thumb strokes my cheek as he offers me everything on a plate. He didn't force or push, like other alphas do. He asked. He waited. He was too fucking nice and good for me, but I can't end the kiss. I want more. Want him.

My body feels like it's burning from the inside, the need and desire painful as I claw at his back, holding him tighter to me, bathing myself in his pheromones. Practically melting into him, I chase more of the incredible scent that clings to his skin. Wood smoke and moss. He smells like the forest. Like home.

As he kisses me deeper, there are sweeter notes and I pick up hints of wildflower, the kind you find up on the mountain tops at the height of summer. Could he be more perfect?

Reluctant to break our connection, I try to shove my keys into the door without looking while Jonah chuckles against my lips.

"Let me," he murmurs as he kisses along my jawline and down my neck. At the same time, he takes the keys from me and slides them into the lock effortlessly, turning it until it clicks. With my hands now free, I wrap them up around his neck even though

I have to go on to my toes a little. Tall alphas are the best.

Letting out an embarrassing whining noise, I throw my head back as his teeth graze over my scent gland and he nips me gently. He was going to make me come before we ever got over the threshold at this rate.

Stepping inside, he drops his bag to the floor and a loud clattering as something falls from my pockets. I don't care. I can deal with whatever it is later.

He reaches for the hem of my shirt, but I place a hand over his, holding him in place as I shake my head. I bore the marks of my time at The Warren on my skin, like a map of my life, and I rarely let anyone read it. How could I? They were tales of a different life.

"Don't." My words are quiet, but I know he hears me because he lets his hand drop and instead, he leans in and kisses me again.

"Love, let me see." The words are like pleas, soft and gentle. The way he says love sends a pleasurable sensation through me, like someone stroking up my spine. My chest aches. The skin throbbing and itching at just the thought of his gray eyes landing on the marks that are etched into my flesh.

The Husk treated children like cattle. Like they were belongings, created only for the benefit of The Warren. And how do you keep track of your livestock and ensure it is returned if it runs away? By branding it. By making sure it's plain for everyone to see your place in the hierarchy.

"I can't."

Jonah places a tender kiss on my forehead. "I think you're beautiful, no matter what."

How was the man real? The bear shifter last summer had told me it was fine, but then repeatedly tried to pry my clothes from me. I hadn't been suffering with my heat episodes as badly as this, so he'd just pissed me off to the point that I'd left once I'd gotten what I needed from him, leaving him hanging.

Jonah kisses my brow and then my cheekbones before claiming my mouth again. His hands have returned to my face, eager for skin-to-skin contact with whatever he can touch.

Wrapping a hand around my throat, he uses it to tilt my face upwards and deepen our embrace. His pheromones surround me, wrapping around me like a cocoon. They give me a strange sort of clarity, but it's like tunnel vision, where all I can see is him. All I want is him.

Reaching for the hem of his T-shirt, I yank it over his head, frantically trying to push away all the barriers between us so that he's exposed to me. I need to touch him. Need my hands and mouth on his body before I combust. He chuckles as he kicks his shoes off and I do the same before we're kissing again, like magnets clinging together.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifts me, his strong arms coming up under my thighs as I wrap my legs around his waist. The downstairs of my cabin is open plan, so once you're through the front door you can choose to go left towards the lounge area, or right towards the kitchen.

Jonah doesn't hesitate as he moves us into the kitchen, placing me down on the kitchen worktop. I keep him locked to me. Not willing for there to be any space between us yet as my hands explore the broad muscles on his shoulders and his back, roaming whatever he'll let me.

Every now and again he makes a soft snarling noise, and it makes my cock jerk. I

love it when a partner's animal side can no longer be contained. It's a sign of how much they want me. Jonah's hand rubs me over my jeans, pinching my tip through the fabric, drawing a long moan from me.

"Can't wait to feel you beneath me," he grunts, giving my dick another squeeze before kissing me like a desperate man.

The heat has fully taken over now, my common sense shredded into ribbons that do nothing more than flap in the breeze as I practically launch myself at him. Stumbling backwards, we move from my kitchen to the lounge.

Dropping onto the couch, with me on his lap, Jonah respectfully keeps his hand on my hips, fingers biting into my skin like he's trying to merge with me. Grinding over his hard cock makes my body tremble. He feels huge.

And suddenly it's like a flame has sucked all the oxygen out as my head goes fuzzy and everything turns to pure need. Want. Want. Want. I need his knot. His alpha cum painting my insides like a Pollock masterpiece.

He can fill this horrible void and stop the hurt.

He can make it better.

Want. Want. Want.

I feel like I might die, if he isn't inside me soon. Reaching between us, I tug at the waistband of his pants impatiently, but he brushes me away.

"Behave, Blue." Reaching up, he wraps a hand around my throat and squeezes, "Be a good boy and I'll give you what you need."

With his fingers pressed into my scent glands, he scent marks me, letting his pheromones absorb into my skin. It's the sweetest headrush, as everything seems to slow down and I feel like I'm floating. Has heat sex always felt like this, or was it just Jonah?

All the nerves in my body feel overstimulated, like my skin has been peeled away and I'm nothing but a bundle of fibers all seeking connection.

"Let me take care of you," Jonah's words sink into my skin as he bites my neck, marking me like I'm his.

My hips roll, and I grind my cock over his, making both of us moan. Our breaths intermingle as we pant. Why isn't he as desperate as me? How was he still in control? It wasn't enough. Want. Need. Breed.

Dipping his hand inside my jeans finally, he pulls out my dripping cock. I'd been leaking pre-cum since the heat had started to hit, back in the hotel room. I was a dripping mess of aching need.

"Goddess, you're beautiful." He murmurs while brushing his fingers up my shaft, sending a shiver up my spine. Want.

I never usually liked all the small talk or awkward sex conversations, but with him, it was like the words stroked me from the inside, overwhelming me, in combination with his physical touch. Need.

If I thought Jonah was here to save me, to stop the ache, I was wrong. He was drowning me, pushing me further under until the pain and pleasure became one. Until my body was a blaze, and the only thing I could see was him. Breed.

Finally wrapping one of his large hands around my throbbing dick, he gives me a

slow leisurely tug and we both watch as a fresh dribble of pre-cum beads on my flushed tip before rolling lazily down over the mushroomed head, moving down until it makes my balls sticky. It feels obscene. Filthy. I shudder, my balls tightening. Was I going to come from this? Fuckkkkk.

My hole clenches, slick leaking out of me while Jonah presses his nail against my slit gently. Fuck. Fuck, he was going to ruin me and we hadn't even started. I run my hands down his chest, bearing my fingers in the patch of fuzz he has between his pecks. How did he have a body like this?

With a cruel chuckle, he grazes his teeth over my scent gland, giving my cock another pump with his fist, squeezing tighter.

Claim me , my omega whines, making me blink. For all the times I'd been consumed by my heat episodes, I'd never once wanted someone to claim me as their mate. There's no time to linger on that errant thought, because his fist moves faster, making wet sounds that echo around my cabin. Schlick, schlick, schlick.

My hands tremble as I lean back, holding onto his thighs to steady myself, rolling my hips so that my hole is pressed against his erection. With one hand, I lift the edge of my T-shirt, just above my hips, and we both watch mesmerized as my muscles contract, tightening and releasing as he jerks me off.

He leans in and steals another kiss, his tongue dipping inside my mouth as my orgasm builds in the base of my spine. "Perfect, like you were made for me."

Do I have a praise kink? I think I might as I spill, creamy jets of cum covering us both. He wrings out the last pathetic spurts before bringing his hand to his lips and licking off the remnants of my climax. This alpha was going to be the death of me.

"You taste so good, love." How is this man real and not some figment of my horny,

heat addled brain?

Letting my T-shirt fall back down, I nuzzle into him, licking up the side of his neck and tasting the salty musk on his skin. Mine, something whispers in the back of my mind, but I ignore it. He's mine right now, but it can't be more than that.

His hands are on my thighs as he teases me with gentle touches. A bead of sweat rolls down my back, and I recognize the growing feeling in the pit of my stomach. The orgasm might have bought me some extra time, some extra clarity, but it was just an ebb in the tsunami of my heat. Already my cock is filling again, sensitive and swollen with need.

"My Insatiable, greedy, love. What are we going to do with you?" Pressing his lips to my forehead, Jonah chuckles before helping me to my feet.

I tear off my socks in a rush before he peels my jeans the rest of the way down my legs and tosses them somewhere. I don't really care where in this moment. He could've set them on fire and waved them around like a flag, and I probably wouldn't have noticed because all my attention was focused on the bulge in his sweatpants.

I needed that cock in me. Now. Whining, I grab his wrist and pull him off the sofa. "Now please. I need you to fuck me. Now."

Jonah almost trips as he tries to kick off his own shoes, but I'm dragging him towards the stairs, impatient. He can keep his shoes on as long as his dick is in my ass in the next five minutes.

"Woah, slow down, babe." He tugs me back for another sloppy kiss, biting my lip and sucking on my tongue before turning us back towards the stairs and landing a playful spank on my ass. "I'm not going anywhere."

“Yes, you are. Bedroom. Now.” Remembering my manners, I add a late, “Please.”

“You know, the more you rush me the longer I’m going to drag this out, darlin’.”

If he keeps sprinkling these endearments like confetti, I’m going to have to handcuff him to my bed and keep him with me forever to shower me with compliments because it’s doing something to me. It’s making me want to nest with him, burrow inside his skin and stay with him forever—and that’s a dangerous thought to have, however fleeting it may be.

Linking my hand with his, I try to rush us up the stairs, but he resists, making us walk. Pouting, I slow down with a grumble, murmuring ‘move faster’ under my breath.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I think his patience with my bitching has finally run out because he pushes me forward and I land on my elbows. It isn’t until I feel his warm hands moving up my thighs that I realize it was intentional.

“Fuck,” he exhales, spreading my cheeks to expose my slick hole. The cool air makes me twitch and I can feel the slick running down my thighs, as my pheromones thicken in the air. Ever so lightly, he brushes his thumb over the tight ring of muscle and I can feel my body flutter and tense.

“You smell delicious.” Leaning in, he licks a stripe up my crease. He laves my skin, licking up everything he can get his mouth on like he can’t bear to waste a single drop. Some people like to compare omega slick to ambrosia. They believe that the pheromones in it make it a potent aphrodisiac. Jonah is clearly one of those people as he buries his face between my cheeks, lapping at the stickiness.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckkkkkkkkkk. Growling into the hallway carpet, I claw at the woven tuft like it’s the only thing tethering me to this earth as he drives me wild.

Reaching behind me, I grab a handful of his hair, holding him in place as he pushes his tongue inside. If I didn't want his knot so badly, I would make him do this all night.

He isn't playing fair when he pushes a finger in alongside his tongue, fucking in and out of me with wet slurping noises. Slowly, he adds a second finger before scissoring them gently, twisting them in and out while he licks around my rim, lapping up the slick now gushing out of my hole. I don't think I've ever been this soaked in my life. Put a sign on my ass—I may as well be a Slip 'N Slide.

Just as I'm on the precipice of coming, my cock rubbing up against the steps below me, he sinks his teeth into my ass cheek. The pain snatches me back from the edge, only partially soothed as he licks over the sore skin. The fucker chuckles as he places light kisses over the mark he's no doubt left behind.

"Don't worry," he reassures me, placing a kiss at the base of my spine. "I'll get you there."

Looking back over my shoulder, frustrated, I scowl, which only makes him grin wider. "You make an awful lot of promises considering your dick isn't in my ass yet."

"Oh, I'm sorry." He isn't and we both know it. "Am I not up to your standards?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to lie to him, and tell him I've had better, but it's like he can read my thoughts because the look he gives me tells me he knows I'd be lying.

Without warning, he curls his fingers, brushing against my prostate as he fucks in and out of my hole, making me lurch forward with a grunt.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." I try to glare at him, but he just smirks. "Are you going

to come for me again?”

“Make me,” I grit through my teeth as he raises a brow.

“My pleasure.”

I should know better than to bait him, as it only takes a little more pressure and a few starving licks before I’m coming with a cry for the second time that night, making a mess all over the staircase. As I’m panting into the carpet, sweaty and flushed, I barely notice Jonah moving my hips. When he drives inside my ass with one powerful thrust, impaling me on his fat alpha cock, I notice that.

A keening noise is ripped from my throat, as he buries himself in me to the hilt.

“Shhhhh, good boy. You can take it,” he soothes, leaning down to cover my body as he strokes my hair and kisses my shoulder.

“You’re so tight,” he says, his words ragged and breathy.

Almost painfully slow, he undulates his hips, never quite pulling out of me, but not pushing in deep enough either. It’s like he just wants to live inside me, torturing me until I’m out of my mind with need.

After a few minutes of this, I’m sobbing, begging for more, but he ignores my pleas to plant tender kisses anywhere he can reach.

I thought he was going to knot me on the stairs. In fact, I was convinced of it. It turns out I was very wrong.

In a dangerous move, he leans back and hooks his arms under my thighs, lifting me as if I weigh nothing. I know that I’m smaller than him, less muscular with a runner’s

body, but I'm not exactly a bag of feathers either.

Sliding my arms around his, I tried to hold on to him tight. I'm afraid that he might drop me and I'll go tumbling down the stairs when all I want was to be fucked until I could no longer remember my name.

Carefully, he takes the next step up, the motion jostling me on his cock, which is still buried inside my body. And again. There are two more steps to go and already my cock is trying to rally.

With the next step, he drops me down a little harder, and a spurt of precum shoots from my half hard dick.

"You're a sadist," I hiss, wrapping my arm around his neck, trying to get a better grip.

I swear I can feel that smarmy grin of his against the back of my neck, and with the final step he drops me but thrusts up at the same time, making me yelp.

Without ever leaving my body, he carries me into the bedroom and very carefully climbs onto the bed, positioning me so that I'm on my hands and knees.

"You might want to grab onto the headboard, love," he warns, and I've barely touched it before he's thrusting into me with low, rough grunts. Jonah fucks like he's running out of time and it will never be enough. I love it.

With one hand on the back of my neck, the other on my hip, he ruts into me like a wild animal, crooning something under his breath. I can't hear what he's saying, but I pick out the occasional word murmured like a prayer, 'perfect' and 'tight' catching in my ears.

“I need you to knot me.” I beg, with panting gasps as I jack my cock. The sounds of skin slapping against skin and slick wetness are drowning out every thought in my head. “Please. I can’t take it anymore.”

Jonah pounds into me relentlessly, my body already rung out but still so desperate for more. I want everything he can give me. I need his knot. Breed me.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come.”

I don’t need him to tell me. I can feel it.

A warm heat floods my body before there’s a stretch. It starts as a delicious pressure that grows and swells until I’m not sure I can take it anymore. His knot presses against my prostate, forcing another pathetic orgasm from my body as if I haven’t already just come several times.

“This is only the first knot, darlin’. We’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

“Promises, promises.”

Rolling us on to our sides, Jonah holds me tight, rocking slowly as he teases his knot against my prostate until there’s nothing left but tears and silent begging. If I have to die, please Goddess, let it be impaled on this man’s knot.

The shrill ringing of my phone filters through my sleep-soaked brain. Opening my eyes is like trying to unglue your fingers after a crafting session. There’s a reprieve when the noise stops, but it’s only brief before it starts again. With a groan and more effort than it should be, I push myself over onto my back and stare at my ceiling.

Something is wrong.

No, not wrong.

Different.

Stretching out my sheets wrapped around my legs, before I rub my eyes. Shit. I slept with Jonah. New to town Jonah. Handsome Jonah with the copper-colored hair. How could I let that happen?

I blush, thinking about the way he'd been so reverent with every touch, every whispered word against my skin. He'd respected my boundaries with my T-shirt, but then fucked me like I was his own personal cock-sleeve. There was praise and pounding, cum and tears. It was a heat episode I won't be forgetting anytime soon. In fact, it was my new spank bank material because that shit was better than porn. Was this what people meant when they said find yourself a man who can do both?

The annoying ringing starts again, and I realize it's my phone and the ringtone I have set for Tawny. Scrambling out of the bed, I hunt around the room, moving slowly, my muscles still tender but can't see anything. T never called unless it was an emergency. He always messaged, and then I would call him from my vault. Our friendship is built upon a foundation of paranoia.

Pulling on a pair of shorts, I follow the noise, which is quieter than I thought, indicating that I've left it downstairs somewhere in the living room. Or perhaps the kitchen. Or on whatever surface we've been making out on last night.

Oh, my Goddess.

I'd hooked up with Jonah Smith. With a quiet groan, I bury my face in my hands before taking a deep breath. The reality was still soaking into my post-heat haze

brain.

When I somewhat have my shit together, I head down the stairs. He's sitting in my lounge, looking perfectly at home. He glances up and gives me a soft smile as I reach the bottom step.

Jonah looks like he belongs in my cabin. My blanket is draped over his legs as he's made himself comfortable with a book and a mug of steaming coffee. The porch doors are open, and the sun is streaming into the space, despite the chill in the air.

"Hey." I say quietly, oddly shy with him curled up on my couch like I'm the guest in the cabin.

"Hey." The corner of his mouth lifts, and his eyes have a mischievous glint as we look at one another like we've just shared a huge secret. Which we kinda have. "I was trying to let you get more sleep but your phone..."

