



Home With Holden (Blueridge Bears #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Mylo

All I ever wanted was a family of my very own. Sure my boyfriend isn't 'perfect', but nothing ever is right? He stuck around. That's what mattered.

And we're going to make it work. Then I'll have an alpha of my own and the family I've always wanted.

The last thing I expected to find when I showed up a couple of days early was another omega with my alpha and the mate mark on his neck that was meant to be mine.

Devastated, embarrassed, and broke. I have no place to go. Luckily, a friend offers me a way out.

Rule one of my new life: No more men! The last thing I need is another alpha in my life.

So why am I so drawn to my new boss? And why does everything in me scream hes mine? Did I mention I really want to jump him?

Total Pages (Source): 29

CHAPTER ONE

MYLO

“You sure you don’t want to come with me?” I asked Tyler, leaning against the doorframe. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to go, either, but I was feeling restless.

He waved me off without looking up from his laptop. “Nah, I’ve gotta finish this apartment application, or I’ll end up back in my childhood room. Some of us don’t have alphas waiting for us now that we’re graduated.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Oh, please. You get to go home to your family’s restaurant, and you already have a job waiting for you.”

“Oh, you mean waking up every morning to my papa asking why I haven’t brought an alpha home yet?” Tyler snorted, and we both laughed. “So fun.”

“Alright, see you later,” I said, though there was that familiar twist in my chest. The casual way he mentioned his family made me jealous. He had a place to go back to—parents who cared about him. Me, on the other hand, only had Chuck—and sometimes, I wondered if that was enough. If Chuck was enough.

I shook that thought away before it could take root. Chuck loved me. We were building a life together. Nothing was perfect, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t worth fighting for, right?

I pushed those thoughts aside. I had completed culinary school, earned a degree, and I

had an alpha waiting for me. That was more than I ever thought possible, so don't be ungrateful, I reminded myself.

As I stepped out into the city, enjoying the sound of Charlotte all around me, I couldn't help but smile. I did it. I actually did it. Sure, there were no parents to be proud of me, and Chuck hadn't made it down for my graduation, but I still did it—and no one could take that from me. I would miss it here, but I was excited about building my own home. Chuck and I were planning to put down roots, and I couldn't wait. Our budget wasn't huge, but I had been working and saving, and we'd bought a house. Chuck said he'd found the perfect place. It needed some work, but I was ready to do whatever it took for a place of our own. I even had plans for a vegetable garden.

I had so many Pinterest boards made for each room. I'd watched DIY videos on Instagram and YouTube, budgeting tips for renovations, and I was ready to get to work.

Only a week to go, I reminded myself as I zipped up my jacket. Fall had come early, but I liked this time of year. It felt like a reminder that things were changing—seasons, people, and even me. My new beginning was so close I could almost taste it, and I couldn't wait—it felt like I'd been waiting forever. Charles had moved away four months ago, and I couldn't wait to join him. We'd be together again, building the life we'd talked about for so long.

Just the thought made me smile, even though an annoying voice filled with doubt kept nagging at the back of my mind.

Which I was ignoring with prejudice!

It's nerves—nothing more!

I wasn't a fan of change, and I'd been in and out of way too many foster homes and

group homes to ever be. Coming home from school only to hear, “Pack your stuff, you’re leaving,” was the worst.

I didn’t plan on going far, but I just needed some air and something to eat.

And you need to stop thinking.

But as I walked down the street, my thoughts kept going back to Chuck, like they had been a lot recently. I missed him. I missed the stability he brought, the way he always seemed to have a plan. I’d never had that before, growing up the way I did. Chuck was dependable, and I needed that.

Things are good... really good.

I stopped outside a small café, the smell of coffee and fresh bread hitting my nose and making my stomach growl. Fresh bread was literally the best thing ever... please let them have a panini. The place didn’t look fancy, but it was cute.

I was halfway through the door when a voice I hadn’t expected—or heard in what felt like forever—stopped me in my tracks.

“Mylo?”

I froze, my heart jumping straight into my throat. No way—no freaking way—it couldn’t be. I turned around, and there he was. Noah. The guy who legit changed—or saved—my life, whichever you wanted to call it. He was the one who showed me I didn’t have to turn out the way everyone thought I would just because of where I came from.

It had been like a year or so, and in all that time, he hadn’t changed much at all. He still had those same broad shoulders, the same kind eyes, and that easy smile that

somehow always made me feel like everything would be okay.

“Noah?” My voice came out awkward, caught somewhere between disbelief and joy. And the huge, ridiculous grin spreading across my face? Yeah, no stopping that.

He laughed, pulling me into a hug before I even registered what was happening. “It’s been too long, kid.”

“I’m not a kid anymore,” I said with a laugh, even though standing there with him made me feel sixteen all over again. When he pulled back, he gave me that look—the one that always made it feel like he could read my mind, even when I didn’t want him to.

“You look good,” he said, giving me a once-over with a nod of approval. “Culinary school must’ve treated you well.”

“It did,” I replied, though guilt twisted in my gut the second the words left my mouth. I wasn’t sure Noah would approve of my choices. But they were mine, dammit. So why did I not want to tell him I was possibly leaving behind better opportunities here in Charlotte to chase after Chuck? You’re not chasing! We had a plan. Still, that definitely wasn’t the vibe I was going for.

“What about you? What are you doing here? What brings you to Charlotte?”

“Picking up supplies.” He motioned to the bags at his feet. “Can’t get half this stuff up in the mountains.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “Still living that mountain life, huh?”

“Yeah, and it’s been good—actually, better than good.” His grin got wider, if that was even possible, and every inch of him had happiness written all over it. “I’m a dad

now. Got a little girl, Lily. And another one on the way.”

It took me a second to process that. “Wait... what? Oh my god, you’re a dad?”

“Yep.” He grinned even bigger, like the pride was too much to contain. “Wasn’t easy, but you know how that goes.” He chuckled, and I could tell just by looking at him—he’d do it all over again in a heartbeat. “I found my mate. Fell in love with someone I was supposed to hate. It was all very Romeo and Juliet , minus the poison.”

I wasn’t sure about the Romeo and Juliet part, but the rest of it sounded amazing.

“Wow,” I said, not really surprised in the least. Noah would make a great dad. “That’s... wild. You’re a dad. But your kids are lucky to have you.”

He nodded, pride written all over every inch of him. “Yeah, it’s crazy. But hey, enough about me. What’s been going on with you?”

I hesitated, trying to figure out how to summarize everything that had happened since we last talked. “It’s... good. Chuck—he’s the alpha I’ve been with for over a year—we’re building a life together. Got all these plans lined up. We even bought a house. I think you’ll like him—he’s solid. The kind of guy with a plan, you know? He even got a good job recently, so he had to move, and he has the same goals as me. We’re both ready to settle down soon.”

I knew I was rambling, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. Once I started, the words just kept spilling out.

Noah tilted his head, raising a brow as he studied me. “Stable, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said, a little too defensive before I could stop myself. “He’s got a good

head on his shoulders. We got a place, and he wants a future with me, and that's what matters."

The words felt true... or at least close enough. Right?

He was quiet for a moment, his gaze holding mine in that way that used to make me squirm—but thankfully, I resisted. I could tell he was figuring out the best way to say what he wanted to.

"You sure that's all that matters, Mylo? You don't sound very passionate."

"I am," I insisted, though even I could hear the doubt in my voice. "I just... I've never had stability before, you know? Chuck gives me that. It's what I need."

Why did that sound like I was trying to convince myself too?

Ugh! Shut it, brain. You have an alpha, a home—everything is perfect, damn it!

Noah nodded slowly but didn't say anything, which always drove me crazy! Back then, he'd used it to make me figure things out for myself, but now... it felt like a mirror, and I didn't like it. It was written all over his face that he wasn't convinced, and maybe, deep down, I wasn't either. But I didn't want to think about that. Not now—not when I was so close to getting back to Chuck and everything I'd ever dreamed of having.

Damn it, I deserved the happily ever after... the picket fence and two-point-five kids.

"It's been four months since we've seen each other," I added, hoping to change the subject. "I bought a ticket to go meet him, but it's not for another week. Non-refundable, so I'm stuck here until then."

Noah's expression softened, and he leaned forward. "You know, I'm heading back to Redwood Falls right after this. I could give you a ride if you want. You'd get to see him a lot sooner."

I stared at him, stunned. "Oh my gosh, you'd do that?"

"Of course," he said with a grin. "You're like family to me, Mylo. I wouldn't leave you hanging."

Even though it had been almost four years since I'd heard those words, they still meant as much to me. I knew it was my fault no one was at my graduation. If I'd invited Noah, he would have been there, front and center, cheering me on. And I guess with his mate and baby... some guys got all the luck.

It will soon be your turn. Chuck and I had decided we would wait until we'd worked a couple of years, fixed up the house, and put money aside.

It didn't take much to convince me. The idea of seeing Chuck sooner made my heart race. Or maybe it was finally just getting started on a life that felt... normal, real... whatever it was, it was finally happening.

"Alright. Yeah, let's do it. Just let me get my stuff—I'm already packed."

We headed back to my place so I could grab my things. I didn't own much, at least not yet—foster care had taught me to travel light—but soon I wouldn't have to anymore. Soon, I'd have a home with Chuck, a place that was mine. Ours.

Once I put the last of my things into the bag I'd packed the second I finished my last assessment, I went looking for Tyler to let him know what was happening. He was still glued to his laptop, but he'd moved to his room, tapping away furiously—probably still submitting apartment applications.

“Hey,” I said, leaning against the doorframe of his room. “So, change of plans.”

He looked up, one eyebrow raised. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” I nodded, trying to contain my excitement. “Noah—my old big brother, remember?—he’s giving me a ride up to Redwood Falls today. I don’t have to wait the whole week.”

Tyler’s expression softened, and he closed his laptop. “That’s awesome, Mylo. You must be excited to see Chuck.”

I smiled, even though that stupid knot of anxiety twisted tight in my chest. “Yeah, I am. It’s been too long.”

Tyler got up and pulled me in for a quick hug, thumping me on the back. “I’m happy for you, man. Just don’t go ghosting me when you’re out there living the dream, alright?”

I snorted, giving him a playful punch on the arm. “As if. Like I’d forget about you. You better stay in touch too—or I’m showing up at your door, no warning.”

Tyler smirked. “I will, just as long as you send me pictures of the house. And the vegetable garden you’ve been going on about.”

I snorted. “Deal.”

We stood there for a moment, not saying anything, the weight of goodbye settling between us. Two years living together, and now it was all about to change. But this wasn’t like foster care, where people drifted away and disappeared, like they were never really there to begin with. This felt different—like it actually mattered.

“Alright,” he finally said, breaking the silence. “Go before I start getting all emotional.”

I managed a small smile, fighting off the lump building in my throat. “You take care of yourself, alright?”

“You too,” he said, giving me a small smile. “Text me when you get there.”

“I will.”

I walked out of his room and into the living room. I gave the apartment one last look before heading out the door. A weird mix of excitement and nerves hit me all at once, but maybe this was the good kind—the kind that comes from leaving something behind without knowing exactly what’s next, but somehow knowing it’s going to be good. Not like when I was shuffled between foster homes with no warning, bin bag in hand. This time, I got to decide. I was moving toward something—something I’d fought hard for, something that felt like the start of something real. Something that mattered.

Are you sure about that?

I ignored that voice. Things were great. This was it—the dream... the life... it was finally here.

And no one, not even Chuck, was going to take that away from me.

I was finally going to have a place of my own. An alpha of my own. Kids of my own. Life was finally swinging my way.

An hour later, we were on the road, leaving the city behind and heading toward Redwood Falls. The whole trip felt surreal, like I was standing on the edge of a

cliff—but in a good way.

Is there a good way?

Ignoring. I was ignoring.

Noah and I fell into easy conversation, catching up on everything we'd missed over the past year or so. He told me all about his mate, their little girl, and the baby on the way—how his life had gone totally different from what he'd imagined.

And I was happy for him, I really was. But I still couldn't stop that flicker of envy. He had everything I wanted—a family, a home, someone who would miss him if he didn't come back.

Isn't that what you're building with Chuck? Isn't that where you're going right now?

Yes. Yes, it is, I told myself firmly.

I shook off the voice and took a deep breath as we pulled into Redwood Falls. The town was just as quaint as I'd imagined, and for a moment, it felt like everything might actually be okay. Like this was it.

This was home.

Noah pulled up in front of the address I'd given him—the place Chuck had found after landing that big job—and my heart raced in my chest. This was what I'd been waiting for.

I stepped out of the car, bag in hand, and climbed the front steps. My pulse was thundering in my ears, but I couldn't stop smiling. This was it. Us. The start of the life we'd planned. I rang the doorbell, my heart racing so fast it felt like it might

explode.