"Thanks." He hands it to me, and our fingers brush. A small awkward silence fills the space. "Do you want to—"

I don't know what I'm going to say.

Grab breakfast?

Talk about how insane last night was?

Repeat it all over again?

Marry me and live in this cabin with me forever?

My phone interrupts all of those things, and Jonah chuckles. "We'll talk later. I'm not

going anywhere.”

He looks so certain when he says that, as if whatever this was between us was already a forgone thing. It should rankle me, but instead I feel comforted. Like I can count on him. I know it’s crazy. Maybe it’s some lingering effect of the heat?

“Great.” I nod, trying to ignore the device in my hand. “Great.”

What the fuck was I? Tony the Tiger? I should be banned from using the word great.

Heading into the kitchen area, I watch Jonah go back to reading his book—my book—and sipping his coffee. Watching him felt like a decadent treat. Almost like a fetish I could easily develop. Is this what the others meant when they said they’d seen Jonah always watching me? Because if that’s the case, I could get on board with it.

Leaning against my counter, so I can keep an eye on him, I press the green icon.

“Blue, baby.” Tawny sounds way too energetic for this time of the day. Rubbing my temple, I squeeze my eyes shut and realize that the headache starting to thud at the base of my skull is likely due to the lack of food or water. The tapping noise from his keyboard is an ever-present soundtrack to our conversations. “So, I have two pieces of news and I don’t think you’ll like either of them.”

Glancing over at the clock on my oven, I see that it’s almost lunchtime. Crap, where has all that time gone? What day was it? Looking at my phone, I see that it’s Thursday. We’d been fucking since the early hours of Sunday. The heat peak lasted longer than they normally do for me. Four days spent fucking. How was I even in one piece? Did I need to make an appointment with a doctor? We hadn’t used protection...What if? No.

“Well, the first is about Tuesday. That mad cunt cat is in Aurora.”

I blink twice, the words not quite sinking in. “What? Why’s he here?”

“Well...” Tawny sounds a little guilty, and I hear the tapping keyboard keys stop. “I may have told him the second bit of news first, and he insisted on rushing right over there. “Personally, I think he was just looking for an excuse to come to your home.”

We didn’t do home visits. It wasn’t safe for us to be seen together, since we were all running from one thing or another. Biting the inside of my cheek, I lift my eyes to the ceiling, my stomach clenched as I start running through the worst-case scenarios. Was it The Husk? Was I going to have to move again?

“What’s the second piece of news?”

“It’s about that handsome piece of man meat you’ve been eyeing up.” Jonah? The same Jonah who was watching me now with a curious gaze? Was I emitting anxious pheromones?

“I’m vegetarian.” Rolling my eyes, I click my tongue at him.

“Fine, that tasty tofu snack! I’ve seen his picture. Your delicious not-so-little ginger-snap!” Tawny snorts, laughing at himself. “Is that better, my hormonal little hare?”

“T...” What had he found out about Jonah?

“Well, here’s the thing...”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

I don't know who's on the end of the line, but whatever is said makes Blue freeze. There's a nervous scent that clings to him, tinged with a hint of confusion, but he doesn't seem upset or angry, so I stay where I am on the sofa.

When I woke up this morning, my thoughts were so loud I thought they might disturb him. As if he could hear them rattling around inside my head while he slept beside me, exhausted from the last couple of days.

The heat had been unexpected, but Blue was everything I'd imagined and more. He'd been so good for me, taking my knot several times, while marking me as his with his cum, tears and kisses.

The obsession was in full bloom. I couldn't get enough of him and that's why I'd forced myself to come downstairs. I owed us both a little space to process and rest.

One thing had become clear as we'd come out of the heat haze together—I couldn't do this job anymore. It was personal. I've seen my target naked, well, almost naked. There was something he was hiding under that T-shirt, but he didn't want anyone to see. I wasn't going to push those boundaries until he was ready. After all, when you thought about it, we were still strangers, even if my fox disagrees.

I should've recognized who he was to me, but my mind and my fox had been so out of tune with one another because of this job. Constantly being torn between doing what I felt was right and fulfilling my obligations was messing with my mind. I needed the money, but I wanted him.

It wasn't until I was buried inside him that all the pieces clicked fully into place.

He was my Fated Mate.

I'd suspected it, and my fox had been convinced but until I'd knotted him there was still lingering doubt. He already occupied so many of my thoughts, I'm surprised I hadn't figured it out sooner. Fated mates were rare. They were the ultimate daydream for most shifters, but in reality, the chances of finding your soulmate were so incredibly low that some people argued there was no such thing as Fated Mate. But there was no other way to describe what I'd experienced over the last four days.

I should be freaking out, panicking or overwhelmed with what was happening, but instead, there was a calm sort of acceptance. This was who I'd be waiting for. Blue Aubin was mine. There was a bond between us, and although it wasn't fully in place, I could feel it. This link between us. A flowing of energy that made me feel like we were almost one.

I wanted to ask him about it this morning, but the hesitation in his eyes, the nervousness around me, told me that he hadn't yet realized what we were to one another. My fox side bristles at this, wanting to claim, wanting my mate to know, but my human side is grateful. It gives me time to unpack the tangled web of deceit that I find myself wrapped up.

How am I gonna explain who I am and what I'm doing in Aurora Pines without destroying what's developing between us? Could I convince Abiel to stop this manhunt and leave Blue alone? Would I be able to keep him safe? How am I supposed to pay for my mother's treatment without this job?

Sitting on his couch, I try to process all of these thoughts and feelings while also trying to come up with a plan where I can have a future with him without all the lies. I need time, space to think clearly and weigh up my options.

Fate must be on my side because, after his call, Blue approaches me cautiously,

chewing on his bottom lip. My gaze is drawn to his neck and the marks I left on his skin. The feral, possessive part of my brain loves it.

“I’m so sorry, I need to take a shower and meet a friend. There’s been a...situation.”

“Can we talk about this—us—later?” He avoids my gaze, as if he’s guilty of something, although when I inhale, all I can pick up is traces of curiosity. Confusion still laces his usual crisp, fresh scent.

“Of course.” This unexpected perk of finding my mate, being able to more clearly pick up his emotions, makes me smile softly. “I’ll see you in The Antler tonight?”

Looking like a doe in the headlights, he blinks slowly and rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah. Yes. Probably.”

There’s something he’s hiding, but I don’t push. A lot has happened in the last couple of days.

Chuckling, I get to my feet and grab my bag. I found it on the doorstep where I must have dropped it last night. “Well, you, and the whole town, know where I am when you’re ready for that talk.”

Does this confidence come with knowing someone is your mate? Despite his hesitation, I know I’ll see him later. I know that we’ll handle whatever comes our way. I know it because, in the simplest terms, he’s mine and I am his. Our souls are entwined forever, whether he realizes it or not.

At the door, we exchange numbers and I pull him in for a kiss that’s indecent, continuing for far too long for a goodbye kiss, before taking my leave so he can shower and visit his friend. I hate leaving him, and I don’t get very far before I feel an urge to go back, but I push through.

Weaving between trees, feeling the dirt beneath my feet, I follow the edge of the lake back towards my truck. I say a silent prayer to the Goddess that Blue was so consumed with his heat, and the situation with his friend, that he never realized my truck wasn't parked outside the cabin. Or that I'm not wearing any shoes.

Letting my bag fall onto the forest floor, I shift. My fox is ecstatic, excited to be in the woodlands again and since I have nothing else planned for today, I decide to spend the next couple of hours indulging that part of my nature. Working up a sweat running around, scenting the woods, digging a small den, I eventually go for a cold swim. It's supposed to be spring, but apparently Aurora Pines was behind schedule as the swim makes my teeth chatter. I warm myself up chasing a young deer before I finally make my way back to my car and force another shift.

Still not quite ready to leave, I pull on my clothes and call my mother. It had been a few days since I'd checked in because of Blue's heat. She picks after only two rings.

"If it isn't my favorite son!" My mother's cheery voice down the line instantly makes me grin.

Ettie Stirling was a fiery woman who raised four boys all on her own after my good-for-nothing father had vanished like a thief in the night with his latest squeeze. Her family had originally come from Wales, and even before the diagnosis, she lived life like she had no filter. Old age and illness hadn't changed anything about that. It was the valley's blood in her veins, she used to say.

"I heard that, old woman." I can hear my brother Finn in the background, and I know I'm on speakerphone. Finn is the most practical Stirling sibling, and he'd often spend time while the girls were at school at my mother's house. I'm sure his common sense and practicality has something to do with being a parent to a six-year-old and a two-year-old.

“You were supposed to,” she murmurs under her breath before raising her voice to say, “I have cancer, I’m allowed to say that.”

“You had cancer. You’re in remission, so try again.” Finn makes a huffing noise and I can just picture him now, standing there glaring at her with his arms crossed. He perfected the disapproving parent look, picking it up instantly when my niece was born.

“Fine. One of my favorite sons. Is that better?” Again, I can almost hear my mother roll her eyes as I picture them sitting out on her garden patio, which is where she likes to spend most of her days.

“Mam, are you giving Finn a hard time?” I snicker with mock disapproval.

My mother laughs. “Not at all. I’m just reminding him that I’m an adult, and not of his children.”

“Maddddddd—she’s being a pain. Make her stop,” my brother pleads, making me grin even though I know they can’t see me.

“Oh! Tattling to your big brother.” She laughs and my heart feels lighter. She’s in safe hands while I’m in Aurora and that’s a huge weight off my mind. “Well...it’ll stop when I’m —”

“Don’t you dare say it.” Finn warns her, his tone sharp. My mother had never been the type of person to take things too seriously. She believed that was how you let life drag you down into the pits of despair. The rest of us struggled a little with that outlook.

Taking a deep breath, she pauses before spelling it out. “D.E.A.D.”

I can hear Finn cursing in the background as he carries on doing whatever he was doing.

“Stop being a menace.” I chide, tossing my head back with a chuckle. “You sound good Mam.”

“So do you.” There’s a knowing tone to her words. There was something about parents, in particular mothers of any gender, a sixth sense of sorts, where they just knew. They knew when you were naughty or lying or hurting. They were attuned to your feelings, as if you were still somehow a part of them. Some people speculated that more than just mating bonds, familial bonds, also existed, but there wasn’t much research on it.

“I haven’t said anything.”

“And yet I can still hear it.”

“Plus, you laughed,” my brother yells. Was my brother always this annoying? Or was I only just noticing it since we’d been apart for a few weeks?

“We’d almost forgotten what that sounds like.” My mother hums in agreement, and it’s like a sharp stinging pain across my skin.

Had I been that miserable and grumpy lately? I’d been so focused on supporting her through her illness that I had put my life almost on hold. How could I go out and have a good time while she was suffering? While my family had to rearrange their lives to accommodate this horrible thing that was outside of our control?

“So, who is she or he?”

“Or they.” Another interjection from Finn.

“His name is Blue.” I hesitate, not sure how much I’m ready to share, but also needing to talk to someone. There was so much push and pull threatening to drag me under.

“Oh, I like that. Like the sky on a sunny day.” My mother’s voice is soft and warm, and I already know that she would love Blue, and he would love her. She had that effect on people.

I think about the young man I’ve got to know over the last couple of weeks, deciding that sunshine and blue skies weren’t quite right when describing him. No, he was calmer, quieter. There was a confidence about him, an assuredness as he seemed to move through life, but I’d seen beyond that this morning when he’d been worried about me—about us.

“More like a cool, clear lake in the mountains.”

“Refreshing. Also, sometimes lonely.” Once again, she hits the nail on the head. I think some part of Blue is lonely, so whatever it is that’s stopping him from going back to his family and The Warren, well, it must be pretty big.

“Things are complicated,” I admit, scrubbing my face.

Even if I refused to finish this job, Abiel would just send someone else. He wasn’t going to let this go. I’d already ignored his calls again this week due to Blue’s heat, so no doubt he was getting anxious waiting to hear from me.

There’s a sadness in my mother’s voice, as she almost whispers, “Aren’t they always?”

She’d never given us the full rundown of what happened when my father left, but she didn’t need to—we knew enough. He’d never been a reliable man, always late home,

forgetting to pay bills, forgetting to sign school permission slips or collect us from sports, vanishing at family events. He was a physically present (mostly), but emotionally absent father.

Raising four rowdy fox shifters had meant that after my father's swift departure, my mother never really had time to fall in love again. When we teased her about dating, she'd joke that she had already found the loves of her life through us. I think that's why we were all so fiercely protective of her. She'd given her life for us, repeatedly, and now it was our turn to return the favor.

"He's 10 years younger than me. And we've only known each other for a couple of weeks." I couldn't exactly tell my mother that we'd probably spent more time fucking than we had talking.

Tapping on my steering wheel, I lean back with a sigh. "There's also the issue that he's the person I was sent here to find. But he doesn't wanna be found and I don't want to be the one to find him. Everything is all messed up."

There's quiet down the line before my brother finally speaks, sounding kinder and calmer than he had earlier. "Oh shit, Mad. What are you gonna do?"

"Does he know?"

Snorting, I close my eyes. "Obviously not."

"Don't you think starting there might be a good idea before he finds out from someone else?" My mother tuts, and I miss that noise and the way her eyes crinkle when she makes it. I miss them all. This case had taken me from home and across three different states before finally arriving in Aurora Pines. I hadn't been home in six weeks or so.

As if he knows where my mind has gone, my brother asks, “Does that mean you’re not coming home?”

“I don’t know, nothing has gotten that far. I literally just left his cabin this morning.” From where my truck was parked, I could see across the lake, the water moving with soft ripples. It was a view I could get used to waking up to each day.

“Well, I can’t wait to meet him.”

“If he still wants me after this.” That was a reality I might have to face. I hadn’t claimed him, and he could still reject the mating bond if he wanted to. The thought of a broken bond makes me feel nauseous, like I’ve been punched and the air has been sucked out of my lungs.

“I’ve never heard you like this, Mad. It’s almost like your obsession with that little jewel thief.”

“Oh Goddess, I thought we agreed never to talk about Mad’s Ghost ever again?” Finn groans, and if I’d been there in person I would have smacked the back of his head or pinched his side. “I’m telling Arlo that you broke the pact and you need to put \$10 in the jar.”

My brothers had spent years making fun of my case, calling The Ghost ‘The One Who Got Away’ as if there was some sort of romantic relationship between the notorious jewel thief and me.

What if I took work home and tried to use my free time to look for clues into his identity? Maybe I did spend my phone calls home to my family, looking for their thoughts on why someone would steal vintage diamonds. It was just a job. He was just a target. And I was just the officer assigned to catch him.

When I handed my notice in, it had grieved me that I hadn't been able to close out the case and see it to the end. I'd tried to keep following along, but from the outside everything had gone quiet and for a while I'd struggled with that. It's what led Arlo to impose a 'Ghost ban' where I had to put 20 dollars in a jar if I mentioned him, and the others had to cough up 10 dollars for triggering me if they were the ones to talk about him. I didn't realize they even still had 'The Ghost jar', since it had been over a year since we'd talked about my vanishing thief.

"You're a right snitch today, aren't you boy? Will you tell Kingsley I didn't eat my peas at lunch too? Then you can all gripe at me. Can't an old woman just be cantankerous these days?" I bet she's frowning now, pulling her favorite pink oversized knitted cardigan tighter around her small frame while she grumbles.

"I don't think that's the right word, Mam," my brother intones. "There are definitely several that are more suitable."

Interrupting them before another round of bickering can break out, I blurt, "I think... I think he's my Fated Mate."

I was still coming to terms with it myself, freaking out if I lingered for too long on the knowledge that Blue was it for me. He was the one.

"What?!" My brother screeches loud enough that even I wince, several states over. "And you didn't think to start with that?"

My mother is more reserved, sounding speculative. "Interesting. Now I want to meet him even more."

"Of course you do."

"What's that supposed to mean? Why wouldn't a mother want to meet her favorite

son's new partner? Meet the future parent of her grandbabies? You know how much I want hordes of grandbabies."

Finn huffs, and I can hear the hose being turned on. He must be watering the flower garden and her vegetable plot for her. "You already have grandbabies, you silly old woman."

"I have beautiful grandchildren. But they're not babies any longer." Finn had found out he was expecting his second child not long after our mother's diagnosis. He wouldn't (or couldn't) tell us who the father was. My nieces, Devon and Lottie, were a handful, at 2 and 6, but they were very much the joy my family needed when things felt dark. "They don't have that new baby smell anymore."

"Shit and milk?" Finn cackles, but a minute later I hear, "Oft!"

I'm willing to bet my mother has thrown her slipper at him. No one talks smack about her grandchildren, not even their parents.

"You know, I've never been to Aurora Pines before."

Instantly I tense, not liking the speculative tone in her voice. "And you aren't coming now."

Things were already complicated. The last thing this whole volatile concoction needed was my mother added into the mix. Could you imagine? I shudder.

"Hmmm."

"Don't hmmm me, mother." I warn, adding a hint of a growl to my voice. "Finn, don't you dare let her book a flight."

My traitorous brother says nothing, but I hear him chuckling away faintly.

After we end the call, I finally make the journey back to town. When I return to the apartment, there's a message from Blue to say that he won't be at The Antler today, so he'll see me tomorrow. I hope whatever the situation is with his friend, is resolved soon. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep away. There's a building itch, a craving simmering beneath my skin, eager to see him again.