This was it.

But Chuck wasn't the one who opened the door.

An omega answered. And he looked very surprised to see me.

Immediately, my gut twisted. My eyes landed on the fresh bite marks on his neck, and for a second, I thought I had the wrong house—or maybe I was dreaming. Right now, I was praying it was both... or either.

This couldn't be right.

Then Chuck's scent hit me like a punch to the gut. It was all over him—this omega standing in the doorway of our future. That's when I knew. Knew with every sinking, horrible part of me.

My voice wobbled. "I—uh, I think I have the wrong?—"

Before I could finish, I saw him.

Chuck.

Standing behind the omega. His eyes went wide when he saw me, but it wasn't the kind of surprise you'd hope for, like Oh my god, Mylo, I missed you so much. Nope. It was guilt. Pure, unmistakable fucking guilt.

I took a step back, everything around me spinning. The omega, the bite, the way Chuck looked at me—it all hit me like a damn tidal wave, and suddenly I couldn't breathe. My chest tightened, and I just couldn't seem to figure out how to breathe...

Shit! Fuck! I couldn't be here.

My brain was screaming: Run, get out of here now!

Chuck was mated... he was mate to someone else. He wasn't mine anymore.

Was he ever really mine?

I wanted to scream, to demand an explanation, but my throat felt squeezed shut. I couldn't even get the words out. Instead, I turned and walked away. Fast. Before Chuck or his omega could say anything. I didn't need to hear whatever excuse Chuck was about to give me. I fucking knew enough.

Stability. That's what I'd told myself I wanted. That's what Chuck was supposed to be. But now I realized I'd been lying to myself the whole fucking time. Chuck wasn't my future—he was just an illusion. Yet another cruel joke from the universe to me.

As I walked down the street, it felt like the world was collapsing all around me, like the weight of everything was finally coming down. I had no idea what I was going to do now. Everything I'd worked for, all the plans, all the dreams—it was over. Done. Just like that.

And I had nowhere to go.

Why didn't anyone ever want me? Why was I never good enough?

I was so screwed! Fuck, how had I let this happen? How had I let my life become this?

My brain kept screaming: This can't be real. This can't be real. Over and over again. But no matter how many times I pinched myself, I didn't wake up.

What do I do now? I felt like I was drowning in the weight of it all, and the only thing I could think was: Why wasn't I good enough for Chuck? Why wasn't I ever good enough for anyone to want to keep me?

I shouldn't have been surprised—my parents had dumped me in front of a firehouse. If they didn't want me, why would anyone else?

My eyes burned with tears, but I fought them back. I couldn't cry. Not here. Not now. Not where he—they—could see me.

Does it fucking matter if they can?

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CHAPTER TWO

HOLDEN

The fire crackled softly, sending flickers of light dancing across the log walls. The lounge wasn't packed, but it had a good number of people for this time of day, and I knew it would only get louder as it got later. West and I had managed to grab a spot near the window, where I could watch the last bit of daylight disappear behind the Blue Ridge Mountains. My laptop was open to the quarterly numbers, but all I wanted was to close it and get out of here.

So why don't you?

This was supposed to be my day off—one of the few times I could enjoy some downtime—but, of course, business never took a break.

Don't you mean you never take a break?

Maybe that was true, but the saying about idle minds wasn't wrong... The last thing I needed was to let my mind wander.

"You need to hire another social media manager," I said, not even looking up from my laptop at my brother.

West was leaning back in his chair, arms hanging over the sides like he didn't give a shit about anything—as usual. "We can't just hire anyone, Holden. You know that. It's not like we're some basic-ass 9-to-5 office job. We're an outdoor company. We

need someone who at least knows how to pitch a tent. Oh, and knows what it means when you say pitch a tent. ”

I glanced up, exhaling slowly. “This is the fourth one you’ve fired this year.”

“Yeah, because the last one didn’t know jack about the outdoors. Never been camping in his life,” West said, shaking his head like he still couldn’t believe it. “Who the hell applies to work for an outdoor brand and has never set foot in the woods? Who does that? We need someone who, at the very least, actually likes going outdoors.”

He had a point, but I wasn’t in the mood to admit it. I didn’t like things not getting done. And the fact that West was sitting there like it didn’t matter only made me want to punch him even more.

Maybe I did need that day off.

Okay, so maybe I was a little annoyed at my brother’s nonchalance, but that didn’t mean we didn’t need to fill the position ASAP.

“That’s what you said last time. And the time before that. We’re not looking for the next Crocodile Dundee, West. This is the fourth person you’ve fired in twelve months.”

West rolled his eyes and snorted. “We’ll find someone when we find them. Because the last guy? He’d never even been camping. He couldn’t tell a hiking boot from a flip-flop if his life depended on it, but somehow, he still thought he was an expert on running an outdoor company’s social media.

"Like, who applies to work for an outdoor store and has never stepped foot in the woods? Who does that? And seriously, Crocodile Dundee, really, bro? Do better.

That was like a million years ago.”

I raised a brow. I was definitely not touching that one.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Just deal with it. Hire someone who knows what they’re doing, or I’ll do it myself.”

West raised a brow at that, his lazy smirk making me want to walk away right then and there. “Oh yeah? Like hell you will. I’m the one who has to deal with them, not you. If you hire someone as clueless as the last one, I’m the one who has to train them. If you think I’m dealing with another clueless city kid who thinks hiking means walking to the corner store, and their only experience camping is waiting in line for the new iPhone, you’ve got another thing coming.”

I was about to respond when the shift in the room had my bear sitting up. It was subtle at first—a soft tension that hung in the air, hinting that trouble was approaching. But then it became sharper, like the calm before the storm.

That was when the smell hit me. Sweet, sharp, and fuckin’ unmistakable.

Shit! It was the scent of an omega on the verge of going into heat. I didn’t need to look around to know where it was coming from. The entire room fell silent, and I could feel the focus of every unmated alpha lock in on the new arrival.

Fuck and damnation! I knew it wouldn’t take much for things to get out of hand in a situation like this. One wrong move, and someone would start a fight. Omegas in heat had a way of causing trouble, whether they wanted to or not.

And that was the last fucking thing we needed today.

West sat up a little straighter, clearly amused. “Well, well. Looks like someone’s

about to make things interesting.”

I ignored him, keeping my eyes on the laptop, even though the numbers blurred together. Focus. That’s what I needed. Not this. Not the scent pulling at my senses.

The omega moved closer, his scent practically weaving through the air like a fucking siren’s song—or at least what I imagined that would sound like.

Focus, Holden!

I kept my eyes down, pretending I didn’t notice. But I felt him before I saw him. Too close. The warmth of his body radiated next to mine, his presence heavy in the space between us.

“Hey.” His voice was low, sultry, already thick with the edge of his heat. “You wanna come up to my room for drinks?”

It wasn’t an invitation for a drink, and we both knew it. He was offering something more—something that most alphas would jump at without a second thought. An omega on the verge of heat? For most, that was a recipe for hours of mindless, rut-driven sex.

But I wasn’t most alphas.

I glanced up, just enough to meet his gaze, then went back to my screen. “No, thank you.”

West nearly choked on his drink, laughing loud enough to draw a few stares. He leaned forward, grinning like a wolf. “I like drinks,” he said, tossing a playful wink in the omega’s direction.

The omega shifted his attention to West, his eyes lighting up at the offer. Of course, West would entertain it. He always did. He wasn't one to pass up an opportunity like this.

I rolled my eyes as West stood, clapping me on the shoulder before taking a step toward the omega. "Good luck, bro. Have fun dealing with all the real work." He tossed the words over his shoulder, clearly ready to dip out and leave me to finish what we had started.

Typical.

The omega flashed a bright smile at West before following him out of the room, their combined scent hanging in the air long after they left.

I sighed, closing my laptop and leaning back in the chair, staring into the fire for a moment.

Alone. Again.

And whose fault is that?

It wasn't that I didn't want what they had—the carefree attitude, the ability to just enjoy life without the weight of responsibility crushing down on them. I envied West sometimes, the way he could jump in with both feet like it was nothing. But I couldn't. I made a promise to myself a long time ago—one I had no intention of breaking.

No humans. Not ever again.

It's safer, remember... for them!

The fire crackled softly, the room slowly filling up with idle chatter again as the tension from the omega's presence faded. But the lingering scent was still there, like a ghost of something I would never have. Or never allow myself to have.

I couldn't afford to get distracted. I'd learned my lesson years ago. One wrong move, one broken rule, and it had cost me more than I was willing to admit.

I had responsibilities. A business to run. Brothers who depended on me, even if they pretended not to.

Noah's voice echoed in the back of my mind—his words from years ago still ringing true. “You're different, Holden. You're always trying to control things because you're afraid of what happens if you let go.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was afraid. But fear kept me in line. Kept me from fucking up and hurting people I cared about. It kept me from making the same mistake twice. And that was something I couldn't afford to forget.

I stood up, stretching out the stiffness in my shoulders before grabbing my laptop. West could handle the social media manager situation later. Right now, I needed to get back to work.

You mean bury yourself away from anything remotely that looks like living?

I ignored the stupid and definitely unwanted reminder.

As I made my way toward the door, I caught a glimpse of West at the far end of the lounge, the omega practically draped over him as they waited for the elevator. I shook my head, biting back the familiar pang of jealousy. Not for the omega—but for the ease with which my brother could live his life. Carefree. Untouched by the weight that I carried every day.

But that was the difference between us. West could afford to live like that. I couldn't. Not anymore.

I knew the cost, and it was too high.

I left the lounge, the door closing behind me, cutting off the warmth of the fire and the lingering scent of temptation. Business came first. It always would.

It's the only way!

And if a small voice called me a liar, I ignored it for the thousandth time.

CHAPTER THREE

MYLO

The cold night air enveloped me as I walked, each step was a struggle to keep it together when all I wanted to do was fall apart. I wanted to scream, I wanted to shout—I wanted to rail at whoever thought I deserved this.

Why did this always happen to me?

I could still hear Chuck behind me, his footsteps picking up as he tried to catch up. He kept talking, but every word out of his mouth made me want to scream. Each sentence was a fresh excuse, and it made me want to turn around and deck him. The worst part was, I wasn't even sure if I was more pissed at him or myself.

“Mylo! Please—wait! You showed up early, okay? I was gonna tell you. We were never right for each other, you know that.” His voice was rushed, panicked. “I was just working up the nerve, I swear!”

I clenched my jaw, swallowing down the bitter laugh that almost bubbled up.

Oh, sure, the sarcastic little voice in my head chimed in, because that's so much better, right? Wait until I've uprooted my entire fucking life just to dump me at the last minute. How bloody noble.

My hands curled into fists, my knuckles aching from how hard I was squeezing them. I wanted to turn around, to shout at him, punch him—anything to make the betrayal,

that felt like my heart was being cut into pieces with dull scissors, hurt even a little bit less.

But what would be the point? Screaming at him wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't undo what was already done, and it certainly wouldn't fix the giant hole in my chest.

Besides, it wouldn't make it hurt any less that Chuck had made his choice—and it wasn't me. So I was making mine. I wasn't going to beg him or argue. I was walking away from it all, like I should've done months ago.

I wanted to say I was doing it with my dignity intact... but who the fuck was I kidding?

You deserve this, a voice mocked.

I knew better.

This was what happens when I break my own damn rule—one that had been drilled into me way too many times by life itself for me to have been so stupid. One I should know by heart already: You can't depend on anyone, Mylo.

I'd learned that the hard way, over and over again. Not having a plan B, depending on Chuck, letting him in, and stupidly believing we could have something real—how could I have been so goddamn naïve? How could I have let myself believe in anything like forever or permanent with him?

People like me didn't get permanent.

I picked up my pace, trying to outrun the hurt clawing at my insides. Chuck was still shouting behind me, but I blocked out the words, which was pretty easy with the

pounding in my ears. My thoughts were a mess, everything felt loud, everything was so jumbled and all I wanted to do was scream.

When I got to Noah's car, I yanked the door open with more force than necessary and got in without a word. The moment I closed it, I wished it was as easy to shut down my brain. The image of the omega with the bite... Chuck's voice, throwing excuses around like they mattered... it all kept ringing in my head.

And maybe even worse—the silence inside the car felt like it would swallow me whole. It was heavy, like the weight of everything that had just happened was pressing down on me, squeezing the air from my lungs.

Noah didn't say anything. But he didn't have to.

He'd had a front-row seat to my humiliation from the driver's seat, his eyes flicking between me and Chuck, who was probably still standing at the door, waiting—hoping—I'd open it.

For what fucking reason?