Reluctantly forcing myself to stay home, I grab a much-needed shower and a nap. I know heats are difficult for an omega, but they weren't always easy for an alpha either.

A heat or a rut is much more than the need to breed, although that's a huge part of it. Omegas release a pheromone that can drive an alpha partner wild if they don't trigger a rut altogether. It's not quite a rut, but it's enough to make sure we're just as affected as they are. We don't stop until they do and while I knew Blue's species had a prolonged mating period, I didn't realize that his heats were as intense as the last four days had been.

In a species more like my own, the heat is less intense but lasts longer, usually around a full week. For a heat to end after only four days would usually mean pregnancy, but Blue was a different shifter breed, so I wasn't entirely sure how it worked. In the heat of the moment, neither of us had actually thought about contraception or any form of protection. We were just desperate to touch, taste, and feel one another. I miss him already.

As I drift to sleep, the thought of having a baby with Blue makes my jaw unclench and my body relax, allowing me to fall into a peaceful sleep. Mine. Mate. Family.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

Once Jonah, or should I say Madoc, is gone, I climb in the shower, trying to process. The man who'd seen me through a heat episode was the same man who'd been hunting me down for years?

How did he slip past me? I never trusted strangers, and I certainly didn't bring them back to my cabin, so why was he different? How did he get past my defenses so easily? Is it because he was handsome and an alpha?

No, I'd never let things like that sway me before. It was something about him.

I almost hadn't believed Tawny when he'd told me, but then I'd looked across at him, reading his book, my book, and I saw it.

Jonas Smith didn't exist. He never had. But a part of me already suspected that, otherwise I wouldn't have asked him to do the background search to begin with. I guess I was just foolishly hoping that I'd been wrong about that niggling in the back of my mind and that Jonas was real.

Even after learning the truth, I still didn't kick him out of my cabin. I should have confronted him and thrown him out. Instead, I'd swapped numbers with him and promised to talk to him later. And then we kissed goodbye, except it wasn't just any kiss.

It was a kiss that had my toes curling and my heart feeling like it was going to jump out of my mouth. How could he be the same man who had followed me around Europe wanting to put me in prison for years? It wasn't adding up. The pieces of this puzzle didn't fit. There was something I was missing.

Under the hot water, I finally have a moment to take stock of every ache and pain. Every mark, made by teeth, nails and his stubble grazing against my skin.

I was sore and stretched out, but in all the best ways. The urge to breed was still there. The mating season thirst wasn't quenched completely, but it was more manageable now that I've spent the last four days trapped on an alpha's knot.

Even now, as I'm washing my hair, my cock is half hard just thinking about the way he touched me, the way he looked at me. My hands drift down my chest, my fingers stumbling from smooth, slick skin to raised, jagged scars. Would he still think I was beautiful if he could see the marks of the life I used to live? Would he still look at me in the same way?

That's why I can't seem to align the two men, Jonas Smith and Madoc Stirling, because in this cabin he had never looked at me with anything other than reverence, like I was his church and he was prepared to kneel at my altar and worship me for days. Someone who hated you and was hunting you down didn't do that.

That's why I wasn't ready to confront him. It was also why I wasn't already packing my bags to run away, even though that's what a smart person would do. Like I said already, sanity has left the building.

There's a strange hollowness in my chest as I soap myself up. It's making me uncomfortable, as if something is missing. Is it him? I'd hated the thought of watching him leave earlier, so I'd forced myself to turn away. I'd been raised to shun any attachment outside of The Warren. Flirting and seduction were sometimes part of a job, but I never had lovers for more than a night or a heat episode. I didn't even have friends until Tawny and Tuesday.

I had grown up knowing that I would be mated to whoever they chose for me. It would be someone carefully selected because not only was I a male omega, which

was unusual for my species, but I was also a rare white hare.

The Warren was essentially a cult living under the rule of The Husk, and for some reason they had latched onto this insane idea that I was a symbol of new beginnings. The things they had put me through, the isolation, the training, the punishments—they said that was preparation to herald in the new future I would bring. But I'm not stupid. I know what that means. They used me to make them richer, wringing out every usable drop of me they could. Interpol wasn't the only organization on my tail and, towards the end, I'd become a high-risk asset.

Through the grapevine and whispers that he had collected on his wandering through the Warren's computer systems, Tawny learned that I was to be matched to a member of The Husk for breeding. Those elderly fuckers were not going to pimp me out to some decrepit old man so I could have his babies. I was supposedly this symbol of power and vitality for the future of The Warren, and yet I wasn't good enough to be considered as a marriage partner, only as a vessel to breed.

Prior to the Germany job, I had done a series of smaller home burglaries where I'd noticed there were a lot more eyes on me than usual. That's how I knew they were preparing to put an end to the work I was doing and bring me back into The Warren permanently. I couldn't let that happen, so we'd moved up my escape plans and made sure Germany was my last run as Gwyn Albin. He died that night, crawling into the burrow and someone else had emerged. It had taken a lot of work and three years on the run before I'd finally become Blue Aubin, so why was I ready to risk that for a man who lied to me about who he was?

Was that the beginning of love? Or just plain stupidity? How was I supposed to know? I'd never let anyone into my cabin until him. Never let anyone stay over and yet I hadn't wanted him to leave.

There was time to ponder all this later. Right now, there was a grumpy cat shifter on

his way to stir up some gossip in Aurora Pines. Plus, I hadn't texted my boss since the drive home on Saturday night when I'd let him know I'd be taking some time for my heat. I'd have a bit of groveling to do to Ciro when I returned to The Antler.

Grabbing my truck keys, I head out towards the other side of town where the bus station is based. I never imagined someone like Tuesday would ever take the bus, but T had been tracking him, and apparently the pretentious cat had chosen public transport as his mode of travel.

When I pull up to the small station, he's already standing waiting at the collection point beside a sleek black suitcase. A large suitcase. Just how long was he planning to stay in town for?

He's wearing a pair of high-waisted black pinstripe trousers, paired with a black and white T-shirt, covered in what appears to be graffiti or doodles. His long hair is pinned up in a messy bun, kept firmly in place with a silver hairpin. I'd seen him stab an alpha with that pin once, when a theft had gotten a little off track. He couldn't look more out of place for Aurora Pines if he tried. He's not even wearing a coat, only an oversized black cardigan and a scarf.

Tuesday plays with one of his black snake bite piercings, looking unimpressed as I wind the window down. I didn't make him take the bus. The man had to be richer than the President with some of the pieces he'd had his sticky fingers on, and yet here he was a little dusty and tired looking after taking public transport.

"It took you long enough," he says as he climbs into the passenger side, leaving me to get out and grab his case. There are no traces of his French accent anymore, not that it surprised me. He had been trying to lose it ever since I first met him, something about France only leaving him with drama and scars, and he refused to be left with the accent, too. I guess I couldn't really judge him for that. I left Russia behind years ago too.

“Well, Tuesday, if you’d told me you were coming, I could’ve been here to meet you right off the bus.”

“Well, Blue, my dearest friend, if you’d told me you had moved, then I could’ve visited a YEAR AGO.” He brushes some lint off his trousers before fixing me with another one of his sharp glares. “Instead, I’m here on a last-minute save-your-ass trip to the middle of nowhere.”

Save my ass? From who? Himself? Jona—Madoc? I didn’t need saving from Madoc. At least, I didn’t think I did.

Chuckling, I pull my belt on and start the engine back up. “I missed you, you know?”

“Of course you did, darling.” He pulls out a pair of sunglasses and glances around, scanning the area. I can tell by the way his jaw ticks, he’s unimpressed with what he sees.

“Didn’t you miss me?”

“Perhaps.” That was as close to an admission as I was going to get from Tuesday. This was the man who’d once said to me that emotions were like wet wipes, occasionally useful, nice to have to hand, but not necessary.

If I thought I had problems with forming attachments and keeping relationships, compared to Tuesday, I was perfectly fine. He would chew up his lovers and spit them out without a second thought. He didn’t like to be tied down, and caring for another person in the way most normal people would, was beyond him unless it was part of a scheme.

Tawny and I were the exception for some reason, but even our relationship wasn’t typical. We were friends, and that meant he would occasionally share information

with me. Perhaps we'd have dinner if we were in the same city, but that was usually too risky. And he'd played a part in my escaping The Husk. He showed that he cared for me by making sure I was never caught, but would he ever say it? No, the man would rather be flayed alive with oyster shells.

"Where are you staying?" I start driving towards The Antler, thinking that perhaps we can grab a late lunch and then hopefully I'll be able to see Jon—Madoc. Madoc. When Tuesday doesn't answer right away, I turn to glance at him as he stares out of the passenger window, avoiding my gaze. "Right. Of course."

He clearly hadn't booked a room at Betsy's Inn, or looked online for any of the cabins out by the lake or in the forest—he'd been planning on staying with me the entire time. Sneaky bastard.

"It's not safe to stay anywhere else," he says quietly, as he rests his elbow on the door and rests his chin on it, watching the small town go by slowly through the window.

"What are you doing?" he asks as I pull into the small parking lot next to the general store. A little self-medication was clearly called for. I couldn't survive tonight without something to take the edge off, especially after the last couple of days. My nerves were more frayed than the welcome mat at a whorehouse.

Plus, it would give my cabin a chance to air out since right now it was now steeped in pheromones. I silently thank the Goddess that I'd thought to open all the windows and change the bedsheets before I'd left earlier. I just hope it's enough, or I think Tuesday might seriously kill me and bury my body in the woods.

"If you're going to be staying with me, I'm going to need alcohol. And snacks. Lots of both."

We manage to get around the store with only a few curious glances our way. A

couple of people wave or nod their head in greeting, but other than that we're left to our own devices. That is until we reach the checkout.

Nerys is quick to pounce, always hungry for gossip as she questions Tuesday about how long he's in town for, whether he's single, and why he hasn't visited before. That question earns me some serious side-eye from the cat shifter.

We're packing up the beer, wine (because Tuesday is a snob) and snacks when Nerys mentions that there are a few more unfamiliar faces in town right now. The statement is innocent enough, because the tourist season for Aurora Pines is about to begin.

From spring to summer, people come to hunt, fish and get away for the weekend with their families out on the lake. However, there's still a couple of weeks to go before anything is really open for tourists, which makes alarm bells ring in my head. Tuesday and I share a look as I hand over the cash, and I know he's thinking the same thing. Neither of us say anything, aware that there are always people listening.

Fully stocked, we finally make our way back to the cabin and while I'm unpacking the groceries, Tuesday wanders around touching everything. He picks things up, looking at them for a moment before putting them back.

There isn't much here for him to look at. While I tried my best in terms of furnishings, I knew better than to fill my home with personal items when there was every chance I may have to leave at a moment's notice. Putting up pictures of people who become important to me, that was a rookie error when you were living in hiding. It was handing over your weaknesses on a platter. Instead, I'd tried to find knick-knacks that reminded me of them.

Tuesday lifts a small needle felted cat keyring off my shelf, turning it over in his hands. It's something that caught my eye at a market back in Newtown, when I lived there for three months. His eyebrow quirks up, but he gently places it back down next

to the ceramic owl.

“We need to talk. Plan your next move.” I know he’s right, but I don’t want to think about it just yet. My head was a mess. I hadn’t had a chance to breathe, to think, to process. I knew the logical thing to do was to move on, even if I hadn’t been exposed yet, which was really unlikely given it was Madoc in my bed this morning. It was only a matter of time.

I lift a hand to silence him. “Not tonight, please.”

If I had to leave, I’d be leaving behind everyone at The Antler, Shep, Ciro and Maizie and even loudmouth Nerys. I’d have to start over again, in a new city, a new home, all alone. I wasn’t sure if I could do all of that again. I’d gotten too comfortable in the last year, putting down roots when I should have left after three months like every other place I’d ever stayed. It was my fault, my mistake for wanting more.

“Blue.” That’s all he says. My name. Except it’s not my name, not really. It’s the name I’d chosen for myself and tried to claim, but now I would be forced to give that up to. Blue Aubin would be no more.

Tuesday lives the same life as me. He understands. He knows how much this is going to hurt and I can tell, because the softness in that one word is more than he’s ever given me in our entire friendship.

“The bathroom is upstairs if you’d like to take a shower. The couch folds out into a bed, so I’ll grab you a quilt and some extra pillows for later.” I need to change the topic, and focus on right now. And right now, Tuesday smelled like a crowded, sweaty bus.

He comes down stairs a while later as I’m sitting out on my porch, wearing only a pair of black silk pajama bottoms and a towel draped around his neck. His long dark

hair is still wet, clinging to parts of his skin as he moves. The white streaks at the front make him look like some sort of comic book badass. Both of his nipples pierced, the metal glinting in the early evening light.

I wonder what that feels like during sex. Should I get mine done? No, that would mean showing someone my marked chest. But...Madoc could easily tug them through my T-shirt, and I bet that would feel incredible. Maybe I should just pierce them myself?

“Like what you see?” he asks me teasingly.

Tuesday was not my type. He was too high maintenance, and he was an omega, just like me. It meant that we would never be quite sexually compatible since we both crave the same thing. That didn’t mean omegas didn’t pair up occasionally, and they certainly experimented with one another, but most of us also knew what we liked and that was a big fat alpha knot.

Quickly, I text Madoc letting him know that I won’t be at the bar this evening and I’ll reach out when I can. He probably thinks I’m trying to brush him off, but that’s not the case and I’ll just have to have a little faith that he’ll be patient with me.

“Who are you texting with a smile?” Tuesday pulls out a T-shirt from his suitcase and pulls it on before towel drying his hair a little more. Cautiously lifting the corner of the quilt, he sniffs suspiciously before taking a seat on the sofa. “Are they the reason this place smells like a brothel?”

Taking a tentative sniff, I can’t pick up anything, but cats have more sensitive noses than hares.

“I’m just letting T know you got here safely.” I lied. I’d already text Tawny a while ago.

Grabbing the wine, and digging around in the drawers for a corkscrew, Tuesday gives me a flat stare. “The owl already knows, and he’s jealous that he’s not here with us, even though he rarely leaves his little apartment these days.”

Frowning, I get to my feet and grab myself a beer, handing Tuesday a wine glass from the cabinet at the same time. I’m not even sure why I have wine glasses. It’s not like anyone ever came out here. Maybe I’d bought them one night when I was feeling particularly lonely and foolishly hoping that this time would be different.

Stopping my mind before it starts wandering down a morose and mournful path, I force myself to smile. “I’ve never had a sleepover before. Do we share secrets, eat junk food and braid one another’s hair?”

“I’ve seen the shit you use as shampoo in your shower.” Tuesday’s eyebrow lifts. I swear I’ve never met anyone with eyebrows as impressive as his. “I would rather eat a mouthful of bees than let you near my hair.

He sashays past me, wine in hand, and takes a seat on my sofa. Staring up at me with those intense green eyes, I know he’s going to want to talk about Madoc, The Husk and packing all my shit up and bailing on Aurora Pines. His face says business, but my brain can’t handle it.

“Hmmm. Wanna practice kissing and talk about boys instead then?” I ask with a snort, earning myself a pillow to the face, but at least it distracts him. For now.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

After Blue's apologetic text, letting me know he's tied up with his personal situation, I feel like I'm at a loose end. I'd woken from my nap and seen the message, but I knew that whatever was going on was important. It wasn't my place to interfere, not yet. Not when I wanted so badly for him to trust me and let me in himself.

Forcing myself to stay in the apartment and not seek him out was making me restless. It felt like there were ants crawling beneath my skin. I'd been an Intelligence Analyst for years. I was used to being focused and dedicated, but four days in Blue's bed had shot that all to pieces. He was like a drug, and I was an addict desperate for my next hit.

In the evening, I sit out on my balcony for a while with my laptop, trying to do some extra research on The Warren. The weather was already milder than when I'd first arrived, or perhaps I was acclimatizing as I left my coat and wore only my hoodie, a cup of steaming coffee on the table next to my laptop.

Combing through forums on the deep dark web, I eventually come across what I'm looking for. Stories, mostly half buried, that make the hair on my arms rise. Tales of imprisonment, forced breeding and child slavery. Secret whisperings of a cult.

With each thread I find, life at The Warren starts unraveling, and I wonder what kind of childhood Blue had. What had happened to him that made him choose this life? Humans were naturally social creatures, even if our shifter species might not be. No one would choose to live on the run, having nowhere to call home, or people to trust, but that's what he's been doing for the last three years.

I wonder if his emergency is related to those 'bad influences' Abiel had been worried

about. A small part of me hopes that the people who got him out of there had at least stuck around to make sure he was safe. I hate the idea of him being out in the world alone, scared without anyone to look out for him.

“Something on your mind, boy?” Mr. Jones, my next-door neighbor, asks as he steps out onto his balcony to water his plants. I’d learned it was part of his nightly ritual when I’d first moved in. “You’ve been sitting out here a while.”

He’s an older gentleman, with white wispy hair, and pale blue eyes. He’s smaller than me and hunches a little, but his broad shoulders tell me he was probably the same height as me once upon a time.

I snort at his words. I’m hardly a boy—I was in my mid-thirties. Although, I was acting like a horny teenager, the way I was desperate to head over to Blue’s cabin and fuck him senseless. Goddess, you’d swear I’d never had sex before the way he was constantly on my mind.

“I also noticed you haven’t been home for a few days, and a certain white head beauty also hasn’t been spotted for a while.” Mr. Jones looks at me over the top of his glasses, eye twinkling as he lifts his watering to the plant pots hanging near the door. “You best not hurt our Blue. That one has been through enough.”

How did he know about Blue’s life before he came to Aurora Pines? The man was sealed tighter than that supposed vault he had. He wasn’t the type to share his feelings openly either. Did Blue know that he had people looking out for him in this town? People who genuinely cared about him. How could I let Abiel ruin that?

“I won’t,” I promise. The words are mostly true. I don’t want to hurt him. I want to keep him safe. To love him. To make him happy. But when he finds out who I am and what I’ve been doing, hurting him might be inevitable.

“Good. Good.” The old man nods. “Now, off to bed with you or you’ll catch a chill.”

Chuckling, I move inside, but thanks to my earlier nap, I wasn’t ready to sleep. I just got the impression you didn’t say no to Mr. Jones.

Gathering up the threads I found, I send them across to Jason, hoping that he can put a little pressure on them, tugging at them until the tapestry comes loose and begins to unweave.

Perhaps if the High Leap and The Husk had other things occupying their attention and time, they’ll leave my mate alone. They might stop their search for him and if not, well then, we’ll have to get our hands a little dirtier than I’d like.

At the bottom of my email, I include a blog I found on a small website with barely any subscribers. It had caught my attention, because it speculated that The Ghost was now active in the US, linking together several small-scale robberies that had taken place over the last couple of years. At first, I dismissed it, because the thief always took items besides diamonds, but then I saw something about white fur being found at one of the sites, and the neighbors seeing a small white hare in their garden, believing it to be a spirit at first. The last robbery had taken place just a few hours away from here, but I remind myself that I’m no longer part of that world. I may be off the case, but Jason might find something of use.

I don’t know if it’s Mr. Jones’s words or just the fact that I finally sat with the knowledge that I had found my Fated Mate, but I knew that my job with Abiel was done. I couldn’t work for that man, no matter what pressure he tried to put on me or what carrot he dangled. There were always alternative ways to make money. I wouldn’t sell my soul to his cult.

Emailing Finn, I let him know that I’m going to have to return The Warren’s money, but I reassure him that everything was fine because I still had some savings put aside

for a rainy day. I just wanted to prepare him that the next couple of months might be tighter than normal so that they weren't side swiped by it. I knew my brothers would pull together and make sure above all else my mother was cared for, at least until I landed the next job. It was just a way to give me breathing space and allow me to focus on my new relationship and cutting ties with The Warren.

When I'm finally done getting my ducks in a row, as they say, even though mine were more like feral pigeons, I realize it's 2 am and reluctantly call it a night. Laying in the dark, in my cold sheets, I hope that this is one of the last nights I stay alone.

The time we spent apart continued to convince me that he was my mate. Every part of me longed to be with him.

A few times today I had caught flashes of my shifter side emerging—my eyes changing in the reflection of the window, a snarling noise creeping up my throat, my nails lengthening and twisting into claws before I stopped it and forced the change back.

My fox was eager to claim his mate, and it was driving him wild, knowing that he was only out by the lake. That was within running distance to him. Soon, I tell him, trying to soothe his impatience. Soon he'll be ours.

When I wake, the strange ache in my chest is stronger, making me nauseous. There's a good morning text from Blue, which has me grinning like an idiot as I pour my morning coffee and wolf down some toast. Ignoring my emails and the missed calls from my brothers, I go for a run in the woods. Careful to stay away from the lake and the temptation of my mate, I shift and distract my inner beast until there's some semblance of calm in my soul.

Once I'm back at the apartment, I shower and dress. It's almost lunchtime, which means Blue might be back at The Antler today, if his situation with his friend is resolved. Walking into town, I continue to ignore the buzzing of my phone, since Abiel was desperately trying to reach me once again. I'd prepared the funds to be transferred back to him. I was just waiting for the right moment to cut ties.

Pushing open the doors of the bar, I catch sight of Blue, my mate, sitting near a window towards the back. His face is lit up with natural light, making his silver white hair appear even more ethereal as he leans back into his chair and chews on his thumb, staring out into the street.

I don't like the way his brows are furrowed together, or how his shoulders are practically up by his ears. If I was close enough to scent him, I'm sure I'd be picking up signs of stress. At least with him in my line of sight, the strange pressure in my chest eases somewhat. I can't see who he's sat with, only the back of their head. I can't even tell what gender the person is because their hair is long and dark with an inky hue, giving nothing away.

Waiting for a moment to see if Blue notices me, I head to the bar. Ordering what's become my regular and taking a seat in my usual spot, I settle in to wait, but he's engrossed in the conversation.

It doesn't take long for Ciro to spot me and narrow in like a heat-seeking missile. I liked the young man. He was curious and friendly, but clearly looking for love in all the wrong places to avoid the giant crush he had on his much older boss. Besides, my heart and my body belonged to someone else, and Ciro was far too young for me. He might be close to Blue's age, but in terms of personality and temperament, Blue had a maturity that Ciro hadn't yet found. Still, I admired him for shooting his shot every time I came in here.

"Have you seen the new man around town, the one with the dark hair and the dark

eyes?” My ears prick up. Placing my drink down on the table, he leans in to whisper behind his hand as if he has any hope of being discreet with the way his voice carries. “He looks like a fugly left shoe.”

“A what ? Never mind.” Narrowing my eyes over at Blue’s table, I ask, “Do you mean the one sitting with Blue?”

“No, not him. He’s gorgeous .” Tittering, Ciro waves his hand before standing with his hand on his hips, the round serving tray tucked under his arm. “There was someone asking around for you earlier at the store.”

Ahhh. I bet Nerys had already been in to collect her lunch order like usual, paying with crumpled notes and gossip.

Someone was asking for me? Only my family and Jason knew I was in Aurora Pines. I hadn’t told anyone else, not even Abiel, who was technically paying me to be here. Emphasis on the ‘was’ since I would be returning the money and terminating that relationship as soon as Jason got back to me.

Could he have sent someone else? He was impatient, but was he foolish enough to risk Blue realizing someone was looking for him and bolting again? Just what had Blue stolen and was there a way I could convince him to return it? It might be the only way to put an end to this farce and buy his freedom.

Burt, a lumberjack who I’d chatted with a handful of times, is sitting on the next table over with someone I think is called Jaxs or Jackson. He coughs, clearing his throat before he grumbles, “Suspicious. Didn’t like the look of him.”

A few other people nearby nod, and it makes my scalp prickle. There was a newcomer in town riling up the locals, and they were asking after me? Digging out my phone, I scroll through the missed calls and messages. Only eight from my

brothers, but twenty-one from Abiel and a handful of messages along the lines of ‘CALL ME. I WARNED YOU.’

This wasn’t a good sign.

Pulling out a stool and placing his elbows on the table, Ciro takes a seat, resting his chin on his hands. “They said they’d been to your apartment but you weren’t in, so Mr. Smith, where were you last night?”

A few people snicker, and I can feel their eyes burning into me. Was nothing a secret in this town? I recognize one or two of them from the grocery store along with Betsy, the local inn owner, along with Mike, who runs the garage and Miss Katrin, the florist. When had I started integrating myself with the locals?

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I tease, trying not to act like anything is wrong. Right now, I don’t actually know if something is amiss, even if every nerve in my body is screaming to shift and go into flight or fight mode.

Taking a sip of my soda, I catch Shep’s eye over the top of Ciro’s head. He likes to act like he’s oblivious to Ciro’s crush on him, but I’ve seen him watching the young man. There’s definitely interest in his gaze, but he seems to be holding himself back from acting on it.

“That’s why I’m asking! Were you with Blue?” Ciro slaps a hand down on the desk as if he’s playing the bad cop role in a bad television drama. “I’ve seen the hickies on his neck and the way you look at him.”

Ignoring the amateur dramatics and the curious stares, I raise a brow. “Did you tell him anything? The man?”

Ciro scoffs, as if I’m asking a stupid question, crossing his arms across his chest. “Of

course not. We don't know who he is or what he wants."

"He's an outsider," Jaxs (or Jackson) chimes in while Burt murmurs in agreement.

Shep finally approaches with my food, saving me from Ciro's interrogation with a stern glare that makes Ciro squirm in his seat. "Is everything okay over here?"

"Yeah, we're good." I nod as he places the bowl of chili down with cutlery wrapped in a napkin.

Glancing up, I realize Blue must have noticed the crowd gathering around my table and finally spotted me because he's walking over. There's a ghost of a smile on his face, but I can also see something else reflected in his eyes. Is he nervous? He looks a little tired, and perhaps paler than usual.

"Hey, I didn't see you come in." His voice is soft, as he stands next to Shep and stares down at where Ciro is sitting next me practically in my lap. He must have inched closer when we were talking.

"I haven't been here long," I say, aware of all the eyes on us, and someone behind me coughs to hide a snicker.

"What are you talking about over here?"

Ciro glances back at Blue with a grin. "That new guy in town."

"What new guy?" A flicker of alarm darts across his face and I feel panic blossoming in my chest. Those aren't my feelings...are they?

"The one staying at Betsy's inn."

Blue's guest is clearly unimpressed at being left alone while the rest of us are huddled on the other side of the bar around another table. It's either that or they dislike having their back exposed to the room without Blue sitting opposite, so they move, sliding into the vacated seat.

For a moment, I try to place him, feeling he looks familiar. The man is beautiful in a haughty way, with high sharp cheekbones and perfectly arched brows. His long hair looks like a curtain of black silk, apart from two silver streaks on either side of his face.

There's a gleam in his eye that seems oddly hostile as he glances over and his gaze locks on mine. His green eyes narrow, and a frisson of awareness runs through me.

I know those eyes.

Recognize that face.

He's been on Interpol's watchlist for years, but we've never been able to make anything stick to Tuesday Reynard. There was never any tangible evidence that could prove definitively he was the infamous 'Le Chat Noir', a thief who had stolen a priceless Sapphire bracelet from the Louvre.

I can see the moment he realizes that I'm onto him, because his mouth twists into a taunting smile and he lifts his hand and waves his fingers. It's like a dare or a challenge to see how I respond. This was Blue's friend who was having an emergency?

Le Chat Noir was also friends with The Ghost. Even though we hadn't caught them together, I strongly suspected there were a few instances where they had worked together. The signs were too clear to be ignored. There had been similar jewelry thefts in the same city, their paths crossing often enough for it to raise suspicions.

There had also been one case where The Ghost had stolen the diamonds, only for Le Chat Noir to go back three days later to steal the rest, like it was some sort of game.

If Le Chat was here, what did that mean?

Where was The Ghost?

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

With Tuesday sitting on one side of the room and Madoc on the other, surrounded by the people I'd grown to care about in the last year. It feels like my two worlds are colliding in slow motion, and there's no way to stop it.

I don't even know why I came over to Maddox's table because it just makes it look like there's something going on between us, which there might be... but now the entire town is going to be talking about it. They were like piranhas latching on to gossip when they picked up the scent of blood in the waters.

They're currently talking about the stranger staying out on the mountain with Betsy, at the inn, which was really just an old converted cabin with five bedrooms. Betsy let out rooms throughout the year to cover the maintenance costs of her family home and keep her going through the winter.

Alarm bells are ringing in my head because Madoc being here is one thing, Tuesday following is another and now a suspicious stranger? A sense of impending doom keeps growing in the pit of my stomach, swelling like a storm brewing until I feel sick with the pressure of it.

Realizing that I won't be able to talk to Madoc with so many people listening, I reluctantly return to my table. Tuesday is sitting in my seat, glaring out at the rest of the bar as he scans it like he's expecting someone to pop out from behind a stool and drag me back to The Warren.

After our night of tipsy bonding, I'd brought him in here for lunch before I helped with the evening shift. I owed it to Shep to put some hours in since I'd missed my shifts this week and the others had to pick up the slack. I also thought that if we had

this conversation in public, Tuesday would be less likely to strong arm me into just vanishing without saying to anybody like I normally would. I just hadn't expected half of the town to come in for lunch or Madoc to be sitting there watching us.

Tuesday looks pissed off when I return. His face is placid, but the nerve in his jaw twitches as his lips twist into a sneer. "You like him."

The words are only an accusation, but they feel like an arrow to my chest. "What? No."

I don't know why admitting I like Madoc is a bad thing, but it feels like dangerous territory, like a secret that shouldn't be shared. Was it wrong for wanting to keep whatever this was between us? For a few days, he was mine. Only mine. And it didn't matter who he was or who I was, because we were just Blue and Jonah, omega and alpha.

"You liked him, even back then." Tuesday scoffs and I hate how smug he is with his arms crossed, gaze trained on me like a human lie detector. "Does he know who you really are?"

"There's nothing to know." Being The Ghost was such a small part of my life now and one day, it wouldn't be a part of it at all. Stealing was usually something I did to help out T or a way to raise money for charities that supported omegas in need. Never again would I steal to line the pockets of greedy maniacs. I would rather die than go back to what I was before. "And I didn't know it was him."

"You're telling me you never looked up Officer Stirling?" Tuesday arches a brow, the disbelief clear on his face. "Never saw a single picture of him?"

Back when I had been actively working for The Husk, I had noticed that one officer in particular had started to become curious about me. Tawny kept an eye on the

intelligence services attempting to track us down, and the same name kept coming up repeatedly. Madoc Stirling.

“I...I did. But that was over three years ago, and I never thought he’d turn up here.” I can feel my cheeks heating and I know there’s a blush spreading on my skin as Tuesday chuckles. I should have recognized him before T had done the background search. Then I would have realized who he was.

Madoc stoked my interest years ago. It was clear to see through his search history and his insistence that they focus extra resources on catching me that he was just a little obsessed with me. Every time I saw his name in an update from T, alongside mine, it felt like some sort of small twisted victory. I’d become mutually obsessed, I guess you could say.

Germany had been like the combination of tiptoeing around one another for years, but it had also been a rude awakening of how close I was to being caught. I knew he’d be on the mission, but I hadn’t expected to spot him in the corridor. I can’t even explain how I knew it was him. I just did.

I couldn’t even see his face because of all his gear and there was no clear scent to pick up either, but there was something about his body language or the way he watched me and I felt it in my chest. That was my Madoc. My hunter. My prey.

After that last job, everything changed. I decided that I wanted to live a life where I didn’t have to stalk someone online to build some sort of twisted connection. I wanted a real chance at a life. And Madoc Stirling eventually faded into the background, his name never coming up again until this week.

“So what? You didn’t recognize him? You just thought you had a ginger daddy fetish?” Tuesday laughs and I realize I rarely see him like this. Was Aurora Pines rubbing off on him already?

Lifting my chin, I glare at my friend with a faux pout. “I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

“I’m just trying to see what you see in him.” He tilts his head, his gaze assessing as he stares over at Madoc.

What do I see in him?

How about his big, strong body? I mean, I could spend hours licking every line and dip of his muscles. His kind eyes that smolder when he looks my way? Giant hands that cup my face when he kisses me like he’s desperate for another taste? Or his perfect lips that whisper all sorts of promises against my skin when he holds me like I’m the most important thing in the world?

Fuck, I was in deep. How had I gotten here?

“It’s not like that,” I deny. If he was important to me, that put him in danger. We hadn’t even talked since the shared heat episode. For all I know, it might just be a one-time thing. I hoped not. Goddess, why was this messing with my head so much?

“The love bites say otherwise.” Tuesday taps his fingers on the table, and just like everything else about him, even those are obscenely elegant. How can fingers be elegant? And yet they are. “Someone has been sniffing around, and an Intelligence Officer from your old cases just magically turns up...something’s not right here.”

Turning my bottle of ginger beer in my hands, I pick at the label. “So what? Is that why you came all this way, to warn me?”

“Mmmmm, I was bored. Also, I thought you might need help preparing for your next move, and if you were going to be stubborn and try to stay, I figured I might also stay a while.”

Tuesday's stares feel like they burn their way down to my bones. I don't know if it's a cat thing, but sometimes I feel like he can read my mind, probing away into the depths because nothing seems to be a secret from him.

"Stay in Aurora? You'll be bored."

"You aren't." There's that shit-eating grin again. The one that looks like the cat got the cream. "Besides, I've already made a few new friends."

I blink several times in rapid succession, as if my brain is glitching. I'd barely left him alone. I mean, for a few minutes in the grocery store maybe and just now when I went to speak to Madoc, but I was cock-blocked by half the town, other than that I'd been with him the entire time. "When?"

"I work quickly, what can I say?"

He's a fucking menace. Glancing over my shoulder to see who he's smiling at, and my gaze lands on the bear shifter, and his father, who is sitting at the end of the bar nursing their beers.

"You have got to be kidding me." I chuckle, biting on my knuckle, hiding my smile so they don't think I'm laughing at them. "I know it seems like they would be fun, but you'll eat them alive. Trust me, they aren't worth it."

Tuesday didn't do commitment. He could never find anyone who held his attention for long enough. Over the years he'd cycled through countless relationships, some of them ending for the most bizarre reasons, such as chewing too loudly or finding an outfit offensive.

No one could ever quite handle him and his demanding ways. He was a perfectionist who liked things done a particular way. It's what made him such an excellent jewel

thief. But it's also what made him a shit boyfriend.

“Well, I still think my new friends have potential. Besides, I can have fun training them while you're chasing that foxy officer of yours, and pulling pints for money you don't need.”