At least Noah looked as pissed off as I felt, but what nearly took me out was the concern—and maybe even pity—in his eyes. I could tell he wanted to say something, but Noah never pushed when I wasn't ready. Just like he'd always done, he gave me space to breathe.

I buckled my seatbelt and looked straight ahead, my mind spinning. The only thought I could pin down was: This couldn't be happening.

Chuck's voice faded as we drove away. I wasn't sure if I was happy not to hear the excuses anymore—or the begging for a second chance—or if I preferred the silence.

I stared out the window, watching the trees blur by, my stomach doing its best to tie itself in knots. Damn it, this wasn't how it was supposed to go. I'd pictured this drive so differently. I was supposed to be in my new life—one I'd been working toward for months with Chuck, in a new place. A future where I finally had someone to lean on, someone I could depend on.

A home... a place no one could tell me to leave when they got sick of me.

But all of that had been smashed to pieces the moment I saw that omega at Chuck's door, wearing his scent like a badge of honor.

The tears started before I could stop them. Hot, angry tears that blurred the world outside the window. I hated crying—especially in front of anyone, even Noah. But what the hell did I have left? Besides, if there was anyone I didn't have to pretend for, it was him.

The one person who'd shown me there was light at the end of the very dark tunnel that was my life before he showed up. The one person who'd never let me down. If there was anyone I could fall apart in front of, it was him.

But damn it, I still hated it.

Noah glanced my way for a second before focusing back on the road. He was giving me space, like always. But after a while, his voice cut through the silence.

"Where do you want to go?"

The question hit me harder than I expected. Where did I want to go? Nowhere. Everywhere. Run. Hide... disappear.

Hell, I didn't even know where I could go anymore. My chest tightened, and the tears

came faster, harder. “I don’t—I don’t know,” I stammered, my voice cracking. “I have no job, no home. No plan. Nothing. I—I was so stupid, Noah.”

I hated how weak my voice sounded, how broken. But the words wouldn’t stop, spilling out like a dam had burst inside me. “I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

Noah stayed quiet for a long moment. I half-expected him to jump in and tell me I wasn’t stupid, that everything would be okay. But he didn’t. He just let the silence stretch, the weight of my words hanging in the air. I wiped my eyes on the sleeve of my jacket, hating how pathetic I felt, how lost.

Eventually, Noah sighed, his voice low. “You’re not stupid, Mylo. You trusted someone. That doesn’t make you stupid. That makes him a coward.”

His words were calm, but there was an edge to them—like he was holding back the full force of what he wanted to say. But even in his anger, Noah was Noah. Steady. Reliable. Everything Chuck had never been.

I sniffed, still wiping at my face. “Well, it sure feels stupid.”

Noah’s lips twitched in a faint smile, but he didn’t push it. “Listen, if you don’t know where to go, why don’t you come with me? I can take you up to the mountains, to the resort my wife’s family runs. I’ll get you a job in the kitchen—comes with room and board. It’s a nice place. You’ll like it.”

His offer hit me like a lifeline in a storm. Room and board? A job? It sounded too good to be true. But this was Noah. He didn’t offer things unless he meant them. He didn’t make promises he couldn’t keep.

The logical part of my brain screamed at me to say no, to insist that I figure this out on my own. But the rest of me—the exhausted, broken part of me—clung to that

offer like it was the only thing keeping me from drowning.

“Yeah,” I breathed, my voice barely above a whisper. “Yeah, that sounds... thank you, Noah. Really.”

Noah glanced over at me, his expression softening. “Anytime, kid. How many times do I have to tell you? I’ve got your back.”

Those words shouldn’t have made my throat tighten. But they did. The reminder that Noah had my back—that he’d always had it—just highlighted how Chuck, who was supposed to have my back, had completely screwed me over. Well, not just you, that bitter voice in my head sneered. He literally screwed the other omega too.

I swallowed the bitterness, trying to push it down, but it stuck in my throat like a lump that wouldn’t go away. Chuck was gone. I needed to accept that. Move on. But it wasn’t going to happen overnight. Hell, it wasn’t going to happen anytime soon.

We pulled into the parking lot of the resort, the mountains looming behind it, casting long shadows in the fading light. Noah cut the engine and glanced over at me. “You want a drink?”

A small, tired laugh escaped me. “Yeah. I think I need one.”

We headed inside, the warmth of the resort’s bar wrapping around me like a much-needed blanket. The dim lighting and rich wood paneling made it feel like we were tucked away from the rest of the world, hidden from everything that had just happened. For a moment, I let myself relax. Just a little.

Noah ordered us both drinks, and I didn’t care what it was. I just needed something to dull the raw ache in my chest. When the bartender slid the glass in front of me, I took a long, slow sip, letting the burn of the alcohol spread through me like a temporary

shield.

Noah's phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out, typing something quickly before slipping it away. "Texted Holden," he said. "He'll sort out the job stuff."

I nodded, grateful but still feeling like my life was spiraling out of control. "You know," I said after a long pause, "what really bothers me the most isn't that Chuck ended things. It's that I didn't know. I had no idea. He kept me in the dark."

Noah didn't say anything, just gave me that look that meant he was listening.

"When I was a foster kid, no one ever told me anything," I continued, my voice shaky. "I never knew where I was going, what was happening to me. They just shuffled me around like I didn't matter. Like my input wasn't important enough to consider. I guess it's my fault for trusting Chuck so completely. Maybe I was too naive. But... why is that such a bad thing? Why is it wrong to believe in someone?"

I took another long sip of my drink, already feeling the effects of the alcohol dulling the edges of my anger. But it wasn't enough. Not yet. I gestured for the bartender to bring me another. If there was ever a day to get drunk, it was this one.

Noah shifted in his seat, glancing around before leaning in slightly. "Look, if you're going to be staying here for a while, there's something important you should probably know."

I frowned. "Something important?"

"Yeah," he hesitated. "It's about the mountain... and most of the people who live here."

Before he could explain, the door swung open, and I felt the air shift. It was like the

entire room held its breath for a moment as a tall, broad alpha strode in. His presence was commanding without even trying, and I knew immediately this had to be Holden—the alpha Noah had mentioned.

But what really caught me off guard wasn't just his size or his confidence. It was his scent. That warm, woodsy alpha scent hit me like a punch to the gut. I'd never reacted like this to anyone before. Not even Chuck—and Chuck had spent months wondering if I was really an omega because I didn't seem all that... interested.

But just seeing him, it felt like my chest cracked open, like my soul—or whatever you wanted to call it—reached out without asking. My hand flew to my chest, pressing down like that would stop whatever was happening inside me. My heart was pounding, wild and out of control, and the way he was staring at me wasn't helping. It was the kind of look that scrambled my thoughts and made my heart do things it shouldn't.

His brown eyes widened, and he sucked in a sharp breath, like I'd caught him off guard. There was something in his expression—a flicker of recognition or surprise. I couldn't really tell. But whatever it was, it hit me hard, like an electric shock straight down my spine.

I could swear the air between us suddenly felt different—heavier, charged. Everything around us faded, and suddenly, all I could see was him. Standing there, staring back at me like he was trying to figure out what the hell was happening too.

Then, just like that, something inside me pulled tight. Like a thread I didn't know was there, snapping into place and yanking me toward him. It didn't make sense.

His nostrils flared, and his gaze sharpened and focused on me in a way that made my stomach flip. My breath caught in my throat. Whatever this was, it was way too big to be normal. And even though I didn't understand it, it felt familiar—like I'd been

waiting for this moment without even knowing it.

Every part of me screamed that I wanted him. I barely knew him, but his scent, his presence—it was overwhelming, in a way that was both terrifying and exhilarating.

Of course, he barely looked at me, like I didn't exist. He walked over to the table, handed me a stack of forms like I was nothing more than a job applicant, and said in a low, businesslike tone, "Here are the employee forms. Fill them out, and we'll get you set up. I'll talk to you later."

Then he turned to Noah, not giving me a second glance. "Can I speak with you in private?"

I stared down at the forms in my hands, feeling a weird mix of disappointment and confusion. Part of me had wanted Holden to notice me, to at least acknowledge the pull I felt toward him. But he was cold, distant—like I didn't even exist. It shouldn't have bothered me. It was probably for the best.

But damn, his scent lingered in the air, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was on the edge of something big. Something dangerous.

As he and Noah stepped away to talk, I finished off my second drink, hoping to numb the sudden and overwhelming attraction I felt. Or to knock some sense into me. I'd already been stupid once with Chuck. I wasn't about to make the same mistake again. Not with someone like him.

But as I stared at the forms in front of me, that nagging feeling in my gut wouldn't go away.

What the hell are you getting yourself into, Mylo?

Somehow, I didn't think he would be a problem I could avoid. I'd never seen a bigger stay the fuck away sign written all over a person in my whole life.

You're fine, Mylo. He definitely doesn't want you. No one does... remember?

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CHAPTER FOUR

HOLDEN

The moment I stepped into the bar, it hit me like a fucking sledgehammer. The air was thick with the scent of whiskey, old wood, and... him. I knew immediately. I didn't even need to see him to know. My mate.

Of course, he was human. Just my fucking luck.

The universe had a sick sense of humor, and apparently, I was the punchline. I could feel my bear pacing beneath the surface, practically vibrating with excitement. He wanted out. Wanted to claim him, to pull him close, rub his scent all over him until every other alpha in the room had no doubt who he belonged to.

But I couldn't. Not with him sitting there, completely unaware of the world he'd just walked into.

Noah was across from him, and I could hear him about to drop the bomb about what we really were. I guess the universe wasn't entirely against me because at least I'd walked in right before he spilled the beans.

I could see him from the corner of my eye. God, I didn't even have to look at him fully to feel that pull. The one that made my blood burn and my chest tighten like it was caught in a vice. My bear was roaring, clawing to get out, and I had to physically force myself to stay still.

It felt like my muscles were locked up, every single instinct in my body screaming to go to him.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

It took all my willpower to clamp down hard on the urge. My pulse was racing, and it felt like a battle to keep my bear in check for the first time in a very long time. Not now, not here. I forced my breath to even out. I had to get a grip, because if I didn't, I was going to lose it. I wasn't about to make a scene in the middle of the resort bar—not when there were humans sitting there, including my human. And he definitely had no idea what we were or what was going on.

Even with all that, my bear fought against me—he was desperate to break free. But I kept him in check—barely. It took everything in me to hold back, to not go over there, scoop him up, and kiss the fuck out of him. Damn it, I really wanted to.

But great goddess, I could see that scene in my head, playing on an endless loop. Just thinking about it made my stomach twist. That moment years ago, when everything went to hell. My best friend. Dead because of me.

And now? The idea of that happening to my mate—the thought of putting him in danger because he didn't know, or because he found out—made my stomach twist so hard I had to stop myself from being sick.

So I did what I had to do. I pretended I didn't feel like my whole world was shifting beneath my feet. I ignored the fact that every nerve in my body was screaming to go to him. I shoved all of it down, deep, and walked over to them as casually as I could—like I wasn't on the edge of losing my shit.

Noah glanced at me, a silent question in his eyes, from whatever he saw on my face. Of course, I didn't answer. I couldn't. My focus was entirely on not breaking—not

letting my bear take over.

Not doing something completely reckless and stupid.

“Here are the employee forms,” I said, handing them to him. It was a miracle my voice sounded steady at all, especially with what was happening inside me. For a second our eyes met, his a beautiful blue, bright and full of... something... confusion maybe. Like he couldn’t explain what was happening.

I could swear he felt the pull too.

I wanted to say something else. I wanted to talk to him, hear his voice. I wanted to know everything about him. I wanted to learn every inch of him—from the top of his wavy blonde hair to those haunting, piercing blue eyes. I wanted to kiss every inch of his sun-kissed complexion. Trace that strong jawline, kiss those full lips.

But I couldn’t. Not now. I couldn’t let myself slip. If I did, I wouldn’t be able to stop.

His scent—fuck, it was intoxicating. It smelled like a soft mix of sugar and citrus. I swallowed hard, forcing myself not to breathe too deeply, not to let it overwhelm me.

I was barely holding it together.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I added, and then I turned to Noah. “Can I speak with you in private?”

I didn’t wait for a response. I needed to get out of there. Now. Before I did something stupid.

Noah followed me, and we left him sitting at the bar, and I prayed he was completely oblivious to the storm raging inside me. I didn’t say a word until we got to my office.

The first thing I did was walk over to the windows and throw them open so I could finally breathe. The cool mountain air hit me, and I dragged in several deep breaths, trying to calm my bear, trying to calm myself.

“You were going to tell him?” I asked, my voice sharper than I intended.

Noah crossed his arms. “Was just about to when you walked in.”

I cursed under my breath. “Good thing I showed up when I did.”