His little jab at my job makes me scowl. I work here because I want to. That doesn't make it a waste of my time, or something to be looked down on. As for the other thing, I hadn't gone looking for Madoc. He'd found me. I don't know why, or how, but it was supposed to happen.

“I'm not chasing—”

Tuesday rolls his eyes and lifts a hand to silence me. Damn him and his arrogant, elegant fingers. “I've let T know we've got an unexpected guest. He's doing a little digging but, in the meantime, do your shift, keep your head down and don't go anywhere alone.”

I nod, but it isn't enough for my overbearing, overprotective friend. Leaning in, his eyes darken. He snarls, and I sit a little straighter.

“Do not go anywhere alone, Blue. Understand?”

I hate The Husk for ruining my childhood, but I refuse to let them destroy the rest of my life too. I had earned my freedom, not that I should have had to earn it to begin with.

They were afraid of me. Afraid and greedy to get their sticky fingers on what I was hiding in my vault. If they left me alone, there would be nothing to be afraid of. If

they were happy with their lot in life and the wealth they had already accumulated, they wouldn't need people like me. When would they realize that I wasn't the vessel for their next prophet?

I was their destruction.

I would set The Warren ablaze before I ever returned there, to be married off to some shriveled elder and birth another weapon to add to their arsenal.

Most of my shift passes almost effortlessly. Working at The Antler has become muscle memory and I'm surrounded by a sea of familiar faces. There's a pang in my chest. I don't want to leave town. These people. I'm not ready to give this up.

I still hadn't managed to talk with Madoc before I started work. It was like some weird town conspiracy where there was always someone else lingering next to him. Throughout the evening, it's the same and I swallow back a curse. When the fuck did he become so popular?

Was everyone just messing with me today? I couldn't pull him away because that would set the gossip mill into overdrive, and right now, I didn't even know if he wanted to be with me or if I was just a casual fuck. It didn't feel like a casual fuck. It felt like he was always meant to be mine.

But what if I was the only one feeling that way?

My gaze keeps wandering back to him throughout the evening, as I foolishly hope there's a moment when he's alone. Even just five minutes would be enough. Every time I glance over at him, he is already staring back at me as if he's already aware that the universe is trying to keep us apart and someone else is sitting where I should be.

I'm changing a barrel in the back room when a wave of heat prickles over my skin. It starts low in my groin before spreading outwards, making my stomach clench and my hole drip with need. Fuck, was it another heat episode? It had never been like this before. Slick trickles down my crease and along my inner thigh. Maybe it was something to do with the stress I was under?

All I know is that my body feels like I'm on fire, burning from the inside out. Pressing my forehead against the cold brick wall, I whine quietly. I need something. I need...I don't know what I need, but it feels like my skin is too tight for my skeleton, and there's an ache in my bones making me tremble.

With huge shuddering breaths and pausing every two minutes for cramps, where my body protests about not being impaled on an alpha knot or filled with cum, I finally manage to connect the barrel and make my way back out into the bar.

"Blue?" I stumble into Shep, who grabs my shoulder and turns me to face him. Concern is written all over his face as he looks me over. "What's the matter? You look awful."

I feel nauseous, but also hollow, like there's something clawing at my insides. I want to drop to my knees and beg for relief, but there's one person who can help now.

"I just need to take my break early." I say, wincing at the contact, and gently shrugging off his touch. For some reason, his hand on me feels searing, and not in a good way.

Tuesday's still sitting at the bar between the two bears, green gaze zeroed in on me, but I lift a hand to let him know I'm okay. He relaxes, looking less like he's about to pounce over the bar, but his eyes don't leave me.

"Of course. And if you need to go home, we've got you covered. Don't worry about

it.”

I owed this man so much for taking a chance on me, for giving me a home and a job. I’d never be able to replay the kindness he’d shown me.

Tears prickle at my eyes. “Thanks. For everything, Shep.”

“Don’t say it like that,” he chuckles awkwardly, scrubbing at the back of his neck as he glances down at his feet. “It sounds too much like a goodbye.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, but it comes out all scratchy and snarled. For a moment, I’m glad Ciro is over the other side of the room, because if he was behind the bar asking me a million questions right now, I might actually bite him.

Fed up with fighting the clawing need building inside me, and no longer caring about everyone else thanks to the pain, I stride towards Madoc’s table.

Barely pausing to grab his shirt, I yank him from his seat before dragging him outside behind me. Pulling him around the corner and into an alleyway besides the bar, I shove him up against the wall.

Cupping my face, eyebrows knitted together with concern, he stares into my eyes. “Love? What’s going on?”

Fuck. Why was he so good? And gentle? And kind?

“Help me,” I plead as I press my body against his, desperate for his touch. The alleyway is dark, barely lit by a lone street lamp on the sidewalk.

“Are you having another heat episode?” he asks, tilting my face up to his so he can gently kiss my lips. It’s not enough.

I nod, whining as I bury my face against his neck, craving more skin on skin. It's one of the only things that seems to calm me. Inhaling, I groan as the scent of wood smoke invades my senses. Mine. Mine.

What the heck was that? There's no time to linger on the voices in my head as another wave of desperation hits me, stronger than the last one. More slick oozes from my hole.

"Pheromones. Now," I grunt, yanking again on his shirt, scraping my teeth over the scent glands on his neck. Chuckling, I feel his hands on my waist, before moving up my back in slow stroking motions that drive me wild.

A moment later, I feel it.

The soothing calm that comes with a hint of wildflower and woodland moss. Sinking my teeth into his neck and sucking on the skin, I rut up against him as the smell deepens. His pheromones are the most addictive high I've ever felt, and if I could bottle that shit, I would.

They wash over me, taking with it the worst of the frantic energy building, but we both know it's not enough. It'll take more than that to satisfy me.

Creating some space between us, Madoc pushes two fingers inside my mouth, pressing down against my tongue as he works them in. "Come on baby, suck."

Fucking them in and out of my mouth, I get them covered in spit until it's dripping down my chin. It's obscene, but I don't care. He tastes like mine. Like home.

Lifting his leg a little, he presses his thigh against my hard cock through my jeans and I almost whimper as I rub against him, seeking friction just to take the edge off.

“Good boy, you’re doing so well.”

I want to be good for him. Mine.

Want to show him how much I need this

Need him. Mine.

Moaning, I take his thick fingers deeper into my throat.

My cock jerks in my jeans, and I can feel the wetness inside my already soaked boxers. Fuck, everything was dripping.

Madoc pulls out slowly, reaching down to grab my ass, squeezing and kneading it in his hands as he forces me to fuck harder against his thick thigh.

“What do you need, love?” he asks, as he pulls my cheeks apart, making slick stream down my crease. Goddess, he was going to kill me if he didn’t fuck me soon.

“You.” It’s whispered, just one word. One simple request, but he knows what I mean.

Claiming my mouth in a kiss that wipes away all traces of doubt in my mind, I know I’m already crazy for this man. He tastes like hope, for a future where I’m free and I can’t get enough. My hands weave their way into his copper-colored hair, while his stubble scratches against my skin as I try to make sure there’s not even an inch between us, because that is an inch too much.

Pulling away, but still holding me firmly against him, he murmurs against my lips with a small huffed laugh. “We’re not fucking in an alley, darlin’.”

“I need it,” I whimper, rubbing my throbbing cock against his leg so he can feel how

wet and needy I am for him.

“I know,” he mimics my tone with a smile, before giving me another deep kiss that makes my toes curl and steals the air from my lungs. Would I ever get tired of kissing Madoc? No, I’d rather die first. His kisses were everything fairytale story books talked about.

“I tell you what,” he sucks my bottom lip between his teeth and tugs on it playfully. “How about you get to your knees and suck my cock. I’ll give you a little bit of that alpha cum you’re craving, and then we can head back to mine.”

My brain goes fuzzy as I start thinking about taking his cock into my mouth, tasting him as I take what I need.

“How does that sound beautiful?” He strokes his thumb against my cheek while raising his leg a little more. Shit! I was going to come just like this if he wasn’t careful.

“Fuck, yes.” I nod eagerly, as his fingers slide into the back of my jeans and brush over my soaked, sensitive hole teasingly. Was he trying to kill me?

“You gonna suck my fat cock?” He tugs my earlobe between his teeth before planting a kiss just below my ear.

“Yes,” I whisper on an exhale. His fingers press against my opening, but he doesn’t push inside even though I arch my body, begging him to do it. To thrust his fingers inside and fuck me with them.

“Are you going to swallow every drop?”

“Yes! Please. Now.” I demand, scrabbling at his clothes, trying to push away so that I

can undo his jeans, but there's not enough space between us.

“Well, what are you waiting for then?” He growls, and sound ripples through me as he issues his command. “Get on your knees Blue.”

Fuckkkkkk.

I think I'm in love.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

B lue drops to his knees so quickly, I'm worried he might have hurt himself for a moment. I can hear him whispering, ' Need you. Need you. Need you. ' over and over like a prayer as he grabs the button on my jeans. Undoing it with deft fingers, he pushes my jeans and underwear down just past my balls before burying his nose near the crease of my thigh.

Seeing him so desperate for me, so needy and beautiful, makes pre-cum leak from my flushed tip in anticipation. I would spend days on end buried inside him if he'd let me.

He wraps his pale hand around my shaft, pumping it twice roughly, drawing a long groan from me as my hips buck in a half-aborted thrust.

"You little shit," I tease as I sink my fingers into his silver hair and yank his head back to look up at me.

Dark eyes stare up at me as he sticks out his tongue, laying it flat under my cockhead, as he continues to tease me. But it doesn't last long, his eyes hazy from the heat peak, and I know he won't settle without this. Without me. There's a certain power, and responsibility, that comes with being an omega's alpha partner.

"Want me to feed you my cock, baby?" I ask, my voice thick and husky as I take myself in a firm grip and tap my dick against his waiting tongue, smearing my pre-cum over his cheek and the bridge of his nose.

It's messy, downright filthy, but exposing him to my pheromones every way I can will take the edge off his pain and ease the heat discomfort until I can get him back to

my apartment safely and fill him with my knot.

Closing my eyes, I groan. Goddess, I was going to see him stretched out on my knot again, his hole puffy and clenching around me. That was a memory I'd relieved several times over the last twenty-four hours. My mouth salivates just thinking about him gaping wide open for me. But first I was going to come down his throat, and maybe a little on his face, if he was a good boy.

"Please, Mad. Please. I need you." He begs, blunt nails biting into my thighs as he tries to direct me into his mouth.

Slowly, I push the tip inside, but Blue is a greedy boy, trying to swallow down more of me. With a slow roll of my hips, I inch my way deeper into his wet heat, drawing it out so that I don't come too soon.

His nose is nestled in my pubes as he swallows, throat constricting around my shaft. Humming in pleasure, he sends vibrations through me, and I can feel the precum leaking over his tonsils.

"I'm going to fuck your face, baby." I croon, stroking his hair before thrusting hard. Mine. "Give you what you need."

Sex with Blue isn't like anything I've ever experienced before, and I don't know if that's just because he's my Faded Mate or because there's just something about Blue. he gives it his all, as if this will be the last taste or touch he'll ever get to experience.

Looking up at me, dark eyes swirling with a heat haze, the dim light refracting and for a moment, I swear I can see an entire galaxy reflected in his gaze. This man is the new center of my universe. Mine. Mate.

"Just like that, love," I praise with a grunt. Mine. Fuck! Mine. He makes that needy

little mewling noise I love so much as I pump my spit slicked shaft in and out, framing my dick perfectly with his pillowy lips. “Fuck, your mouth was meant for sin.”

Spit trickles out of the corner of his mouth, running down his chin. Fuck, he looks beautiful. How have I been so lucky to land a mate like this? One so desperate to please.

“You look so perfect on your knees for me,” I tell him as I watch the way he thrusts his hips. He probably doesn’t even know he’s doing it as he chokes on my cock. Omegas are incredibly sensitive when they’re experiencing their heat or a heat episode. I bet if he carries on like this, he’ll come hands free in his jeans.

Blue pulls off my sloppy cock, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand before begging to be fucked down.

“Please. Please fuck me, I need your knot.” His voice is all scratchy and husky, making my groin tense as I hold back on my orgasm.

“I know darlin’, but not here,” I promise, pumping out more pheromones for my greedy little love. He deserved the finest silk sheets, champagne and plump pillows, but the best I can offer him is my bed back in the apartment with the cotton quilts. One day, I promise myself silently, one day I’ll give him everything. I’ll never let him doubt how I feel about him.

Swallowing me back down to the base, he fondles my balls, massaging them between his fingers as a fresh load of warm spit drips down my sack.

Obscene sounds fill the dark alleyway as he gags and chokes himself on my meaty shaft. I’ve never had a lover suck my cock like this, like he needs it more than air. Blue touches me like he might die if he can’t and that’s intense, driving me crazy

with every frantic, frenzied connection.

My balls tighten under his dexterous fingers. The pressure, the heat is too much and when he moans, shooting into his jeans like I predicted, it's enough to push me into the abyss.

My orgasm slams mercilessly into me, dragging me into the undertow of the swirling storm he'd conjured with his mouth. Fuckkkkk.

Grabbing Blue's head, I use his hair to keep his mouth on my dick as I wrap myself around him, shooting my cum down his throat in gushes. He takes everything I have to give him, like the good boy he is, and as I pull out, I give myself a couple of strokes, squeezing a few more ribbons out, just for him. It streaks across his nose and cheek before I wipe the last droplets over his swollen lips. Seeing my cum marking his face makes me want to devour him whole.

With gasping breaths, as he comes down from the high, Blue slumps back against the red brick, his face relaxed as he sits there. His eyes are glazed over and cum drunk. I think this might be one of my new favorite sights, almost as much as when I'm fucking him.

As he slowly comes back into himself, I can practically see the need still pulsing away beneath his skin as he moans and reaches for me with a small whimper. The scent of apples is strong, mixing with my own pheromones so that we're almost dripping in them.

If I didn't get him back to my place soon, I was going to give the good citizens of Aurora Pines a show they'll never recover from. Shrugging my jacket off, I drape it over him before leaning down and wrap his hands around my neck and pull him into my arms. His clothes are sticky with cum, and I can't wait to peel him out of them when we get back to my apartment. I might even lick him clean if I'm feeling patient.

I only live a few streets away, so ensuring Blue is tucked away under my jacket, I get us there quickly. Luck is on our side as we manage to get back without running into anyone other than Mr. Jones, who gives me a knowing look as he wrinkles his nose and goes inside his apartment. It's probably because everybody else in this town is apparently in The Antler, given the way I couldn't seem to get five minutes alone with Blue earlier.

Carrying Blue into my room, I lay him down carefully on top of the sheets and strip away his clothes, careful to leave his undershirt on.

"Look at you," I say, leaning back to admire my omega. My mate . "My perfect, dirty Blue."

"I'm going to need you to fuck me now," he chuckles, watching me as I remove my own clothes and I'm glad some of his awareness has returned. His gaze is hungry as he waits for me to lose my jeans and I milk it for all it's worth, flexing and posing while he raises a brow at me.

"Anything for you, love." He doesn't understand yet how true those words are. But one day he will. Crawling onto the bed between his spread legs, I kiss a trail from his knee to his groin. The sweet smell of a slick fills my nose, my mouth waters as I'm eager for a taste.

"I want to feel you for days." He might say he wants it hard and rough, but I know how to read the signs of his body. And I know that my pretty little omega needs me to fuck him slowly and gently.

With my hands behind his thighs, I push his legs up until he hooks them with his arms and holds himself open for me.

"Look at this hole, still puffy and swollen from all the knots I gave you already." I

like him exposed like this. It shows how much he trusts me and how much he wants this.

Pushing my finger through his sticky slickness, I tease his sweet rim, watching the muscle flutter beneath my touch.

“Urgh, was it only yesterday? Then why am I so desperate for you?” He throws his head back against the pillow and I watch him swallow as I push the tip of my thumb inside him. “What is it about you?”

The column of his neck is strained, marked from our last encounter, and I resist the urge to climb up his body and sink my teeth in. The need to claim him as mine is simmering away under my skin, but he isn’t ready. There was still too much between us.

Even if his human side hasn’t caught up, his shifter nature knows who he belongs to. It’s why he didn’t want to be apart from me any more than I did him. He can write it off as being part of his heat, but I could feel it in my bones.

My fingers move over his balls, cupping and fondling them until his cock is twitching, leaving sticky marks all over his toned stomach. Unlike when he sucks my dick, I don’t believe in dragging it out and teasing him. Placing my hand near the base of his shaft, I swallow him down until I gag. I can feel his balls tighten in my hand and I know that he’s loves it, even without the soft mewling soundtrack.

“ Yesyesyes, oh fuck yes !” While he’s distracted by my mouth, I push two fingers inside his tight channel without bothering to prep him.

“ Fuckkkkkkkkkk ,” he exhales with the invasion. He’s still so tight and hot around my fingers, despite me spending four days stretching him to fit around my knot. Blue’s body clamps down as if it’s trying to suck me inside him.

I pull off his cock with a soft pop, laying a sloppy kiss at the base of his shaft before I take his balls into my mouth and suck on them.

“Fuck, I love how filthy you are.”