My pulse was still racing like I’d just run a mile. I shoved my hand through my hair, trying to calm my racing heart, but it wasn’t helping. His scent seemed to be stuck in my nostrils, his beautiful face forever etched in my brain. Fuck. I could feel the tight grip of panic crawling up my spine. Every muscle in my body was on edge, and I was barely holding on by a thread. My bear was still roaring, clawing to get out, but I forced him down, biting back the urge to shift.

Noah raised an eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

I clenched my jaw, every muscle in my body still tense. “Because he’s mine, Noah. He’s my mate.”

Noah stared at me for a moment, and I could see him processing what I’d just said. Then he shook his head slowly. “You’re serious?”

“Dead serious.” My voice was rough, barely holding it together. “And he’s human.”

Noah let out a low whistle. “Well, shit.” Then his face transformed, a smile taking over. “Actually, I can see how you two would be perfect for each other. Mylo is amazing.”

Mylo. Even his name was perfect.

“Let me guess—you’re stuck on the human part,” Noah said.

“Yeah,” I muttered, running a hand through my hair, tugging at the roots just to ground myself.

My bear was still pacing beneath my skin, every second out of that bar making it harder to stay away. It was like a leash, pulling tighter and tighter, threatening to snap. I wanted to turn around, go back in there, and just... be with him. But I couldn’t. I knew better. I knew what happened when humans got tangled up in our world—in my world.

It was dangerous. And I wouldn’t put him through that.

“Are you gonna tell him?” Noah asked, his voice quieter now.

I shook my head. “Not yet. He doesn’t need to know.”

“And when will you tell him?” Noah pushed, not letting it drop.

I met his gaze, feeling that same old stubbornness rear its head. “I don’t know, Noah. But I’ll figure it out. Just... not now.”

Because now? All I could think about was the mess this would turn into. Mylo was my mate. The one person meant for me. But how the hell was I supposed to protect him when I was probably the person he needed protecting from?

As much as I wanted to claim him, as much as my bear demanded it, I knew I had to be smart. And right now, all I could do was take it one step at a time. One painfully slow step.

Noah nodded, not pushing further. He knew better than anyone how I dealt with this kind of thing. I wasn't impulsive like West or carefree like Bishop. I couldn't afford to be.

I straightened, trying to shake the tension from my shoulders. "Just make sure he's taken care of," I said. "And don't tell him anything yet. I'll handle it when the time's right."

Noah watched me for a second, and then, with a nod, he agreed. "Alright. But don't wait too long. Mates don't like to be left in the dark."

I knew that. Hell, I felt that. But I wasn't about to rush this—not when there was so much at stake.

"I'll figure it out," I ground out, my voice harsher than I intended. "Please just give me time. I have to be the one to tell him... Mylo about shifters."

Saying his name out loud—fuck, it felt so good. Mylo!

Noah, ever calm, leaned against the desk, crossing his arms over his chest like we were discussing the weather. "I wasn't planning on telling him about you, Holden. That's your secret to keep. But telling him about me? About my family? That's my business. Not yours."

His casual tone pissed me off. Didn't he understand what was at stake? How couldn't he see just how dangerous this was? My jaw clenched, and before I could stop myself, I had him pinned against the wall, my hand gripping the front of his shirt, muscles taut.

"He's my mate," I growled, my voice low and dangerous. "And I don't want him to know."

Noah's eyes flickered, a sharp gold flashing through them—the telltale sign that he was very close to shifting. But he kept his cool, his voice steady, even though I could feel the power radiating off him. But my bear was stronger than his wolf, and we both knew it.

“I know what you went through, Holden. I know about James.” His voice softened just a fraction, but it didn't dull the intensity in his eyes. “But you'd better take your damn hands off me before I rip out your throat.”

Fuck! Noah is family—what are you thinking?

Even with that reminder, I hesitated, my grip tightening for just a second longer before I finally let go, stepping back. I couldn't let this spiral out of control. Not here. Not now.

Noah adjusted his shirt, keeping his eyes locked on mine. “You don't need to worry. I won't tell him your secret. But you can't keep this from him forever, Holden. He's your mate. He's going to figure it out sooner or later. And you're not going to like it when he realizes you've been keeping him in the dark.”

“I'm doing this to protect him,” I shot back, my voice tight.

“Protect him from what?” Noah asked, his tone exasperated but still calm. “Yourself?”

I didn't answer. I couldn't. I didn't want to admit that maybe that was exactly what I was trying to do.

Noah shook his head, standing straight again. “I'll get him settled in. But this is a temporary fix.” He snorted. “It's not even a fix, Holden. You know you can't run from this, right?”

I grunted but didn't speak, because I knew he was right.

With that, he left the office, shutting the door quietly behind him. I was left standing there, my fists clenched, my bear raging inside me. I wanted to punch something, break something—anything to release the pressure building up inside my chest. But I couldn't. I had to keep it together.

“Breathe in and out,” I repeated over and over until my heart rate slowed.

It wasn't just Noah's words that were eating at me. It was the fact that he knew. He knew about James. He knew about that day—about the one thing I tried to bury so deep that no one could ever drag it to the surface. But somehow, Noah knew.

I left the office, the walls feeling like they were closing in on me, and I headed straight for the one person who would have the answers: Hope.

Her cabin was tucked away in the more secluded part of the resort grounds, far enough from the bustle of guests but close enough to everything else that she could be there if she was needed. I pushed through the front door without knocking, my frustration boiling over as I walked in.

Hope was sitting on the couch, reading a book, her feet propped up on the coffee table. She didn't even flinch when I barged in. She just sighed, setting the book down and giving me that look. The one that said she'd been expecting me.

“What did you tell Noah?” I demanded, not bothering with pleasantries.

Hope raised a brow, leaning back on the couch, completely unfazed by my tone. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I'm talking about. Noah knows about James.”

She didn't flinch, she didn't even look guilty. Instead, she shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest. "Of course he knows. He's my mate, Holden. I tell him everything."

I stared at her, my pulse hammering in my ears. "You had no right?—"

"He's my mate," she said firmly, cutting me off. "When you find your mate, you'll understand that there are no secrets. Not between us."

My blood went cold at her words, the weight of them settling in my chest. I clenched my jaw, my throat tight as I forced the next words out. "I found my mate."

That got her attention. Hope's eyes widened slightly, and she uncrossed her arms, leaning forward, her voice softer now. "You... found your mate? Why aren't you happy about it? That's great news, Holden." She studied my face. "It is great news, isn't it?"

I ran a hand through my hair, tugging at the strands in frustration. "He's human, Hope."

She frowned, watching me closely. "And?"

Why is everyone acting like it's no big deal?

"And... I can't let him know what we are. I won't. It's too dangerous."

Her frown deepened, her eyes narrowing slightly. "Because of James?"

I didn't answer, but she knew. Of course, she knew.

"Holden," she said softly, her voice gentler now. "Just because James reacted badly

doesn't mean Mylo will. Not all humans are the same."

"You don't know that," I snapped, pacing across the room, the tension in my muscles coiled so tight I thought I might snap. "I won't risk it. I won't risk him."

Hope sighed, standing up and walking over to me, her hand resting lightly on my arm. "Holden, you can't keep him in the dark forever. He's your mate. He deserves to know the truth. Keeping him at a distance won't protect him. It'll only hurt him more. And you," she added softly.

I shook my head, pulling away from her. "I'm doing this to keep him safe. He'll be better off not knowing."

She didn't argue, just looked at me with that same knowing expression she always had. The one that said she saw right through me, even when I didn't want her to. And I could swear there was now pity mixed in, too.

"You're making this harder than it has to be," she said quietly.

"Maybe," I muttered, turning away from her. "But I'm not going to lose him. Not like I lost James."

She didn't respond, and I didn't give her the chance. I left her cabin before she could say anything else—before she could make me feel like I was making a mistake. Because maybe I was. Maybe I was overreacting. But I couldn't shake that image of James from my head—the way he'd looked at me with fear in his eyes. The way he'd run.

And the way I hadn't been able to stop him.

I wasn't going to make the same mistake with Mylo. I wasn't going to let him get

hurt, even if it meant keeping him in the dark for now. Even if it meant keeping him at arm's length.

I'd already lost too much. I wasn't about to lose him, too.

That was the thing about being a shifter, about having a mate. You didn't get to choose who it was. You didn't get to say, Nah, I'll take a pass on this one. The bond was there, whether I liked it or not, and I could feel it now, getting stronger with every second that passed, pulling me toward Mylo like gravity.

But I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready to let him into this world, into my world.

Because once I did, there was no going back. And if something happened to him—if I let him in and he ended up like James... I wouldn't survive that.

So, for now, all I could do was keep my distance, hold my breath, and pray that when the time was right to tell him the truth, it wouldn't destroy everything.

Would it ever be right? I really didn't know.

My bear chimed in to share his opinion. You're making a mistake.

CHAPTER FIVE

MYLO

Day eight at the resort kitchen, and I still couldn't believe how lucky I'd gotten. Every time I thought about it, I broke into a cold sweat and couldn't shake the gnawing feeling in my gut that if Noah hadn't run into me that day, I'd probably be homeless right now—or worse. It was hard not to wonder if maybe, just maybe, there was someone out there looking out for me. Me? Someone looking out for me? Yeah, right.

Still, Noah and his family... they'd been nothing short of amazing. Every single one of them. I didn't want to think about where I'd be without them. My chest tightened at the thought. Everyone here had welcomed me like I was already part of the family.

Well, almost everyone.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the task at hand, chopping vegetables while Sarah—Holden's sister-in-law (it was funny how I always thought of her in relation to Holden, not Noah)—moved gracefully around the kitchen. She was mated to Indigo, Holden's sister, and for whatever reason, she'd taken a shine to me. Honestly, I had no idea why, but I wasn't complaining.

Sarah had this easygoing way about her that made working in the kitchen feel less like work and more like... I don't know, hanging out with a friend who just happened to be an absolute genius when it came to food. She had a knack for breaking things down in a way that made sense, and I was learning more from her in a few days than

I'd learned at school.

And really, apart from Tyler, I didn't have any friends until now.

"How's that soup coming along?" Sarah asked, glancing over her shoulder with a playful grin. Her dark hair was pulled into a messy bun, a few loose strands falling across her forehead.

I wiped my hands on my apron and took a quick look at the simmering pot. "Pretty sure I nailed it. Might even be better than yours," I teased.

She snorted, tossing a towel at me. "Oh, please, rookie. You've got a long way to go before you even come close."

I caught the towel with a grin. "Maybe, but I'm getting there."

"That's the spirit," she said, turning back to the stove. "You're picking this up faster than I expected."

"Thanks, but honestly, I feel like I'm getting way more out of this than I should. I still feel like I'm earning way more than I deserve. "

Who the fuck keeps bringing that up? But it was the truth. I should earn way less, especially since I didn't even have to pay for my accommodation.

She waved me off without looking at me, like I'd just said something absurd. "Don't start with that again. We've been over this. You're doing great work, and that's what matters. Besides, you're part of the team now."

I tried not to let her words hit too hard, but it wasn't easy. Part of the team. It had been a long time since... I snorted. Maybe never since I'd felt like I was part of

anything. And hearing it now... well, it felt good. Too good.

But that didn't stop the nagging feeling that I didn't really belong here. That maybe they were being too nice. I couldn't help it. Every time I tried to bring up the fact that they were paying me more than I was worth, Sarah or Noah—or someone else—would brush it off like it didn't matter.

“Okay, fine,” I said, holding my hands up in mock surrender. “I won't bring it up again. Promise.”

“Good,” Sarah said with a wink. “Now, about that sauce?—”

“I think I got it right,” I said, “but I can try again if you think it's missing something.”

She grinned, wiping her hands on her apron. “You're doing great, Mylo. Honestly, I'm impressed. Not many people pick up this stuff as quickly as you do.”

I felt my cheeks heat up a bit at the compliment, but before I could respond, Sarah glanced toward the door, and my stomach dropped. I didn't even have to look to know who had just walked in.

Holden.

My hands instinctively tightened around the cutting board. Of course, he had to show up now.

He stopped short when he saw me. It was written all over his face that he was clearly not expecting me to be there. His sharp brown eyes flickered between me and Sarah, his expression unreadable. For a second, I thought maybe he'd just turn around and leave.

But no such luck. He turned to Sarah, his expression unreadable as usual.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt,” he muttered.

Sarah waved him off, completely unfazed by the tension in the room. “You’re not interrupting anything. We’re just finishing up. What’s up?”

Holden shifted slightly, his eyes flicking to me again before he spoke. “Wanted to talk to you about the inventory, but I can wait.”

Sorry, he muttered under his breath, his voice low. Didn’t realize you’d be here.

“No worries,” Sarah chimed in, seemingly oblivious to the sudden tension that had settled in the room. “We’re just finishing up some prep. What’s up?”

Holden’s eyes flicked toward me again, and I could feel my pulse quicken. God, why did he have to affect me like this? Every time he was around, it was like all the air got sucked out of the room, leaving me standing there, struggling to breathe. And it wasn’t just his size or the way he carried himself—though that definitely didn’t help. It was something else, something... more.

Remember you’re here to cook, and learn, and nothing else. No alphas!

“I just came to talk to you about the inventory stuff you mentioned,” Holden said, his voice clipped. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Sarah waved a hand, still stirring the sauce. “You’re not interrupting anything. Mylo’s got the soup under control, and we’re good for now.”

Holden’s eyes flicked toward me again, and I had to stop myself from flinching. We barely exchanged words when we crossed paths, yet every time he looked at me, it

felt like he saw straight through me—like he knew something I didn't.

Even when he wasn't looking directly at me, I could feel the weight of his gaze. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, leaving a tension between us that I couldn't explain. Something unspoken and heavy lingered in the air. I wanted to ask him what his problem was, why he always seemed ready to bolt whenever I was near, but I bit my tongue and stayed quiet.

You're the employee; he's the boss, I reminded myself.

"You can talk in front of Mylo," Sarah said casually, stirring the pot on the stove. "Unless it's a big secret?"

Holden grunted, clearly not interested in continuing the conversation with me there. "I'll catch you later."

I watched as he turned and walked out without another word, the door swinging shut behind him. The second he was gone, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

What. The. Hell.

I exhaled, realizing I'd been holding my breath the whole time. What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I get so tense around him? He barely noticed me... apparently hated me, and yet here I was, acting like an idiot every time he was in the same room.

"Don't mind him," Sarah said, breaking the silence. "He's... complicated."

"Yeah, I've noticed," I muttered, wiping my hands on a towel. "Does he always act like this?"

Sarah gave me a sideways glance, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Only when he doesn’t know how to handle something.”

I frowned, and glanced toward the door where Holden had disappeared. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She shrugged, not offering any more details. “Let’s just say Holden’s got a lot going on. It’s not personal.”

I let out a short laugh, more for show than anything else. “Yeah, well, complicated doesn’t even begin to cover this.”

I probably shouldn’t speak so freely about her brother-in-law, but seriously, what was with him?

Sarah chuckled, but there was a softness in her eyes when she looked at me. “Give him time. He’s got a lot on his shoulders. Just don’t take it personally, okay?”

Sure feels personal, I thought but didn’t say. I wasn’t going to get into it. Whatever his deal was— not my circus, not my monkeys. It was probably... definitely best to keep my head down and stay out of his way. The last thing I needed was to piss off the guy in charge.

I nodded, even though I wasn’t sure I believed her. I wanted to. But there was something about Holden that made it hard to believe he’d ever let anyone in—least of all me.

It seemed like every time I was near him, the guy acted like he’d rather be anywhere else. The tension was so thick I could feel it in the air, like an invisible wall between us. I could swear it was just me. Maybe he didn’t like something about me—maybe my scent was off or something. I mean, alphas were picky like that, right? But still, it

made me feel wrong, and no matter what I did, the guy barely looked at me, let alone spoke to me.

It was driving me crazy.

I tried to play it cool, keep my head down, and focus on the job, but it wasn't easy. Especially when every time he walked into a room, it felt like all the oxygen got sucked out. I caught him a few days ago, staring at me from across the lodge, and the second our eyes met, he spun on his heel and disappeared before I could blink. Then there was another time—he was coming down the path, spotted me, and immediately turned around, detouring in another direction.

What was his deal? Did I do something to piss him off? I'd barely said two words to the guy.

I wiped down the counter, trying to get my mind back on track. Sarah was talking me through one of her recipes, her voice light and cheerful as usual. She had this way of making everything feel... easy. Like no matter what, things would turn out fine.

“So, once the sauce thickens, you're going to lower the heat,” Sarah said, demonstrating as she spoke. “Let it simmer for a bit, and then it's good to go.”

I nodded, trying to keep my focus on her, but my thoughts kept circling around Holden. I couldn't shake it. There was something about the way he looked at me—something tense and... guarded. Almost like he was trying to figure me out, but not in a good way. More like he was waiting for me to mess up.

I pushed the thought aside, forcing a smile as Sarah glanced back at me. “Got it. I think I'm finally starting to get the hang of this.”

“You are. Trust me, you're a great addition to the staff.” Sarah's smile softened as

she changed the subject. “Anyway, I was thinking... You’ve been doing really well here, and we’d love for you to stay long term. But I know this place isn’t for everyone. So, I thought maybe you could use a little break to enjoy the area, fall in love with the place.”

“Uh, what do you mean?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

She grinned. “Horseback riding. Have you ever been?”

I blinked. “Horseback riding? No. Not unless you count watching it on TV.”

“Well, then it’s about time you gave it a try,” she said with a wink. “And I know just the person to take you.”

Before I could even ask, she gave me a look that made my stomach sink. “Holden.”

I almost choked. “Wait, what?”

What I really wanted to say was, Are you smoking something, lady?

“Holden,” she repeated, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “He knows the area better than anyone. Plus, he’s great with the horses. You’ll have fun.”

“I’m not so sure he feels the same way,” I said, trying to keep my tone light, even though the idea of spending any extended time alone with Holden made me more nervous...and excited than I cared to admit. “He doesn’t seem like... the chatty type.”

Sarah waved me off. “Don’t worry about that. He’ll warm up to you.”

I highly doubted that, but there was no arguing with Sarah once she had her mind set on something. She patted my shoulder, already moving toward the door. “I’ll go talk

to him, see if he can take you tomorrow.”

“Wait—what if he says no?” I asked, half hoping he would.

From across the kitchen, someone let out a chuckle—probably Greg, a middle-aged guy who always had an opinion and wasn’t shy about sharing it. “Holden say no? Not likely, kid.”

Sarah shot Greg a pointed glare, and he quickly coughed into his hand, pretending to look busy.

She paused at the door, glancing over her shoulder with a smirk. “He won’t.”

She sounded so sure... Well, that made one of us.

And just like that, she was gone, leaving me standing in the kitchen, my mind racing with all the reasons why this was a bad idea. Spending time alone with Holden was the last thing I wanted to do. He barely tolerated me as it was. Hell, I was pretty sure he hated me.

I suddenly felt a prickling sensation, like someone was watching me. I glanced around the kitchen, but everyone was busy. Greg was stirring a pot, Sarah had left, and the rest of the staff were focused on their own tasks. I shook my head, feeling stupid. Paranoid much, Mylo? I needed to get a grip.

Still, a tiny part of me—the part that couldn’t stop thinking about Holden, even when I knew I shouldn’t—wondered what it would be like. Maybe this was my chance to figure him out, to get past whatever wall he had between us. Or maybe I was just setting myself up for more confusion and frustration.

Either way, it looked like I didn’t have much of a choice.

Suck it up, Mylo! This is possibly the best job you'll ever get.

By the time I finished up and headed out of the kitchen, the sun was already starting to set. The air was cool and crisp, and I took a deep breath, letting it fill my lungs as I made my way back to my little cabin. It was quiet here, peaceful in a way I hadn't ever experienced. And despite everything—the tension with Holden, the uncertainty of my future—I couldn't deny that this place had a way of settling my nerves.

I liked it here. More than I expected to.

Maybe Sarah was right. Maybe I just needed to let myself fall in love with the place.

And maybe, just maybe, I'd figure out what the hell was going on with him in the process.

One day at a time, I reminded myself as I unlocked the door to my cabin. One step at a time.

You're damn lucky to be here, and don't you forget it. You can get one alpha to like you... or at the very least tolerate you before he ruins everything.

CHAPTER SIX

HOLDEN

I couldn't believe I let Sarah talk me into this. Then again, she hadn't exactly had to twist my arm. The completely unhelpful voice in my head mocked me. Just the thought of spending time with him... if I was honest, I didn't think I could have denied myself.

Avoiding him had been more difficult than I ever imagined. It felt like every time I turned around, he was right there—bright-eyed, eager, and completely unaware of the chaos he stirred up inside me.

He was perfect. My mate was so handsome and kind... and you only know this secondhand because you're avoiding him like a coward.

And of course, my family wasn't making it any easier. Why couldn't they understand that I was trying to protect him? Protect us both, really.

Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit.

Other people had mated humans, and it had turned out just fine.

Yeah, well, I wasn't most people. And I'm not risking my mate.

Our mate.

Ugh! I can't believe I'm arguing with my bear. What does the beast know?

More than you, apparently.

The second Mylo stepped into the stables, I knew he was there. His scent hit me like a wave—fresh, warm, and unmistakable. My bear rumbled in my chest, a low sound of contentment I had to fight to suppress. Bears weren't exactly subtle when they were happy, and mine was downright giddy to be in the same space as our mate.

I glanced over to see Mylo standing near the entrance, looking nervous as hell. His eyes were wide, like he wasn't sure whether to be excited or terrified about what came next. He's never ridden before. This is a huge mistake, I thought, but I couldn't exactly back out now. Not with Sarah's threat to take him herself if I didn't.

That thought alone nearly sent my bear into a frenzy. The mountains weren't safe for someone like him. Humans didn't have the situational awareness that shifters did, and all I could think about was the dozen ways this could go wrong.

But I wasn't about to let Sarah put him on a horse without me.

Yeah, that's the reason!

It was. It really was...

Great. So now I'm babysitting my mate, I grumbled inwardly, but deep down, I knew the truth: keeping him safe was my priority. Always would be.

Yeah, and getting to spend time with him without it being your idea is awfully convenient. Coward.

Another word I'd gotten used to hearing from my bear... which, let's face it, just

meant myself since Mylo arrived.

I led him over to a gentle white mare named Snowdrop, one of the calmest horses we had on the ranch. If anyone could handle my mates' nervous energy, it would be her. I could feel his eyes on me as I stroked Snowdrop's nose, introducing him to her slowly.

"This is Snowdrop," I said, keeping my voice low and steady. "She's good for first-timers. Just be calm around her, and she'll take care of you."

My mom would be so ashamed. Apparently, I'd also forgotten how to be a decent human... no 'hi,' no 'hello.' Way to be an ass, Holden.

Mylo blinked up at me, clearly trying to hide his nerves. "I'll do my best," he muttered, but his hand was shaking slightly as he reached out to touch the horse.

"Easy," I said, stepping closer to him. His scent filled my lungs, and it took everything I had not to react. Being this close to him was... damn it, it was harder than I thought. Too close.

But also not close enough...

I placed a hand on Mylo's shoulder, feeling the tension in his muscles. He was nervous, no doubt, but he trusted me. Even if he didn't realize it, he was relying on me to guide him through this.

And I would rather die than let any harm come to him.

"Here," I murmured, sliding my hands under his arms to lift him onto the saddle. My fingers brushed his sides as I helped him up, and the simple contact sent a jolt through me. I gritted my teeth and focused on the task at hand.

And I cursed my brain for the flood of unhelpful images it decided were appropriate to send me right now.

Breathe in... Shit! No—hold your breath. Drawing more of his intoxicating scent in was the last thing I needed.

Once he was seated, I adjusted the stirrups and checked the reins. Snowdrop stood still as a statue, patient as ever, but my bear was not. He was practically bouncing, thrilled to have Mylo this close.

I stepped back, running a hand through my hair, trying to get some distance between us before I did something stupid—like pull him off that horse and wrap my arms around him and kiss him within an inch of his life.

I snorted at the thought. Yeah, and get a punch for my trouble, most likely. Just because I knew he was my mate didn't mean anything to him... I was practically a stranger.

And why did that thought hurt my heart?

Again, whose fault is it?

“You good?” I asked, my voice rougher than I meant for it to be.

Mylo nodded, but I could see the hesitation in his eyes. “Yeah... I think so. What about you?” He cracked a nervous smile, probably trying to lighten the mood.

I huffed out a breath and shook my head, a small smile tugging at my lips. “I'm not the one about to ride a horse for the first time.”

He let out a nervous laugh. “Fair point.”

I glanced at him—his shoulders tense, his grip on the reins a little too tight. My bear growled, wanting to calm him, but I kept my voice brisk, trying not to make a big deal of it. “You’ll be fine,” I said, keeping it matter-of-fact. “Snowdrop’s steady, and I’ll be right here. Just focus on staying balanced, and she’ll do the rest.”

He looked up at me, still uncertain, but he nodded. “Right... okay.”

I fought the urge to reach out, to place a hand on his shoulder and tell him everything would be okay. Instead, I stepped back and cleared my throat. “Let’s get started.”