Adding another finger, I pick up the tempo, making sure to brush against his prostate every couple of thrusts so that his cock is dripping pre-come and the slick keeps flowing out of his ass. No one will ever turn him inside out the way I can, because he was made for me.

Pulling away, with spit trailing from my mouth to his body, I line my cock up with his entrance, and unlike his last heat, I slowly notch my way inside, torturing us both. Inch by agonizing inch.

Leaning down to claim his mouth in a kiss, I swallow back a laugh as he fists his hands in my hair and wraps his legs around my waist, trapping me against him before thrusting upwards and impaling himself on my cock.

“Impatient brat,” I growl, biting down on his earlobe as he bucks his hips, using me like a dildo.

Letting him have his fun for a few minutes, it’s not long before he gets bored with doing the work when all he wants is to be taken care of. My little pillow princess.

“Mad...” he whines, arching into me as he scratches at my back, trying to pull me closer.

Grabbing his ankles, I position them on my shoulders. The change in position allows me to fuck him harder, deeper, the angle punching against his prostate with every thrust. He fists the sheets, tearing at them as I bury myself inside him, pumping my cock in and out until it feels like I’m almost ready to crawl out of my skin.

Our skin is sticky and sweat covered, the room smells like us and right now, nothing else exists. The apartment building could crumble around us and they'd find me in the dirt, still fucking him like it was my reason for living. Everything is perfect at this moment.

Letting one of his legs fall back down to hook around my waist, I wrap my hand around his cock and jack him in time with my thrusts.

“Yesss,” he cries, mouth open as I drive into his body.

“You’re mine,” I demand, my chest heaving as he grabs my face and pulls me closer.

“Yes,” he breathes against my lips, swallowing down my air before he kisses me, shattering us both as I bind us together with my knot.

This peak passes much quicker than the last one, lasting only two days before Blue is back to his senses and no longer clawing at my back like he's trying to crawl inside my skin. A part of me is pleased that once again we'd gone without condoms, because now I'm more certain than ever that Blue's my mate and to see him grow big with my child is something that makes my chest feel like it's about to burst.

I stroke his hair and down his spine as he lays across me, my knot still buried in his ass. That last round, he'd ridden me slowly, teasing us both with the lazy rolls of his hips until he orgasmed so hard, he got cum in my chest hair.

“We’ve never talked about why you’re in Aurora Pines.”

“I’m a freelancer and I followed a job here,” I say as I twirl silver strands between my fingers. I don’t want him to ask about the nature of my freelance job, so instead I share other truths in the hope of distracting him.

It makes me feel shitty to hide this from him, but now, when he's vulnerable and soft, isn't the right time to admit that I was sent to track him down. "I'm from Clearwater, where I grew up with three brothers. I was raised by my mother, my father left before I was ten. I have two beautiful nieces, Devon and Lottie."

His breathing is steady, and for a moment I wonder if he's fallen asleep, but then he places a tender kiss just above my nipple, a silent plea for me to continue.

"Because I travel a lot, I moved back home with my mother. My brothers will often stay there too, so it's never a quiet house."

"That sounds nice." There's a soft sigh as his fingers run through my chest hair, snagging slightly where I've been sweaty and sticky. "Are you a mama's boy?"

Chuckling, I think for a few moments about how to answer. "A few years ago, I would've said no, but then my mother got sick and now I get anxious if I'm away from her for too long. So, honestly the answer is yes."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Is she... Is she okay?" Pushing up to look me in the eye, Blue unintentionally rocks on my knot, making me grin.

"She's in remission and she's a fighter. We often joke that the Goddess isn't ready to meet her again yet, and that's why she's still with us." I don't linger on the topic because my mother's illness isn't something to be sad about. She is still with us and that's all that mattered.

"What about you? Where's your family?" I ask gently, even though Abiel told me about Blue's parents being important members of The Warren.

Through some of the forums I'd managed to dig up, I learned that parents inside The Warrens didn't keep their children. They were moved around to spread out access to

resources and based on which areas of Warren life they might go into. I couldn't find much more than that, but I guess it meant that Blue had never really grown up with his parents. Why was Abiel pushing the family card so hard when, in reality, Blue probably couldn't pick his parents out of a line-up?

He confirms my suspicions when he says, "My parents gave me away and I was raised by someone else. When I was old enough and able to, I left. There was nothing there for me."

There's a strange detachment there and I recognize it well, having gone through training to deal with people who have trauma. He disassociates, taking himself out of the situation that might be painful for him otherwise.

"So, who looks out for you?" My fingers continue to move up and down his spine in a soothing pattern. I can't get enough of him, I don't wanna stop touching him. I place a kiss on his lips before he settles back down with his cheek squished against my pec. I'll give him whatever comfort he needs for the rest of our lives.

"Tuesday, who you saw at The Antler earlier is one of my closest friends. We met not long after I turned seventeen." I pick up notes of sadness in his scent, and I want to swallow them down, so he never has to feel them again.

Tuesday, the jewelry thief, has been friends with him since he was a teenager. Does that mean that Blue knew The Ghost? Had he been forced into a life of crime just to survive? My thoughts begin running wild and I tense, making Blue glance back up at me. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to calm down mine. My mate. Protect. Safe. I wasn't going to let anybody hurt him ever again. And he'd never be alone for as long as he'd have me.

"I also have another friend called T, who's been by my side since I was fifteen. They are my family." He pauses before grinning at me. "And obviously, I moved here, and

that's where I met Shep, Maisie and Ciro."

Happiness. Anxiety. These are woven into the apple fragrance that surrounds my little mate. A small part of me is relieved that he'd spent the last twelve months building a family and that the people of Aurora Pines had welcomed him with open arms. Blue deserves to be loved unconditionally. Another part is angry at myself that I haven't found my way to him sooner.

"Not all families are bound by blood. In fact, I always think that the best ones are the ones you make yourself," I murmur, as I place both hands in his hair. My knot has begun to deflate and cum trickles out of his sloppy hole while he places kisses down my sternum and over my nipples teasingly.

I'm too tired for another round, as I suspect he is. It's more for comfort. For intimacy. We aren't ready to breach this bubble we've built around ourselves the last two days.

"Tuesday is staying here in town for a little while, but I would really like it if you got to know him better." Blue looks up at me again, his cheeks flushed and his silver hair all rumpled as he rests his chin on his hands over my heartbeat. "I mean, if you'd like that. Because I...I really like you."

He means he loves me, but he doesn't recognize it yet and after the life he's lived, I'm not surprised. He still hasn't figured out what we are to one another and that's okay. I don't need him to say the words. I know they're buried in there somewhere.

"Love, I'm not going anywhere. I'd be honored to meet your family." I can feel the bond between us pulsing, getting stronger. When it's the right time, when all of our skeletons are out of the closet, I'll claim him as my mate and there will be no doubt over what we mean to one another.

A few hours later, while Blue is taking a shower, I hunt around for my phone and call

Jason. I need more information about Tuesday Reynard. He answers after the first ring, sounding breathless as he launches straight into speaking.

“Have you seen my email?” He demands, and I blink. It wasn’t like him to get worked up. We’d teamed up for countless cases over the years, and Jason always kept his cool. It was one of the things I’d admire most about him.

“No, I’ve been a little preoccupied.” Sitting on the edge of my bed, I run a hand through my hair. I’m careful to keep my voice down, because I still haven’t told Blue who I am. “What’s going on?”

“Tuesday Reynard has been spotted in Aurora Pines.” Jason sounds keyed up, but I say nothing. How am I supposed to admit that I already know exactly where Tuesday is? Because he’s in Blue’s cabin right now, living his best life as one of my mate’s closest friends.

Jason’s voice lowers, “And I think...that The Ghost is there too.”

“What? Why?” My chest tightens as if I’ve been sucker punched.

The Ghost was in Aurora Pines? That made no sense. Why now? Yes, we thought they worked together, but that didn’t mean he was here. They were rarely in the same cities at the same time. What were the chances they were both here now? That was more drama I didn’t need right now. I already had enough on my plate.

“The robbery you sent me—it makes sense that the two of them are up to their old tricks again.”

I’d seen the article and suspected, but I didn’t really think I was on to an actual lead. “So, you think that whoever is with Tuesday is The Ghost?”

There's silence down the line before Jason scoffs.

"I'd bet my job on it, Stirling." He laughs bitterly, and I think I hear him slamming something down on a desk or into a wall. Had he just punched the wall? "What I can't quite figure out is how The Warrens and The Husk fit into all of this, but something in my gut says they're connected."

"Huh?" What did The Warren have to do with any of this? Was Jason conflating two different things because he was suspicious of The Husk?

"I started piecing together the things you sent me and it was Axia who noticed it." I can hear papers being shuffled around, and the sound of a marker being dragged across a whiteboard. "The Husk moves around, going from Warren to Warren. But there's a pattern emerging. They're in every city only a few weeks before there's a hit by The Ghost."

That wasn't unusual because, despite the numerous Warrens across the globe, there was only one Husk council. So, in reality, it makes sense that they would move, travelling around to visit each Warren to carry out their duties. That alone isn't enough to be a cause for concern, even though I understand where Jason is going with that train of thought. It's an odd coincidence. And 'odd' always rings alarm bells.

"I need more time to do more digging, but is The Ghost one of them maybe? The forums you found talked about using children to make money and maybe...maybe The Ghost is just some poor kid being exploited."

I think about the stolen items that Blue supposedly has tucked away somewhere in a hidden vault. What if he'd stolen already stolen jewels from The Husk to start his new life? Could The Ghost be someone he knew back at The Warren?

I didn't want my mate involved in this mess any longer. As soon as this call was over,

I was transferring the money back to Abiel and emailing the contract termination email that had been sitting in my drafts folder since my stay at the cabin. I was done with this mess. I needed to focus on Blue and my family now.

“I don’t know, man. It sounds—”

“I know, I know. But something is off with that weird little rabbit cult.” Jason sighs, sounding like a balloon being deflated down the line. “Barker said I needed more evidence before I could get within ten miles of an investigation, so I’m going to keep digging but keep your eyes open. Things are strange in Aurora Pines.”

He’s got that right.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

Something is different this time. Unlike that morning back at my cabin after the first heat peak, I don't feel awkward anymore. Wearing Madoc's clothes, since mine are covered in dried cum and dirt, we walk down to where his truck is parked, hand in hand. It feels like the most natural thing in the world, to be connected to him like this.

No one seems surprised to see us together. In fact, Madoc's neighbor Mr. Jones offers us a friendly 'Good morning!' as we leave Jeremy Biles's apartment.

Jeremy will be back in a few weeks and I don't know what Madoc's thinking, but I'm not ready for him to go home yet. Is it too soon to ask him to move in with me?

He must've hypnotized me with that dick of his because I didn't normally cling to my partners like this. With him, there was this strange feeling in my chest and every time I look at him, my heart hammers away and the feeling grows, swelling until it feels like it might seep out through my ribs and explode out of my skin. That wasn't normal, was it?

We take Madoc's truck to my cabin, since I'd left mine with Tuesday when the unexpected heat episode hit two days ago. He hated driving stick shift, so he was probably cussing me out the entire drive home. Serves him right, I think to myself with a chuckle. That's what he gets for showing up in Aurora Pines unexpectedly.

The plan for today was to let Madoc get to know Tuesday a little better, make a late breakfast and then perhaps head back into town, firstly to apologize profusely once again to Shep. But also to see if he needed any support with the lunch shift. I know how incredibly lucky I am to have a boss like him, but for the past couple of weeks, I'd been pushing the limits of his kindness.

When we pull up to the cabin, my truck isn't parked outside like I expect. The curtains are all still drawn and everything is weirdly still. The only sounds are the lazy waves from the lake as the water licks at the shore.

A little voice in the back of my head is screaming 'danger!', and if I was in my hare form, I would spend more time watching, waiting, listening, however in my human form, I let logic override my instincts. And that's why it isn't until I push open the door that I realize how fucking wrong I am.

There's a stranger standing in my lounge, dressed in all black. He's huge, with dark brown hair and a smug grin. Rushing towards me, he attempts to tackle me backwards, but he doesn't count on Madoc entering behind me.

It doesn't take much before the two men are grappling, crashing into my furniture and against the walls as I'm trying to dig out my phone to text Tuesday. I need to know that he's safe and warn him to stay away.

The stranger pushes Madoc into my side table, smashing my lamp as they fall into it. Madoc punches him in the face and blood spurts up the wall. The man goes down with a wail. When he gets back up, he shoves Madoc against the front door and over my porch railing. With Mad out of the cabin, the man approaches me again.

Darting across the kitchen, I pull open the bottom drawer of my island counter and yank out the false bottom to find my gun. Turning the safety off, I lift it and aim it at the intruder, who stands, grinning at me with blood pouring down his face.

"Who the fuck are you?" I snarl, keeping my aim steady as I see Madoc get to his feet out of the corner of my eye. He staggers back inside, a low growl in his throat as he stands behind the man and we cage him in.

The intruder steps forward, rolling his sleeves up, and I see it—a mark on his inner

arm. He's a Buck, a guard dog for The Husk. Fuck.

"The High Leap has come to collect you personally." Abiel was here? How could I be so stupid? How could I ever think I was finally safe? How many of them were out in the woods? "There's no escape for you now, Zaichik."

"Stay fucking there." I hiss when the man steps forward.

Another man with black hair runs in from the other side of the cabin, grabbing Madoc by the back of his jacket and tossing him against the wall. I hold firm as he crumbles to the floor, winded.

I'm never going back. They would have to catch, kill, and mount me on a plaque first.

Mad kicks out, taking down the closest intruder to him, the one with the black hair, while I use the distraction to shoot the other in the leg. It brings him to his knees with a grunt, but he isn't down for long. Why won't they just stay down? Pushing back to his feet with a feral growl, he tries to rush at me again, but I dodge out of reach of his outstretched hands.

The thing about omega hares is that we're often underestimated. We're usually quicker than the others. As the birthing parent, the survival of our species depends on our instincts and the ability to fight off predators, including our own kind.

Ducking closer, I hit him across the face with my gun. There's a satisfying crack as something snaps, and I hope it's a cheek bone or his jaw. I hit him again. And again. My anger pouring out in waves as I dart and weave closer, delivering another hit, pulling away and then coming back for more. He lands a hit or two of his own, but they don't stop me. I spit out a mouthful of blood with a grin.

The Buck drops to the floor with my next strike, his face a bloody, pulp mess. I don't

make a habit of killing people, but when it comes to survival, only the strongest and the smartest make it through the night. Putting him out of his misery with a clean shot, I turn my attention to Madoc and the remaining intruder.

“Run!” Madoc screams as he takes another punch, this one to his stomach. “You need to get out of here now, before Abiel arrives!”

I freeze as we both realize what’s just been said.

For a moment, Madoc looks as if he wants to say something else, but that’s the only opening the second Buck needs as he wraps a big meaty arm around Madoc’s neck and squeezes him until he starts turning red.

Rolling my eyes, I lift my gun, keeping my hands steady. One shot right between the eyes is all it takes for the intruder to fall backwards and onto my rug, blood pooling beneath him.

Fuck’s sake.

I liked that rug. Ciro had helped me choose it as a yard sale a couple of months ago.

“Are you hurt?” Madoc demands, limping over to cup my face, checking me over before tugging at my arm. “We need to leave!”

I stare at him. His face is like a revolving door of emotions and suddenly, I know why everything was too good to be true.

“Let’s go!” His fingers dig into my skin as he clings onto me, trying to pull me towards the truck.

Feeling sick, like my heart has been ripped out of my chest, I peel his digits off one

by one. There's no emotion in my voice as I say, "You're working for them, aren't you?"

He licks his lips before running a hand through his hair. There's blood drying on his skin and matted in his hair.

"They hired me to find you, but I haven't told them anything. I never betrayed you." I don't know why, but I want to believe him. My stupid little deluded brain wants to trust the same man who lied repeatedly to my face.

"Goddess, you're a fool. You think they weren't keeping tabs on you?" How could he have worked in the intelligence services and not thought that they would track him? He led them, like a trail of breadcrumbs, right to me. Was he that confident in his own skills that common sense went right out the window?

I shove him, pushing hard on his chest, but he barely moves. The reality of the situation sinks in as I look at the two bodies on my floor and my ruined home.

It was always the same.

"Do you know what you've done? I'll have to leave. Again. Start over. Again."

He steps closer, his hand outstretched, but he pulls it back when I snarl at him, baring my teeth.

"It was all fun and games when I thought it was just Agent Stirling looking for The Ghost. I should have known better. The Husk never gives up." This time he doesn't retreat, stroking my hair and trying to pull me into an embrace, but it's too late. I'm shaking with rage. "Let go Madoc."

"You know who I am..." I watch as he finally begins to slot the pieces of our fucked-

up jigsaw together. “I heard you call me Mad earlier, but I thought I was imagining it. Wishful thinking. How long have you known?”

“I won’t go back. Ever.” I vow.

He paces back and forth, limping and favoring his left side as he obviously tries to process what the fuck has just happened and where we go from here.

“Does this have something to do with The Gho—”

Madoc’s words die as I hold out my hands as if to say ‘Ta-dah! Here I am.’ and I don’t miss the way he winces. I hate how he looks at me as if I’m a stranger, but it must be the same expression mirrored on my face. “They said you stole something from them and that’s why they’re looking for you.”