I moved beside him, walking Snowdrop forward a few steps, making sure Mylo’s balance was steady. Each time I reached out to adjust the reins or guide his hands, our fingers brushed, and it felt like sparks shooting up my arm. I didn’t know if this was punishment or reward—spending time with him, touching him—but keeping myself in check the whole time was the hardest thing I’d ever had to do.

My bear huffed impatiently, wanting more than just these brief moments of contact. He wanted Mylo closer, wanted him in my arms, safe where he belonged. But I couldn’t give in to that. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Because as much as I wanted him, as much as my bear craved him, I knew better. I’d made a promise to myself a long time ago—no humans. Not after James. And Mylo... well, Mylo was human. He was everything I couldn’t have, and every second I spent near him was just a reminder of how cruel the universe could be.

But at least if he was riding with me, I could keep him safe—even if that meant keeping him at arm’s length.

“Ready to go?” I asked, giving Snowdrop’s reins a gentle tug to lead her forward.

He nodded, though I could still see the nerves swirling in his eyes. But he trusted me.

Even when he didn't know it, he trusted me with his safety.

If only he knew the truth. That look in his eyes would vanish—just like it had in James'. Replaced by one I never wanted to see in my mate's... fear.

Walking alongside Mylo should've been calming. The rhythmic gait of the horses, the open air, the quiet sounds of nature all around—it had the makings of something peaceful. But inside, I was anything but calm.

I was battling everything in me just being this close to him, and I wasn't even sure which side I wanted to win.

He was catching on quickly, which was impressive. For someone who'd never ridden before, he seemed to be getting comfortable fast. I kept an eye on him, watching the way his body started to move with the horse instead of against it, how the tension in his shoulders eased. And every time he smiled or laughed at something small, that knot in my chest tightened a little more.

He was just so perfect... and seeing that joy on his face made me realize I never wanted to see anything else there.

It's because he's your mate, my bear reminded me, a content rumble stirring in my chest. I tried to shove the thought aside, focusing on keeping Snowdrop at a steady pace.

We made light conversation, mostly about how beautiful it was out here—because, hell, there wasn't much else to say. I wanted to ask him more, ask him a thousand things, but every time I opened my mouth, I clamped it shut again. I couldn't risk getting closer to him than I already was.

“How do you get to work out here every day? It's... honestly amazing,” Mylo said,

his voice bright as he took in the scenery around us.

I forced a small smile, keeping my eyes forward. “Yeah, it’s a perk of the job.”

Both my bear and I preened at the fact that our mate loved this land—a land that was just as much a part of me as my bear. It felt amazing.

That was safe enough to say, wasn’t it? Nothing too revealing. I didn’t let my eyes linger on him too long because every time I did, I saw something more. Something that scared the hell out of me.

I could feel my bear stirring inside, wanting to be closer, urging me to say something real, something that would let him know who he really was to me. But I couldn’t do it. I had to keep the distance. Mylo had no idea what it would mean if he knew the truth, and I wasn’t about to let him find out.

You mean you don’t want to find out what he’ll do if he knows the truth. I really should just get “COWARD” tattooed on my forehead in all caps.

Suddenly, he turned toward me, his smile wider than it had been all day. “I think I’m getting the hang of this.”

That smile—it was like a punch to the gut. My stomach twisted, but I forced myself to stay composed. “You’re doing great.”

“How about we go for a nice trot?” I asked, keeping my tone casual. Maybe it was reckless or selfish, but I wasn’t ready for this to be over yet.

Mylo glanced at me, holding my gaze for a second, searching for something—but I wasn’t sure what. Finally, he nodded. “Yeah, sure. Sounds good.”

I released the breath I didn't even realize I'd been holding at his agreement and led Mylo toward the stable, where the horses were grazing lazily in the corral, the familiar scent of hay and pine filling the air. "Do you want to stay on Snowdrop while I get my horse ready?" I asked, keeping my tone light.

Mylo nodded, holding my gaze for a second, like I was a puzzle he was trying to piece together. What, I wasn't sure. I gave him a brief smile and turned away to get my own horse ready, but I couldn't help glancing back at him every few moments. He was still there, sitting tall on Snowdrop, looking like he was starting to get comfortable in the saddle.

I grabbed the reins for Titan, my trusted stallion, who stood tall and muscular, a perfect match for my size. His sleek black coat gleamed in the afternoon light, muscles rippling under his skin as I ran a hand down his flank. Titan let out a soft huff, and I smiled, giving him a firm but affectionate pat. "You ready, boy?" I murmured under my breath. "We've got company today."

Titan had been with me for years—strong, steady, and loyal. I trusted him with everything. He was more than just a horse; he was a partner. I leaned in closer, lowering my voice so only he could hear. "You see him over there?" I asked softly, glancing toward Mylo. "That's my mate."

Titan's ears flicked back, as if he were listening, and I chuckled under my breath. "Yeah, I know. It's a mess. But we'll figure it out, right?"

For a second, I regretted telling the stable hands to give us space today. It wasn't practical; I knew that. But selfishly, I wanted this time alone with Mylo, even if it made things harder for me. Titan snorted as if in agreement, and I gave him another pat, feeling a little more grounded. "Let's do this," I said quietly, guiding him over to where Mylo was waiting.

As I saddled up, I kept my eyes on him, watching how easily he was handling Snowdrop now. He'd picked things up faster than I expected. Despite the nerves buzzing under my skin, a small swell of pride bubbled up. He was catching on quickly, and I couldn't help but admire that.

Once I was settled, I led Titan toward him, the powerful horse moving beneath me like an extension of myself. "Ready?"

He nodded, and we rode out at a slow pace, the rhythmic sound of hooves against the earth filling the air between us. The land stretched out in front of us, the rolling hills framed by the Blue Ridge Mountains, their peaks looming in the distance.

"See that over there?" I pointed toward a dense forested area. "That's one of the trails we use for the more experienced riders. It's beautiful but tricky—lots of steep climbs and sharp turns."

Mylo nodded, his eyes wide with interest. "It's gorgeous. I can't believe this is where you get to work."

I shrugged, keeping my voice even. "Perks of the job." I pointed toward a meadow in the distance, where wildflowers dotted the landscape. "That's a great spot in the spring. It's covered in blooms—looks like something right out of a postcard."

He smiled, and I had to look away. It was too much. Too bright. Too... everything. I forced myself to focus back on the task at hand.

"How about we try going a little faster?" I suggested after a while. My bear was restless; the instinct to keep him safe was warring with the need to let him enjoy himself. "You're doing great so far."

Mylo smiled and nodded, and I nudged Snowdrop into a trot, making sure to keep

pace with him. I followed suit, watching as he started to relax into it, a smile creeping across his face as he grew more confident.

“See?” I said, my voice lighter than it had been all day. “You’re getting the hang of it.”

“Yeah, I think I am,” Mylo laughed, his voice filled with something close to joy. I hadn’t heard him laugh like that before, and a part of me softened. Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

But then, in a split second, everything shifted.

Without warning, Mylo gave his horse a little too much rein and took off in a direction I hadn’t expected—toward the Piedmont Mountains.

My stomach dropped. My heart leapt into my throat as I watched him ride toward the wolves’ territory. Shit. He has no idea what he’s doing. He has no idea where he’s going.

“Mylo!” I shouted, panic clawing at my chest as I kicked Titan into gear and chased after him.

He was laughing— laughing —like this was all a game, like he wasn’t heading straight for danger. My pulse pounded in my ears as the landscape shifted beneath us, and I pushed Titan harder, trying to close the distance.

He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what’s out there. My bear growled inside me, a mix of terror and fury as I watched Mylo riding ahead, carefree. My mind raced with every terrible possibility. The wolves won’t hesitate if they find him. And I wasn’t about to let that happen. What if he goes over a cliff or something?

Fuck. I shouldn't have brought him out here.

When I finally caught up to him, adrenaline surging through me, I reached out and grabbed his reins, yanking them hard enough to bring his horse to an abrupt stop.

Mylo's laughter faded instantly, confusion replacing it as he looked up at me. His face dropped when he saw my expression.

"What the hell are you doing?" I barked, louder than I intended, my voice rough and raw. "You're a novice! You can't just take off like that! What if you lost control of the horse? You don't know the terrain, Mylo!"

His eyes widened in shock, the color draining from his face. I could feel the panic in my voice, the fear boiling under the surface. I wasn't just angry—I was terrified.

"I-I'm sorry," Mylo stammered, his earlier confidence crumbling under the weight of my outburst. "I didn't think it was that big of a deal. It was fun, I thought I?—"

Why did I feel like I'd just kicked a puppy?

Doesn't matter if he's upset as long as he's safe.

"This is dangerous!" I snapped, cutting him off. "Do you even know where you were heading?"

He blinked, still looking shell-shocked. "No, I... I was just riding. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal," I said through gritted teeth, "is that you were heading into territory that isn't ours. And it's dangerous. Don't ever go in this direction again. Got it?"

I could see the stubborn look starting to settle on his face, that flicker of defiance I'd seen once or twice before. He wasn't just going to let this go. But I couldn't tell him everything—not without opening up a whole new set of complications I wasn't ready for. Not yet.

“Why is it dangerous?” he asked, his voice firmer than before, the confusion giving way to curiosity. “What's out there?”

“That's not for you to worry about,” I said, trying to steady my voice, trying to keep the panic from bleeding into every word. “Just... trust me on this. Stay out of this area.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, clearly not satisfied with my vague explanation. I could see the questions brewing behind his gaze, and I knew I was in for a fight.

“Okay,” he said after a long pause, but fuck it if I didn't know this was far from over. “But I don't get it. You're making it sound like?”

“It's an order, Mylo,” I said, my voice dropping lower, more forceful than before. I even let a little alpha push come through—not enough to force his will, but enough for him to understand that this was serious. “Don't go in this direction again. Ever.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, and he gave me a small, reluctant nod. But that look on his face? I knew it all too well. He wasn't done with this. He had questions, and they weren't going to go away just because I said so.

But right now, the only thing that mattered was that he was safe. He had no idea what kind of danger he'd just avoided. And I wasn't about to let him find out.

No one touches him. Not the wolves, not anyone.

But as I looked at Mylo—the stubborn set of his jaw—I realized maybe I’d opened a can of worms that hadn’t existed before.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MYLO

Dinner with Noah and Hope had become a regular thing, and honestly, it was one of the best parts of my day. It was warm, it was easy, and after the chaos of the kitchen, it felt good to sit down with people who treated me like family. But tonight, I had something on my mind that I couldn't shake.

It was what I'd always imagined family dinners would be like.

I pushed a piece of bread around my plate, glancing up at Noah and Hope as they chatted about something I wasn't paying attention to. My brain was stuck on that damn horseback ride with Holden.

I couldn't figure him out. One second, I thought we were having a nice moment—he was actually talking, showing me parts of the land, even smiling a little. I figured—finally—we were turning a corner. But then, out of nowhere, he got all growly and bossy, barking orders like I'd done something wrong.

Who the hell does he think he is?

I didn't even realize I'd said that last part out loud until Noah chuckled, raising an eyebrow. "Something on your mind, Mylo?"

I groaned, leaning back in my chair. "It's your brother-in-law," I muttered, and both Noah and Hope immediately perked up, grinning like they knew exactly what I was

about to say.

“Oh, this should be good,” Hope said, a playful gleam in her eye as she leaned forward. “What did Holden do this time?”

I let out a sigh, running a hand through my hair. “We went horseback riding today, right? And for a while, it was actually nice. He wasn’t giving me that weird silent treatment. He was showing me around, telling me about the land, and for a second, I thought we were good.”

“And then?” Noah prompted, amusement already written all over his face.

“And then,” I huffed, “maybe I got a little ahead of myself, started riding ahead, and he lost it. I mean lost it . Started yelling about how dangerous it was, how I didn’t know the terrain, and that I had to listen to him because he knows better. Like, excuse me, what? ”

Hope laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. “That sounds about right.”

I stared at her. “Are you serious? He acted like I’d just run off a cliff or something.”

“Well,” Noah said, exchanging a glance with Hope, “knowing Holden, he probably thought you would.”

I threw my hands up in exasperation. “Yeah, but why? I’m not a kid! And it wasn’t that dangerous, was it? I mean, what’s the big deal about riding a horse? He made it sound like I was about to get eaten by wolves or something.”

Noah choked on his water, and Hope had to smack his back a couple of times as he coughed. “Okay, maybe that’s not far from the truth,” he said, still catching his breath. “But seriously, Holden’s... complicated.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, that’s an understatement. Complicated doesn’t even begin to cover it. He’s bossy, controlling, and acts like I’m gonna break if I do anything outside of his perfect little plan. What’s his deal? Why is he always like this? One minute, he’s nice-ish, and the next, he’s ordering me around like he owns me.”