“I only took what was owed to me and an insurance plan.” I scoff, checking the bullets in my gun before grabbing some extra ammunition from the drawer. Using weapons wasn’t my style, but I wasn’t going to let another Buck lay a finger on me. “I paid in blood sweat and tears for their greed.”

Still trying to calmly rationalize everything, Madoc checks over the bodies of the two dead men. “I’m sure we can work out something. If we just return the diamonds or whatever you took...”

“No.” It’s a complete sentence.

How can I make him see that I can never go back? The people hunting us will never let us live if they can’t capture us. My body doesn’t belong to me when I’m with them. How can I make him understand that?

“This. This is only a small part of what they did to me.” Lifting my shirt, I figure that

while we're airing all of our dirty secrets, I have nothing more to hide. "Am I still beautiful, Madoc?"

His eyes widened before narrowing on my scars and the black marks on my sternum. I wait for horror, for disgust, for him to turn away from my ugly chest, but instead Madoc looks like he wants to cry.

"Is that a—"

"A fucking brand. Because to them I. Am. Property. " I laugh. It's a hollow, grating sound that echoes around the cabin, skittering out across the lake like skimming pebbles. "What are a few vintage diamonds to them? They have Warrens all over the world, siphoning funds in through whatever means necessary. That's not what they want."

He thinks this is only about the diamonds? What I tucked away in my vault is so much more than pretty gemstones. I have records and detailed evidence of every job I've ever worked on. I have a forest of paper trails Tawny uncovered, linking them to so many other incidents globally. I only managed to get my hands on those because I was in a position of trust. Because I was a chosen vessel, selected to bear the next High Leap.

"I can't return my freedom, Madoc." The Husk wanted to own me in every way possible. To break me until I was nothing but a biddable shell. They wanted to put me in my place, and handing back a few shiny rocks wasn't going to satiate them. "That's what I've 'stolen' from them."

Something in the distance creaks and I know we need to leave. We've lingered here too long. Grabbing his arm, I drag Madoc out into the woods in the opposite direction of the noise, towards the hiking trails.

We don't get far when I hear a familiar clicking sound, followed by a rhythmic thumping I'd recognize anywhere.

Dropping down into a crouch, I yank Madoc's T-shirt, dragging him down with me. From where we're hidden in the overgrowth, I can just about see my home through the trees.

"Wha—" I slap my hand over Madoc's mouth, lifting a finger to my lips to remind him to be quiet.

Abiel steps out onto my porch steps, looking into the forest. He's naked, having shifted, until a Buck comes behind him with a long black cloak and drapes it over his shoulders like he's some sort of king. Two more stand on guard nearby. Seeing him standing by my home makes my gut clench, and I swallow back a silent sob.

"I know you're out there, Gwyn." His voice rings out, stretching between the trees like smoke chasing me down. "You have until sundown to return home and end this nonsense. The fox can't protect you."

We stay in the mud, watching as Abiel shifts into a giant brown hare before leaving with his little entourage.

Finally pushing to my feet, I brush the dirt off my knees and start striding towards town. I don't want to go back to my truck. That's a risk I'm not prepared to take, but I need to find Tuesday. Then I need to call T and get out of Aurora Pines before anyone else gets hurt.

"How could I be so stupid? I let myself get sucked into this bullshit." I spin and point an angry finger at Madoc. "I thought you might actually care about me. I'm such an idiot."

“I do! I want to keep you safe. I love you.” His words stopped me dead in my tracks and I can’t help it, but I laugh. I cover my face with my hands and I laugh and laugh until there are tears streaming down my face. Love me?

“Listen to me, Blue. I love you. You’re my Fated Mate. I would do anything for you.” He screams, and I pause as he charges through the foliage.

Grabbing my arm he turns me to face him. Gray eyes that hold so much hope and determination, that it’s almost painful, stare down at me. He pulls me into an embrace and I push at his chest, trying to shrug him off, but he holds on firmly.

“Keep your lies Madoc, I don’t want them anymore. All you’ve done is lie to me,” I spit, the accusation heavy in my words. I don’t want any more of his secrets. They make my heart hurt. His lies make me wish for a life I can’t have and I think that’s the cruelest thing of all.

“Stop being a brat,” he grunts as I elbow him in the stomach. “And what about you? I hunt a runaway all the way here to Aurora Pines and it turns out to be the most beautiful man I have ever met. Not only that, but he’s my Fated Mate. It turns my life upside down, but that’s not enough fuckery from the universe because then I find out that the same person is also a jewel thief that I spent years of my life tracking. He’s the one that got away.”

I huff petulantly, squirming and wriggling, but he tightens his grip around me.

“Well, love, that’s not going to happen again.” His voice is all growly in my ear, and I shudder. “If you want to talk about liars, don’t forget to include yourself in that too. Neither of us are innocent, but that doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

My resolve is cracking the longer his hands are on me. I can feel his warmth seeping through my clothes, and I want nothing more to lean into his touch. But it’s a trap. It

has to be.

“Let go.” I twist my body, trying to use my weight as leverage, but he’s like a marble statue.

“No. If you’re angry, be angry. If you’re hurt, lash out. Hurt me too. I can take it.”

Crying out, I can’t listen to his words anymore. He’s wrapping me in his love and pheromones, trying to calm me and soothe the ache, but it’s not enough. Sinking my teeth into his skin until I taste copper on my tongue, I silently beg him to let go.

But he only squeezes me tighter. “I am not going anywhere, and neither are you. We belong together.”

Closing my eyes with a heavy sigh, I stop. Forcing my jaw to unclench and my shoulders to drop, I take a big, deep breath.

Exhaling slowly, I open my eyes.

“Good boy.” He relaxes his hold. “Now let’s talk about—”

I seize the chance and slip under his arms before darting off.

“Don’t you dare run away from me Blue!” The frustrated sound he makes scares away some nearby nesting birds and I use the distraction to change direction. Lowering my body closer to the floor, I weave through the bushes and foliage, making it more difficult for him to track me. This is my domain, and I was raised to run.

“Fuck you for making me feel this way.” I holler, flipping him off through some trees before I start moving again. “And for playing dirty.”

“Last chance little hare,” he shouts in warning, and the corner of my mouth tugs up into a smirk.

Would you like a fun little nature fact?

Hares are faster than foxes.

Throwing myself forward, I shift mid jump, losing my clothes in the dirt before landing on my paws and darting through the trees.

Somewhere behind me, I hear Madoc swearing as he begins to strip off his clothes and for a moment I pause, and go up on my hind legs to watch as he begins his shift.

With a tilt of my head, I realize the noises he’s making are pain. For him, becoming his other self doesn’t come naturally. I spend too long fascinated by his shift because a few moments later I hear a growl and a pair of amber-colored eyes stare at me through the bushes.

Shit, it looks like it’s time to run.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

S shafts of light filter in through the trees, the boughs reaching out to bathe in the pale afternoon glow as the leaves light up like jewels of greens and yellows. But the light struggles to reach the depths of the forest, and closer down to the ground, where Blue and I are skulking. There's an earthy scent that occurs only after a fresh rain fall. Petrichor. Damp and decaying leaves.

Peeling back my lips to let out a low growl, I warn my little hare that my patience is wafer thin. Lowering my nose close to dirt, I inhale, letting the fragrant notes of the forest guide me as all my other stresses melt away and I focus on my instincts. I may not be able to see my mate, but I know he's out there watching. I can feel him.

Scanning the undergrowth, my muscles are coiled tight as I wait. Predators know all about patience. How the kill is all about the hunt. Somewhere in the distance, a branch snaps.

Up ahead, I see him, his beautiful silvery coat like a beacon against the greenery. My fallen star. My love. My prey.

He sits up on his back legs, ears twitching, swiveling nervously as he listens out for me. But I don't move. Patience.

There's no doubt in my mind that this is a game between us because if Blue had no intention of playing, he could have run. He would have been almost to town by now. He could have dug a burrow and hidden safely beneath the earth. Instead, my bratty little bunny was overconfident, baiting me into the chase.

Another faint rustle snags my attention, and we both turn, but when nothing emerges,

Blue darts through a dense thicket of brambles and ferns, a blur of pure white.

Launching myself forward, I stalk him through the thickets. A thorny bush snags my fur, but I don't let it stop me as I try to follow his path through the brambles. Mine. Mine. Mate. The chase was instinct, pure unfiltered, untethered instinct. I was driven by a need to claim him. Own him. Breed him. I'm close on his heels as we pick up speed, but he's always just out of reach.

Just a little further ahead.

Just a little faster.

As I prepare to spring, he darts left, and I skid into a tree trunk with a thud, rotten roots ensnaring me. It takes me longer than I'd like to admit to right myself, and I let out a howl of frustration. The noise rises up my throat and disturbs a nearby owl.

Up ahead, I hear a clicking, similar to the one earlier at the cabin. But unlike the sense of dread that came with Abiel's noise, I know that it's Blue. Mocking me.

Taking off again, I'm desperate to close the gap between us. I could almost feel the warmth of his fleeing body, hear the frantic beats of his heart thrumming away behind his rib cage. He was so close.

Somewhere around us, I hear running water and as Blue skitters a little more to the right, I register that he's avoiding a stream. Unlike him, I'm not quick enough, tumbling into the cold water head first as my paws slide in mud before I emerge on an embankment on the other side, shivering and dripping.

Blue takes pity on me, watching from nearby with a tilt of his head. My fox has had enough. Prowling towards him, shaking off the water that clings to my russet coat, I never take my eyes off him.

The closer I get, the more his scent, raw and sweet, fills my nostrils, driving me wild. His eyes hold a wildness that mirrors mine and I can see him trying to find a way out. There is no escaping what's between us.

I begin to circle with a soft huff, a knowing breath that our dance was coming to an end. It was time for the hunter to claim his quarry, and I refused to let Blue slip between my fingers again, like a ghost. Mine.

This time, I leap, putting every ounce of power and drive I have into the jump. He tries to dart away, kicking out at me, boxing me with his front paws, but I am done with his antics today.

He is mine.

He. Is. Mine.

We tussle for a few moments, but while he may be faster; I am stronger. With a feral roar, I clamp my jaws onto the back of his neck and pin him down in the mud. His fur is matted with leaves and dirt as he lets out a whimper. Tasting copper as I sink my teeth in, I keep his writhing body held in place beneath mine.

This time, my shift is almost effortless. It's like liquid, flowing from one form to another as if my human body was waiting in anticipation for this moment. I'm not the only one to have shifted, as Blue's warm body stretches out beneath me in his human shape.

Where streaked silken fur had been, there was now smooth pale skin smeared with dirt, and covered in battle scars. Recognition flares between us as the bond finally clicks into place.

His frantic struggles cease, chest heaving with rapid, shallow breaths. That's when I

see the teeth marks on the back of his neck, bloodied and raw. A tremor runs through my body as the surrounding forest seems to blur, the sounds and smells fading until all I see and feel is him.

Mate.

Earlier, when he asked me if he was still beautiful, I had no words. Not because he wasn't, but because my heart hurt at what he'd suffered at the hands of the people who were supposed to care for him. Now as he lies on a bed of leaves on the forest floor, a survivor, a fighter, a bratty little shit, he has never looked more beautiful in my eyes.

Unwilling to make this easy on me, Blue hisses and scratches at me as he tries to scramble away. Taking both his smaller wrists in my hand, I pin them into the mud above his head. Whether he admits it or not, he is mine. His body was made for mine.

Part of him recognizes that he belongs to me just like I belong to him as his back arches, pressing his peachy ass against my groin.

There's a lingering wildness in his eyes as he looks over his shoulder at me. "Is that all you've got?"

Leaning in to lap at the fresh blood pooling over the teeth marks, I glide the head of my hard cock through his slippery crease. For all his arrogance, he was dripping slick, just as desperate for me as I was for him.

With a snarl, I press myself against his tight hole, applying pressure but not pushing inside as I continue to lap at the claiming mark he wears. My mark.

"Madoc, are you just going to poke me with that thing or are you going to fuck me?" He lets out a frustrated huff as he thrust his ass back against me.

Chuckling quietly, I continue to lick up the column of his neck before sucking his earlobe between my lips and pinching it between my teeth gently.

I wasn't going to give him what he wanted until he admitted what we both knew. We were Fated Mates. The energy fizzling between us down the bond was palpable. It felt like I was finally complete. Blue was the missing piece of the puzzle, slotting perfectly into place and suddenly it was like I could breathe again.

The parts of my mind that had been fractured into man and fox were working together, claiming the man with galaxy eyes. I had been waiting for him my whole life. And if he thought I couldn't wait five minutes more or even an hour for him to finally acknowledge me, then he was underestimating my patience.

He rolls his hips grinding up against me, and I know he can feel my pre-cum dripping against his skin and on the small of his back, but still, I hold myself firm covering his body with mine.

"Fuck me, my alpha!" He demands. His words are like a match, lighting me up from the inside as he claims me in return.

Pressing my teeth back over the marks, I bite down again, lighter this time, but as I apply the pressure, I sink into his wet heat in one thrust, drawing a protracted groan from the both of us.

The bond between us means energy moves like an endless circuit, ebbing and flowing between us, back and forth. I can feel his pleasure like a feedback loop as I rut into him slowly, with hard, deep strokes.

The thrill of the Hunt and the heightened emotions of our day are taking their toll on me, as my body is on a hairpin trigger. Already I can feel my orgasm building in the base of my spine, the pressure growing with every plunge of my cock into his tight

body.

I know Blue feels the same as he claws at the dirt, whispering my name into the mud like he's seeking out divine intervention. "My alpha. Madoc. Mad. Fuckkkkk. Alpha."

He begs so sweetly when he's not biting or scratching like a feral thing. It doesn't take either of us long to climax, spilling out onto the forest floor with animalistic groans.

When I come, I'm careful not to knot him, even though my alpha nature demands it. We're too exposed here. We've spent too long in the woods, and leaving us stuck vulnerable while we wait for my knot to deflate would be a less than ideal situation.

"Later." I promise Blue, as he keens and pleads for it.

As we're catching our breath, laying on our back staring up at the fading light through the gaps in the trees, I intertwine my fingers with his. We're broken, battered and bloody, but now things make sense. We had to shatter, so we could begin the work of rebuilding.

"I love you." Lifting his hand, I kiss his knuckles. "Do you believe me now?"

He turns to look at me, and we need no words. I can feel the love pouring from him down the bond. One day he'll say the words aloud, but that's okay because I can wait.

Pushing up onto his elbow, he laughs. "You know, for an intelligence agent, you got your ass handed to you back there."

"I'll have you know, I was mostly a desk agent. I rarely went out into the field." Groaning, I bury my face in my hands. It wasn't my finest performance. I'd been so

overwhelmed with worry for Blue that I'd made stupid mistakes. "Plus, I was more concerned about you—it distracted me."

"So, what you're saying is that all your muscles are just for show?" Raising a brow, Blue looks over my dirty, naked body. "But, what about Germany?"

Pushing to my feet and attempting to brush away some of the dirt, I give him a small shrug. "I begged my supervisor to put me in."

Stretching out and grabbing handfuls of dirt, Blue closes his eyes. Whispering, he says, "I wish we could just stay here."

He doesn't. Not really. What he means is that he wishes we could be away from The Husk and Abiel. That we didn't have to return to a ruined cabin or deal with the fallout of our lives imploding with a new mate bond. Life was simpler when we were a hare and a fox.

"We need to go back. Warn everyone else." Reluctantly, he let me pull him to his feet and into my arms.

"I know." He murmurs before placing a soft kiss on my lips. "Let's do this."

Using our shifter senses, we find our way back out to the road, careful to stay hidden in the trees as we're both roaming around completely naked.

The low humming noise of an engine reaches our ears and we both freeze. Glancing at one another, we crouch down to see if we can get a better view of the oncoming vehicle.

A dusty looking red truck quickly approaches, at speeds that I'm pretty sure are illegal.

“Is that...is that my truck?” Blue asks, tugging on my hand as he pulls us out into the road so we can flag it down.

The truck slows, and before we can see through the dirt cloud surrounding it, we hear him.

“Where the fuck have you been?” A familiar voice screams over the sound of tires screeching as he comes to a juddering stop. Tuesday leans out the window with his mouth open, clearly unimpressed with our lack of clothing and the dirty, bloody state we’re in. “And what the fuck happened to you?”

Reaching over, he opens the passenger side and waves us in urgently. I climb in behind Blue, relieved when he offers me a jacket to drape over my lap. Wrapping an arm around his waist, I run my nose along his neck, scent marking him.

Tuesday quickly turns the truck around and we head back towards town. He’s wearing an unhinged grin as he looks at us both and says, “Everyone’s been looking for you. You need to see this.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

Tuesday ushers us in through the back door of The Antler, where I'm greeted by a very startled Shep and an excited Ciro, who spends far too long looking at my naked mate.

My mate. It still doesn't feel real. Fated mates were a fairytale, you told children. I never believed they were real, but here I was with one.

When his teeth had sunk into me and he had claimed me as his, it was like the ache in my chest dissolved into a thread that bound me to him. I've never experienced anything like it. When he said he loved me, he meant it, and even if I didn't believe him with my ears, there was no denying what I felt through the bond.

Was this why he had been so sure every step of the way that everything between us would work out? I think back to all the times he called me love. Had he known then? Had it given him confidence that what we had was inevitable?