Noah and Hope shared another look before Noah finally spoke. “That’s just how Holden is. He’s... protective. Like, to a fault. It’s his way of showing he cares.”

I snorted. “Yeah, well, someone needs to give him the memo that he needs a new way. I felt like a kid getting scolded for running with scissors. Seriously, what gives?”

Hope smiled softly, leaning forward. “Mylo, you’ve gotta understand, Holden’s not used to... letting people in. Especially people he cares about. It’s probably freaking him out more than it’s freaking you out.”

I blinked at her, confused. “Wait, what? He doesn’t even talk to me unless he has to. How is that him caring?”

Noah shook his head, laughing under his breath. “You have no idea, do you? Trust me, if he didn’t care, you’d know it. Holden’s like that with people he’s trying to protect. It’s just... his way.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but then I stopped. That didn’t make any sense. He barely looked at me most days. And when he did, it was like he was always trying to figure out a new way to avoid me.

“Protect me from what?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “Because it sure doesn’t feel like protection. It feels like he’s just keeping me in the dark about something.”

Hope’s smile softened, and she reached across the table, squeezing my hand gently.

“He’s trying, Mylo. Trust me. Holden’s got his reasons for acting the way he does. You just have to be patient with him.”

I groaned, dropping my head into my hands. “I’m so tired of being patient. One minute, he’s decent, and the next, he’s Mr. Commanding Alpha, barking orders like I’m supposed to salute and say ‘yes, sir.’ It’s driving me nuts!”

And they were so wrong—he definitely didn’t care about me. But I didn’t feel the need to argue that point.

Noah and Hope burst into laughter, and despite my frustration, I couldn’t help but smile. “Sorry,” I muttered. “I shouldn’t be talking about your family like that.”

Noah waved me off, still chuckling. “You’re family too, Mylo. Don’t forget that.”

I paused, the words sinking in deeper than he could ever know. Family. I didn’t think I’d ever felt that way... not even with Chuck. So hearing Noah say it like it was a fact... it meant more than I could put into words.

“Thanks,” I said quietly, glancing between the two of them. “I just... I don’t get it. I thought we were good today. And then he flips out on me like I’ve done something wrong. It’s like he hates me or something.”

Hope exchanged a look with Noah—it was that thing couples did, communicating without words—that just served to highlight how alone I was. Then she turned back to me. “Maybe he’s scared.”

I frowned. “Scared? Of what?”

“Of you,” she said simply, shrugging. “Of getting too close.”

I stared at her, my mind whirling. Holden, scared of me? That literally made no sense. The guy was six-four, built like a mountain, and could probably crush me with a look. But the way Hope said it, like she knew something I didn't, made me pause.

Could he actually care enough to be worried?

"That doesn't explain why he's so bossy," I muttered, earning another laugh from Noah.

"Yeah, well, bossiness is kind of in his DNA," Noah said with a grin. "Just hang in there. Holden might be rough around the edges, but... he's worth it."

I wasn't so sure about that—or if it even mattered to me. Or if it would make any difference in my life.

Yes, it does! I ignored that voice.

I nodded anyway, trying to push down the lingering frustration. Holden might be complicated, but I wasn't ready to give up. Not yet, anyway.

And I wasn't exactly willing to examine too closely why that was.

"Anyway, it doesn't even matter," I said, pushing my food around my plate, halfheartedly stabbing at a piece of roasted chicken. "He's my boss. As long as he doesn't fire me, we can just avoid each other."

I looked up, expecting Noah or Hope to chime in with some reassurance, but instead, they exchanged one of those looks—the kind couples use to say everything without saying a damn word. It was a brief moment, but it still stung. That pang of loneliness hit me square in the chest, reminding me how far I was from having what they had. They didn't say anything, though, which only made the knot in my stomach tighten.

Don't get too comfortable, a familiar voice in my head reminded me.

I let out a breath, leaning back in my chair. Time to change the subject. "Anyway, what was that about? The land Holden mentioned—the one I wasn't supposed to ride into?" I glanced between the two of them. "He freaked out like I'd crossed some forbidden line."

Noah cleared his throat, shooting Hope a quick glance before turning his attention to me. "Well... you kinda did."

I raised an eyebrow. "What? I thought it was all just open land. What's the big deal?"

Noah shifted in his seat, clearly trying to find the right words. "Okay, think of it like this—Holden's family and mine, we're like... the Capulets and the Montagues. The land you were heading toward? That's my family's territory. And let's just say they don't take kindly to trespassers."

My fork clattered against the plate as I dropped it, staring at Noah. "You're kidding, right? You're telling me I almost started some kind of Romeo and Juliet feud?"

Hope chuckled softly. "Trust me, we already did that, you know—without the poison and dying part."

Noah snorted, then shook his head, his expression serious. "I'm not saying anyone would've thrown down right then and there, but yeah, it's dangerous. My family isn't exactly welcoming to strangers, even if they're riding in on horseback."

"Great," I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck. "So why didn't Holden just tell me that instead of losing his mind on me?"

Noah and Hope exchanged another one of those looks. This one lingered a little

longer, and for the first time since I'd sat down with them, I started feeling like I was missing something big.

"There's... more to it than that," Hope said quietly, her eyes soft but cautious.

I narrowed my eyes. "You mean like some big secret everyone's keeping from me?" I let out a short laugh, trying to lighten the tension in my chest. "'Cause it feels like I'm the only one around here who doesn't know what the hell's going on. Sarah's the same way—always talking in half sentences, stopping herself mid-thought. I feel like there's something just out of reach that no one's saying."

Noah sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It's not like that, Mylo. There's just... things you'll understand eventually. Just... give it time."

I blinked, unsure what to say to that. "Right. Because time clears everything up," I muttered, half under my breath.

Hope smiled sympathetically, leaning over to pat my arm. "Trust us, Mylo. There are reasons for everything, even if they're not obvious right now."

"Yeah, well, it would be nice if someone actually explained those reasons," I muttered, glancing between the two of them. But it was clear they weren't about to spill anything, and I didn't have the energy to press.

After dinner, I found myself playing with Noah and Hope's daughter, Lily. She was all curly hair and big brown eyes, giggling as I lifted her into the air like an airplane. Her laughter was contagious, and for a moment, I forgot about all the stress of the day. She was just so... light. Free. The kind of happy that made you believe in something better, even when things felt uncertain.

"You're pretty good with kids," Noah commented, leaning against the doorframe

with a smile.

I smiled back, setting Lily down gently. “Yeah, well... I’ve always wanted a big family.”

Noah’s smile softened. “You’ll have that someday. I’ve got a feeling.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Doubt it. Not really in the cards for me.” But even as the words left my mouth, images of Holden flashed unbidden in my mind—broad shoulders, those intense brown eyes, the way his voice sent a shiver down my spine every time he said my name.

It was ridiculous. I barely knew the guy.

And yet...

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Noah said, his tone light but thoughtful, like he knew something I didn’t. “Things have a way of working out when you least expect it.”

I let out a breath, running a hand through my hair. “I don’t know, man. I mean, Holden’s handsome and strong and... sexy as hell,” I admitted, feeling a little heat rise in my cheeks as I said it out loud. “But he’s also my boss. And honestly? I don’t think he’s interested in me at all. If anything, it seems like he can barely tolerate me.”

Noah chuckled softly. “Holden’s not the easiest guy to read, that’s for sure. But trust me, there’s more going on than you realize.”

“Yeah?” I shot him a skeptical look. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

He just grinned, shaking his head. “You’ll figure it out.”

I glanced back at Lily, who was now playing with her toys on the floor, her innocent laughter filling the room. My chest tightened a little, an ache I couldn't quite explain. I wanted this. A family. A place where I belonged.

But right now, that felt so far away.

"I hope you're right," I said quietly, half to myself.

Noah clapped a hand on my shoulder, firm and reassuring. "I am."

I wasn't sure if I believed him, but something in his tone made me want to. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance I'd find what I was looking for here. Even if I didn't see how yet.

But that didn't stop the thoughts of Holden from creeping back in, making my heart race in ways I wasn't ready to admit.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOLDEN

I leaned back against the wall of the family room, my arms crossed as I braced myself for what was coming. I could hear Hope's voice carrying from the kitchen, followed by Sarah's. And to make things worse, they'd dragged Mom into it. I rubbed a hand over my face, letting out a deep breath, but it wasn't going to help.

"Are you seriously going to keep avoiding him?" Hope's voice cut through the space like a knife, and when she appeared in the doorway, hands on her hips, I knew I was in trouble.

I sighed, standing up straighter, but didn't even get a chance to open my mouth before Sarah appeared right behind her, arms crossed like a mirror image of Hope.

"Holden, this is ridiculous," Sarah added, her tone just as sharp. "You're going to push him away if you keep acting like a damn robot around him."

"It's not like that," I muttered, knowing full well they weren't going to listen. "I'm protecting him."

Hope threw her hands in the air, exasperated. "Protecting him? From what, exactly? You keep saying that, but none of us know what the hell you mean."

Before I could answer, my mom, Addison, stepped into the room. Her expression was softer, but the disappointment in her eyes hit harder than anything Hope or Sarah

could throw at me. “Holden, sweetheart, we understand you’re cautious, but you’re going too far. The Adalbern wouldn’t have brought Mylo to you if this wasn’t meant to be. You know that.”

I looked away, trying to avoid the weight of her words. Yeah, I knew what Adalbern was supposed to do—bring mates together. But I wasn’t most people, and my past still haunted me every damn day.

“You don’t get it,” I said, my voice low. “I’m not like you guys. I can’t just?—”

“Can’t just what?” Hope interrupted, stepping closer. “Can’t just trust your mate? Can’t just tell him what’s really going on? You’re not doing either of you any favors by keeping him in the dark.”

I clenched my jaw, the frustration building. “It’s not that simple.”

“It kind of is,” Sarah said, crossing her arms tighter. “You’re the one making it complicated.”

They weren’t going to let up. And deep down, I knew they were right. But I wasn’t ready. Not yet.

“I’ll apologize,” I said, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. “I’ll talk to him. Happy?”

Hope and Sarah exchanged a look, but before they could say anything, Mom stepped forward and placed a hand on my arm, her voice softer now. “Holden, honey, we just want you to be happy. We want you to let yourself feel something. For once.”

I didn’t say anything. Just nodded.

The truth was, I felt everything... and they didn't get how hard it was to stay away. But it couldn't be about me.

I found Mylo in the kitchen later that afternoon, stirring something on the stove. He was humming softly to himself, completely oblivious to my presence until I cleared my throat.

He jumped, turning to look at me, his eyes widening for a second before he composed himself. "Oh, hey," he said, his voice casual, but I could see the tension in his shoulders. "What's up?"

I took a deep breath and stepped closer but kept my distance. "I wanted to apologize," I said, my tone gruff. "For the other day. I overreacted."

He blinked, clearly not expecting that. "Oh, um... okay. Thanks, I guess." He paused, stirring the pot in front of him before glancing at me again. "But why didn't you just tell me I was riding into Montague territory? Noah explained it after, but you kinda... freaked out instead."

I blinked, confused for a moment. "Montague territory?"

Mylo grinned, and something in his face softened, like he was holding back a laugh. "Yeah, Noah said your family and his are like the Capulets and Montagues or something. I figured you were just trying to avoid a Shakespearean disaster."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it, the tension loosening in my chest just a little. Leave it to Noah to make a feud between bear shifters and wolves sound like a literary battle. "Yeah, something like that," I muttered, shaking my head.

His smile widened, and I could see that curious glint in his eyes again. I could see him searching, trying to figure me out. And for a split second, I thought about telling

him everything. About the feud. About the risks. About why I was so terrified of getting too close to him.

But I couldn't. Not yet. Until I knew it was safe.

"Just... don't go near that land again," I said, keeping my voice firm but less harsh than before. "It's dangerous."

His brow furrowed, and I could see the wheels turning in his head. "Dangerous how? I mean, Noah's family can't be that bad, right? What's the worst that could happen?"

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to stay calm. "Just trust me on this, okay?"

He held my gaze for a long moment, searching for answers I wasn't giving. Finally, he nodded, though I could see the frustration in his eyes. "Fine. But you're not off the hook."

I raised an eyebrow. "Off the hook?"

He smirked, crossing his arms. "Yeah. I want to know what's really going on. And why you keep looking at me like... like I'm some kind of puzzle you're afraid to solve."

I stiffened, the weight of his words hitting harder than I expected. "I'm not?—"

"You are," he said, cutting me off. "But it's fine. We can play this game for a little while longer. Just don't expect me to ignore it forever."