Shep returns from his apartment above the bar with a bundle of clothes, handing them to me and Madoc so we can cover up our filthy bodies. We needed showers, and possibly a few stitches, but it would have to wait. Whatever had Ciro bouncing from foot to foot, and Tuesday grinning like the Cheshire Cat had piqued my interest.

"What on earth is going on?" Madoc demands as we hear grunts and a muffled wail coming from the bar.

"Now, we're going to need you to have a very open mind." Tuesday says with a wicked gleam in his eye as he plays with his snake bite piercings.

“What have you done?” I ask my best friend, who was not always known for making the most rational choices in life.

Ciro slaps me on the back with an easy grin. “It wasn’t just Tuesday. Don’t you know, we protect our own in Aurora Pines?”

Entering through the back of the bar and out into the main area, I realize that The Antler is closed. All the curtains are drawn and the front door is still locked. There are no diners or patrons, but there is a crowd gathered around something in the center of the room.

As we get nearer, people step back, parting the crowd to reveal the High Leap, bloody and bruised, tied to a chair. This man had plagued me, and hunted me for years after torturing me under the guise of calling education and care. I’d been terrified of him as a child, and even earlier today my body had filled with fear when I laid eyes on him.

He whimpers, and I detect the stench of piss in the air. The person in front of me was nothing more than a scared coward who wielded power over those weaker than him.

His mouth is gagged, but that doesn’t stop him from trying to speak as he glares at me, yelling something I probably didn’t want to hear anyway. Stubborn and prideful until the end.

Burt steps forward, smacking the back of his head.

“Shut the fuck up.” He barks.

I blink. Was this the same lumberjack who asked for Alphabet Spaghetti to be added to the lunchtime menu?

Jaxs leans in and flicks Abiel on the forehead while Nerys leans against the bar, her

mouth drawn into a scowl while she watches with her arms crossed.

Over by the main doors, I recognize Betsy, Mr. Jones and a few familiar faces from the coffee shop and the hardware store. What was going on?

“Nerys heard this old man here talking on the phone about how he’d been out to your cabin and had torn it to pieces.” Ciro says as he sits on one of the dining tables and starts swinging his legs.

How are they all so relaxed when there is a man bleeding and gagged in the room?

“Nasty man,” Nerys tuts, as if she’s chastising a child.

“Bastard,” Ciro spits, and I find myself shocked. I’ve never heard him so angry before. Were these the same people I’d gotten to know and love over the last year?

Stepping forward, Shep holds out his hands to motion to everyone in the room. “Blue, we’re not asking you to get involved and I’d rather not implicate you, but we also felt you deserved a chance to know just how much you’ve come to mean to all of us here in Aurora Pines.”

My eyes prickle and burn as emotion wells up in my chest. They were trying to protect me? They didn’t even know me.

“Why?” I ask, feeling like there’s a rock lodged in my throat. Madoc reaches out and places his hand on the small of my back, his warmth soaking into my skin. Down the bond, he sends waves of love and reassurance. “I’ve lied to you all.”

“Everybody here has secrets.” Mr. Jones chuckles, clapping Madoc on the shoulder as they share a small smile. “We don’t care if you’re called Blue. You can change it to purple if you like.”

Abiel grunts again, fighting against the ropes that bind him, and I stare into his eyes. I don't understand. How could this town love me more than my own species? How could they protect me, when this man, my elder, wouldn't have in the same situation?

Betsy offers me a kind smile. "When you showed up every day for work, that wasn't a lie. When you made an anonymous donation for the new school roof, that wasn't a lie either. When you helped purchase another defibrillator for the town hall, was that a lie?"

Mazie's behind the bar, wiping down the worktop as if this is all entirely normal. Just another day at The Antler. "Your actions speak louder than your words."

Placing a large hand on my shoulder, Shep smiles. "Leave this fucker to us. We're going to make sure you never have to run again."

"What about the others who were with him?"

The bear shifter coughs awkwardly while his father snorts, "We protect our own in Aurora Pines."

"It's not that simple. If you get rid of him, another one will take his place and they will send people looking for him." They didn't understand. The Husk never gave up. They would keep looking for him. Looking for me. If they found out what had happened to Abiel, they would destroy Aurora Pines.

Tuesday clicks his tongue as he pulls out his phone. With a dramatic sigh, he says, "If only we knew a tech genius who could help us cover up what we're about to do."

Rolling his eyes, he puts his phone on speaker. If Tawny could make it seem like Abiel was never in Aurora Pines, if none of the Buck made it here, then we might be able to keep everybody safe.

“Bonnie Blue,” T croons down the line and I’m relieved to hear his voice. “I hear you have an unwanted guest in your quaint little town. Well, besides the cat.”

Tuesday huffs and flips him off even though he can’t see it over the phone.

“Can you make him vanish?” My voice is shaky. He knows what this means to me. He’s the one who helped me escape my life at the Warren and gave me a way out. Back then we had been children, looking for a way to escape our demons, but things were different now. We were adults, and we weren’t alone anymore.

“Of course,” he scoffs, his smugness making me feel more confident that we could get the situation under control as he furiously taps away on his keyboard. “Excuse me a mo, my asshole neighbor is back at it again.”

There’s a pounding noise, and he must be banging on a wall or a door as he yells, “If she’s screaming that fucking loud, she’s faking it!”

Everyone in the room chuckles softly as Tuesday and I share a look.

“Urm, is everything alright?”

“Yeah. Just peachy,” he hisses through gritted teeth before his tone becomes softer. “Blue, I think it might be time to cash in that insurance policy of yours.”

Hidden away in my vault was my lifeline. My little black book was a way to tug at the thread weaving throughout The Warren in the hopes that it would unravel the entire tapestry. It contained documented evidence that would send The Husk into a tailspin.

As I glance at the faces smiling at me around the room, at the people willing to kill for me, to lie for me, I realize that I don’t need to cling onto a lifeline like that

anymore because I'm not alone.

“That insurance plan of yours, do you need some help getting it into the right hands?”
My mate asks, with a mischievous glint in his eyes, and we both grin.

Turning, I pull Madoc into a quick kiss. “If only I knew someone who had connections at an intelligence agency who operated globally...”

Somewhere behind us, Tuesday makes a retching noise. “Ew.”

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:31 am

“M ad, I can’t find Blue anywhere,” Ciro says as he pokes his head into the new extension where I’m moving some new furniture out of the way. We’d decided to add to the back of the cabin once we bought it from Shep, building a home office, a spare bedroom, an extra bathroom and a large nursery. It was almost finished and just in the nick of time.

“I think I know where he is,” I say, sharing a small smile with the young man who was a regular feature in our home these days.

As I head back into the kitchen, I’m accosted by Finn, who’s glaring at me with his arms crossed. “Mam wants to know why Shep is cooking on the grill when you told her to bring tuna pasta, baked potatoes and salad.”

Glancing over at the dishes covering half of the kitchen worktops, I can’t see anything wrong with the food my mother brought for the barbeque.

“Have you seen how many of us there are? Tuna pasta and salad isn’t going to feed everyone,” I offer with a shrug. Plus, Shep made the best burgers in town. I wasn’t passing up on that. Having a vegetarian husband, who was also sensitive to smells right now, meant I had to eat meat out on the porch or head into The Antler. This way, I was getting the best of both worlds.

“I don’t know man, did you see how much she brought,” Arlo, my other brother, chuckles as he opens my fridge and grabs a beer. “There’s more out by the grill.”

Remind me again why I thought hosting at our place was a good idea? As they both head back out to the others, it seems the universe isn’t quite finished with me.

Tuesday blocks my way, slamming his hands down on the worktop counter before tapping his nails like a psychopath. “You know, you don’t deserve him.”

It was safe to say that while we were civil to one another, I hadn’t quite grown on the fussy feline fucker. But that didn’t really matter to me because Blue loved him, and he loved Blue.

Somehow the cat shifter had ended up staying in Aurora Pines along with my family, and in fact he’d bought the cabin right next door to them. Everyone was on everyone else’s doorstep. Wasn’t that nice?

It wasn’t nice when you were trying to chase your husband through the woodlands and fuck him in the dirt, but then you hear your mother calling you.

Or when he was naked, his peachy ass bent over the porch railing while you rail him and one of your brothers pops up out of nowhere.

Or when you’re giving each other hand jobs in the lake and his irritating best friend goes by on a boat, the look of disgust on his face halting your orgasm in its tracks.

So, it’s very, very nice to have family nearby.

“Oh for fuck’s sake. Not this again.” Scrubbing my face, I sigh before taking a deep breath. “Look, I already know exactly how you feel. You brought a twenty-six slide presentation to PowerPoint night about it—you don’t need to tell me again.”

Because PowerPoint nights were a thing in my life now, along with film nights, games nights, Thursday night dinners and every week, my husband would also have my mother, Ciro, Finn and Tuesday over to watch Great British Bake Off. Paul Hollywood could fuck off. I don’t care what my mother thinks. That man was a snake. Or maybe a stoat.

Trying to ignore the cat shifter, I open the cupboards and search for Blue's emergency stash of pickled eggs, syrup and lemons. Grabbing a jar of mustard and a knife, I toss the lot into a bag to carry with me.

The corner of Tuesday's mouth lifts into a sinister grin and I wince. "I made an animated video this time. I've already air dropped it to your phone."

I can feel the notification vibrate in my pocket as I add a bottle of watermelon water to my stash.

"Great, thanks. I'm sure that was a really productive use of your time. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to go and find my husband." As I walk away with the snacks in hand, another thought occurs to me. I'd been picking up some weird vibes lately, which Blue said was all in my head, but I wanted to nip it in the bud.

Calling back over my shoulder, I yell, "Oh, and stay away from Arlo! The last thing I need right now is you seducing my brother."

In the reflection of the window, I catch Tuesday flipping me off as he sweetly says, "He's a grown man. He can think for himself."

Fuck my life, I think with an eye roll as I climb the stairs to our bedroom. In the corner of our room, Blue had built a little hidey hole for himself, dragging in all the things that gave him comfort right now.

"Hey baby, whatcha doing?" I ask as I kick off my shoes and sit on the rug with my bag of goodies. A small snuffling nose pokes out of the nest made mostly of our worn clothes. "You know you can't hide in here all night, right?"

My husband, in his hare form, wriggles out into the open slowly. His ears twitch, moving to catch the noises from outside as his swollen belly drags across the fabric and he tries to make the faded pheromones cling to his gorgeous white fur.

“You might want to change back, since lots of our guests are eager to see you,” I say as I start slicing up a lemon and smearing mustard over each slice. I place the slices down near the edge of the nest and watch as he comes, his nose twitching before he nibbles at it.

He hadn’t wanted a traditional baby shower, so instead we’d opted for a barbeque on the edge of the lake and on our porch, but last night he hadn’t slept well and today he was a little more grumpy than usual.

Shifting just as gracefully as normal, if not a little slower, he changes into his human form and grabs the jar of pickled eggs from the bag. He didn’t really want the eggs, just the brine they came in. Swallowing back the urge to laugh, I watch as he pops open the jar and drinks half of it before returning to nibbling on the lemon slices.

“I’m tired, and I don’t want to see people,” he whines as he sits amongst the nest, naked, his scars on display. His pregnant belly seems to be sitting a lot lower now as we enter the last couple of weeks.

Handing him the watermelon flavored water, I shuffle around and rub his back.

“I know love, but they’re all here for you.” It was a strange concept to someone who had grown up with only two strangers on the internet for friends, but Blue was finally wrapping his head around our ever-growing family and the people who loved us. It’s why we put up with their overbearing ways and inconvenient visits. “Besides, they also brought lots of cute baby clothes.”

His ears prick up and he sits a little straighter. Unexpectedly, it turned out baby clothes were a weakness for my hormonal little hare. He couldn’t seem to resist picking up a new outfit every time something caught his eye. When you multiply that by two, since we were expecting twins, that meant the nursery was currently filled with more baby rompers, frilly little socks and dresses than I think they’ll ever wear.

Getting to my feet, I help Blue up and into a flowy white wrap dress he'd been wearing around the house lately. Maneuvering him, so he's sitting on the edge of the bed, I grab a pair of clean boxers from the drawer and kneel down to help him slide them on.

As I'm lifting his foot into them, he makes a soft whimper and something warm and wet trickles down his legs. We both stare at the mess for a moment before his eyes go wide with panic.

"It's happening. Mad, it's happening!" He grabs hold of my shoulder, fingers biting into my skin as his breathing becomes uneven and choppy. "I'm going into labor, what do we do?"

"We're ready for this, remember?" I stay kneeling at his feet, reaching out to cup his face and stroke his cheeks with my thumbs. Releasing some of my pheromones to calm him, I watch his body relax under my touch. "Now would you like to give birth in your shifter form or your human form?"

When we'd found out Blue was expecting, we'd rushed to the doctors and started reading everything we could get our hands on about omega shifter births. Some omegas swore that it was easier to give birth in their animal forms, letting instinct drown out the human worrying.

"I'm scared, what if I can't do this?" Blue whispers, dark eyes burning into me as tears well up and threaten to spill down his flushed cheeks. "I never had parents, Mad. What if I fuck up?"

Chuckling, I fish my phone out of my pocket and fire off some texts before stretching behind me to put it on the dresser.

Gently squeezing Blue's knees, I kiss a runaway tear softly. "Love, as long as you don't make our children steal antique jewelry, you're already winning. Now, shifter

or human?”

Sniffing, Blue hiccups a laugh before pouting. “Shifter, but just you and me. Make everyone else leave.”

“It’s okay, I’ve already texted Tuesday. He’s keeping everyone downstairs and away from our bedroom.” At least, I hope he was. He’d sent an eye roll emoji back in response.

“Where’s T?” Blue whines, grabbing onto my shirt and yanking me close.

It had already been nine months, but I still hadn’t met the infamous Tawny. I didn’t take it personally, since Blue said he’d only actually met him a handful of times in person himself, but apparently, he was making an effort to be here in person for our baby shower. I only hoped he would actually show, otherwise it might leave a taint on the day for Blue.

“He’s on his way, he won’t be long. There was a road closure,” I promise, kissing the top of Blue’s head and relaying the text that had come through to my phone about half an hour ago.

Coaxing Blue back to the nest, I resist another laugh. Wasn’t it ironic ten minutes ago I was trying to convince him to come out and play nice? Now I was helping him back in so he could bring our daughters into the world.

Once Blue is settled on top of the fabrics and cushions, I peel off the wrap dress and toss it to one side. Blue’s shifts are always effortless, beautiful as his body accepts who he is in every form.

I’d been practicing more since I’d learned that a lot of shifting pain came from mental blocks. Blue had taught me that it was our human side, trying to reject the animal nature and protect us, but shifting became easier when you pushed past that. That still

didn't mean it came easy to me, and as I strip out of my clothes and climb into the nest beside Blue, the ripples of energy that move through my body brings me to my knees. After a few moments of what feels like my limbs rearranging, stretching, and contracting, I shake off the ache of the shift.

Blue has burrowed back inside the nest, and so I follow him. Approaching my white hare mate, I lick his nose tenderly, letting him know I'm here as he makes a pained noise that almost sounds like a newborn squealing. He nestles against my side, nuzzling my fur as I release more calming pheromones. Amazed, I watch as his belly moves, our babies preparing to enter the world. He nudges his head against mine, and I lick his face and ears, grooming him, comforting him, reminding him that I'm here every step of the way.

Two and a half hours, a lot of sweat, a few nasty bites and some fur pulling later, we welcomed Briar and Wren Stirling into the world. Blue and I spend some time with our daughters, cleaning their fur and covering them in our scents before we rest for a while.

Did you know that baby hares are called leverets, and they're born with their fur and their eyes wide open? They have Blue's dark eyes, and it feels like I'm staring out into a galaxy when they look at me, blinking slowly. Their fur isn't completely white like his, but rather a pale ginger, with patches of white on their faces and chest. They're perfect.

When we wake, there are rustling noises and whispered voices outside our bedroom door. Blue shoots me an alarmed look, his ears twitching wildly before we both shift back.

Quickly, I pull on some boxers before wrapping Blue's dress back around him, making sure he's somewhat covered while he cuddles two little balls of fur close to his chest.

Our room is a mess, with a bloodied nest taking up half of the space, and the scent of us saturates everything. But that apparently isn't enough to deter our family as there's a knock on the door.

"I tried to keep them away as long as I could!" Tuesday calls from the landing, sounding almost apologetic. Well, as apologetic as an arrogant cat can.

"I brought food! I thought you might be hungry." My mother says gently, and Blue chuckles, looking more at peace than I'd seen him in a while. I knew bringing Wren and Briar into the world safely had been a big concern for him, but he'd done it beautifully. I was so proud of him.

As our family and friends pour in, congratulating Blue and cooing over our leverets who aren't quite ready to shift yet, I can feel the love surrounding us. This is what I was looking for all those years ago, not some jewel thief or some missing runaway. I was looking for my Fated Mate. The love of my life. The father of my children.

"Oh! It looks like I made it just in time," a small man with strawberry blond curls gasps as he enters the room.

His big wide eyes are hidden behind a pair of round glasses that are resting cautiously on his cute button nose. The way Blue's exhausted face lights up tells me that this is the famous Tawny. As he's about to step forward into the room, my brother, Kingsley, blocks his way with a low growl. T doesn't hesitate, stepping forward and going toe to toe with King.

"Why the fuck is my neighbor here?"

The End