I swallowed hard, not sure how to respond. He wasn't just stubborn. He was relentless. And that scared the hell out of me.

“See you around, boss,” he added with a wink, turning back to his pot.

I stood there for a moment, frozen, watching him stir the contents of the pot like we hadn’t just had a conversation that shook me to my core.

Yeah, I was in trouble.

The apology didn’t go exactly how I’d planned. But at least he wasn’t pissed. Now, I just had to figure out how to keep my distance without pushing him away entirely. Because no matter how much I tried to convince myself I was doing this for him, the truth was, I wasn’t sure how much longer I could keep this up.

If my family was right, if Adalbern truly did bring us together for a reason... then why did I feel like running in the other direction every time I looked at Mylo?

And worse... why did I feel like I couldn’t?

I stood there for a moment, watching him stir the pot like nothing had just happened. I knew I should walk away, get back to business, put this whole conversation behind me like everything else, but something kept me rooted in place. My chest felt tight, my bear restless, like I’d missed something important.

I cleared my throat, trying to ignore the way his presence made it hard to think straight. “Look,” I started, and his eyes flicked back up to mine, curious. “I wasn’t thinking clearly the other day. I—” I paused, feeling the words get stuck in my throat. Apologizing wasn’t exactly my strong suit. “I was worried about you. About what could’ve happened if you’d gone too far into that territory.”

His brow furrowed slightly, and for a second, I thought he might laugh at me. Instead, he surprised me. “You were that worried about me?”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Yeah,” I admitted, not sure how much to reveal. “I didn’t handle it well. I panicked. But... I’m glad you’re okay.”

His face softened, and I could see something shift in his expression—something warmer, like he appreciated that I’d admitted it. “Thanks, Holden,” he said quietly. “I didn’t realize you were that freaked out. But I guess... it’s kinda nice knowing someone was looking out for me.”

My chest tightened at that, and I forced myself to look away before I let the moment linger too long. The last thing I needed was for him to start thinking I was someone who had a soft spot for him, because that would only make this harder.

“Anyway,” I said, clearing my throat again. “I wanted to make it up to you.”

His eyebrows shot up, his lips twitching with amusement. “Make it up to me?”

I nodded, already regretting what I was about to say. “There’s a bourbon tasting tonight at the resort. High-end stuff. It’s... not exactly my thing, but I thought you might like it. If you’re free.”

His eyes lit up, and a smile tugged at his lips. “Wait, you’re inviting me?”

I shifted, feeling the weight of his gaze on me. “Yeah. I mean, it’s just a tasting. It’s not like... a big deal or anything.”

“Not a date, then?” he asked, and there was a teasing glint in his eye that made my stomach do something I wasn’t prepared for.

I huffed out a breath, trying to keep my cool. “No, it’s not a date. It’s an apology. For my... behavior.”

He grinned, his eyes still searching my face like he was trying to figure out if I was telling the truth. “Alright, I’m in,” he said, and I couldn’t help but notice the way his excitement made my pulse quicken. “I mean, I’ve never been to a fancy bourbon tasting before, so... why not?”

“Great,” I replied, maybe a little too quickly. My bear practically purred at the thought of spending more time with him. I had to remind myself this wasn’t some kind of... romantic gesture. It was just an apology. That’s all. “It starts at seven. I’ll meet you in the main lounge.”

“Seven,” he repeated with a nod. “I’ll be there.”

I nodded once, too stiffly, before turning to leave. “Good,” I said, probably sounding more gruff than I intended. “And Mylo?”

He raised an eyebrow, that curious glint in his eyes still there. “Yeah?”

I hesitated, my chest tightening again. “Just... don’t think too much about what happened the other day. It was my fault, not yours. I don’t want you to feel bad.”

For a moment, Mylo just stared at me, and I could see the surprise in his expression. Then, slowly, he smiled. “I won’t,” he said softly. “But I appreciate you saying that, Holden.”

I nodded, unable to find anything else to say. So, without another word, I turned and walked out of the kitchen, my stomach still flipping in ways I wasn’t used to. My bear growled in satisfaction, happy to have spent time near our mate, and I had to push down the instinct to call it what it was.

It wasn’t a date. It wasn’t anything more than an apology. I wasn’t going to let it be anything more than that.

But the way my heart fluttered at the thought of seeing him tonight told me my bear had other plans.

Damn it.

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CHAPTER NINE

MYLO

To go or not to go?

Who are you kidding? an annoying voice mocked.

Of course, I was going. There wasn't a damn thing that could've kept me away—not after Holden invited me. Not after that look he gave me.

The look you think he gave you!

There was something about that alpha, something magnetic, that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't fight it. Something I couldn't resist, no matter how many times my brain screamed at me to stay away—because everything always ended badly in my case.

If it ends badly, you have no one to blame but yourself.

I snorted. Fair point. Holden was the definition of unavailable. If there was ever an alpha with a neon “keep your distance” sign flashing above his head, it was him. Although, I could swear that, every now and then, that sign flickered off—and for a brief moment, he seemed... different. Warmer. Like there was something there. Like he wanted me to try.

Or it could be your imagination.

Maybe. But that didn't change the fact that I was going.

Because you're a glutton for punishment, apparently.

I blew out a breath, standing in front of the mirror, checking my reflection for what felt like the hundredth time. It's not a date. I'd reminded myself of that repeatedly as I fixed my hair and adjusted my shirt. But still, the thought of being around him made my pulse race in a way no amount of reasoning could fix.

So yeah, I was going to a bourbon tasting. I didn't even know bourbon tastings were a thing before I got the invite. Then again, if wine tastings were a thing, why not bourbon? Still, it was obviously going to be a fancy event. I knew the resort hosted plenty of rich guests, so I bet the bourbon would be high-end stuff—definitely not my scene. But if Holden invited me? There was no way I was sitting this out.

Even though I'd never touched bourbon outside of a recipe for marinade, sauce, or glaze.

Still, I wasn't going to pass up the chance to maybe—just maybe—figure him out.

Yeah, that's what you want to do. Just figure him out.

When I arrived at the lounge, the place was already full of people—the kind of crowd who looked like they could tell the age of the bourbon by sniffing it. I immediately felt like the poor relative crashing a wedding.

Also... does bourbon even have an age? Or was that just a wine thing?

You so shouldn't be here.

So why didn't I turn around?

Instead, I scanned the room, looking for him. I didn't spot Holden right away but instead saw Sarah's wife—Indigo—standing off to the side, talking to another guest.

I made my way over since she was the only person I technically knew, even though we hadn't actually met. I tried to blend in, but thankfully, Indigo noticed me before I got to her and made an ass of myself. Her eyes lit up as she recognized me.

"Mylo, right?" she greeted me with a warm smile, her dark hair falling loosely over her shoulders.

"That's me," I nodded, feeling a little—okay, a lot—out of place but very grateful for the friendly face.

"Glad you made it," she said, stepping closer. "Sarah mentioned you might be coming and ordered me to watch out for you. You're in for a treat. This tasting has some of the best bourbons you'll find."

I managed a small smile, even though my stomach was now host to a bunch of butterflies. "Don't think I've ever had bourbon before, but I'll give it a shot."

Indigo chuckled, linking our arms like we'd been friends forever. "That's the spirit. Trust me, you'll do fine. Just pace yourself—it's all about tasting, not drinking."

"There's a difference?" I asked, and she burst out laughing.

"You're funny. I see why my wife likes you."

I wasn't trying to be funny, but if that was where we landed, well... okay.

I looked around the room and spotted a couple of other men who looked vaguely familiar, and then it clicked—Bishop and Knox, Holden and Indigo's brothers. I'd

seen them around the resort but hadn't actually met them yet. You could see the family resemblance, but while all the alphas could definitely be described as handsome, Holden had this intense, brooding thing going on. His brothers, on the other hand, seemed... softer, maybe. More approachable.

Bishop gave off a nerdy, handsome vibe—like the kind of guy who was probably the smartest person in the room but way too polite to ever say it out loud. He must've noticed me looking because he gave me a small wave, his kind eyes bright behind his glasses.

I felt my cheeks flush but managed a wave back.

Knox, on the other hand, looked more reserved—maybe even a little anxious—but there was a kindness in his expression that made me think we could be friends. He didn't wave, just gave a quiet nod of acknowledgment, but it felt welcoming all the same.

Indigo must have noticed. "Have you met Bishop and Knox?"

I shook my head. "No, but I've seen them around."

"Come on, I'll introduce you."

We walked over, Indigo greeting a couple of people along the way before we reached Bishop and Knox.

"Knox, Bish, this is Mylo," Indigo said.

I could swear there was an extra inflection on my name. Or maybe I was just being paranoid. Just say hi.

“Hi, nice to meet you guys,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady as I joined their small circle.

“Likewise,” Bishop replied, his smile genuine. “You’re working in the kitchen, right? Sarah’s mentioned you a couple of times. Said you’re catching on quickly.”

I shrugged, even as I felt a blush creep up my neck. “I’m trying my best. Sarah’s a really good teacher.”

“She is,” Indigo chimed in. “But don’t let her fool you. She can be tough when she wants to be.”

I chuckled at that, nodding in agreement. “Trust me, I’ve noticed.”

As the evening went on, I found myself actually relaxing a little. Even though Holden still hadn’t shown up, being around his family made me feel more at ease. Indigo hadn’t left my side since I arrived, thankfully, because I had no idea what kind of conversation to have with anyone else in the room.

I didn’t have to find out, though, because Holden’s siblings were so welcoming, and they were way easier to talk to than the moody alpha who had still managed not to show up.

Was I getting stood up at a non-date thing? Ugh, of course.

Still, it was hard not to feel a little jealous of Holden. It was easy to see that he had a big, loving family—the kind of family I’d always wished for but never had.

And don’t get any ideas... these ones aren’t yours and never will be.

The snide but timely reminder had me wanting to duck out. But just as I was about to,

the tasting finally started.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but I quickly realized this was way more serious than I'd thought. It started with small pours of bourbon being handed out, and I watched as people swirled, sniffed, and sipped before casually spitting the bourbon into small buckets placed around the room.

Spit it out? Okay, I definitely hadn't seen that coming.

And seriously—who the hell spits out perfectly good bourbon?

And it was actually not bad. So yeah, nope. Not happening. No spitting here.

I'd been raised on the waste not, want not motto.

And from the information given out on most of these samples, I could tell they were way out of my price range. So, I drank every single drop of my samples. It was probably a bad idea because it didn't take long to feel the warmth of the bourbon settle into my stomach.

It was nice. Actually, more than nice—it was smooth, rich, like liquid fire that made everything feel a little softer around the edges. By the fourth or fifth sample, I stopped counting. The room took on this warm, fuzzy glow, and I felt the weight of the past few weeks lifting off my shoulders.

I knew it hadn't really—not deep down. But feeling good for a few hours sounded like a nice idea.

Maybe it was the bourbon, or maybe it was the fact that I'd spent so much time around Holden's family tonight, and they'd been so nice. And somehow, that kindness made me feel even lonelier. The sadness hit me out of nowhere. The

loneliness. Everyone here was so damn close, so damn comfortable with each other, and I was just... me. The outsider. The guy who didn't really belong anywhere.

I downed another glass, and by the time the tasting was over, I was smashed.

Like... absolutely smashed.

And it was great!

I stumbled as I stood up, and before I knew it, Holden was right there, his large hand steadying me.

"Whoa," he murmured, his brow furrowed as he looked me over. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I slurred, waving him off with a weak attempt at a smile. "More than fine. You're the one who's not fine. Or maybe you are. I don't know. I can't figure you out."

Holden raised an eyebrow, his expression unreadable. "You've had too much to drink."

"No shit," I muttered, wobbling slightly on my feet. "But you know what? I don't care."

He sighed, wrapping an arm around my waist as he started guiding me toward the exit. "Come on. Let's get you back to your room."

"You don't have to be nice to me, you know," I rambled as we walked. Or maybe he was doing most of the walking while I stumbled along. "I know you don't... want me. You invited me tonight and didn't even show up. So rude."

Holden's jaw clenched, but he didn't say anything, just kept steering me through the hallway.

"I'm serious," I continued, my drunken brain deciding that now was the perfect time to let it all out. "I know I'm not... I'm not like you. I'm not strong, or... or important. You're this big, important alpha. I'm just... me. Charles didn't want me either, you know? And he wasn't even close to being as... alpha-y as you."

At the mention of Charles, I could swear I heard Holden growl low in his throat, but in my drunken state, I barely registered it. If anything, it sounded like a purr.

"But it's fine," I babbled, my words slurring together. "I don't expect you to mate me or anything. I'm not stupid. I get it. But... I mean... if you wanted to... I wouldn't say no. To like... you know... ravaging me during my next heat or something."

Holden stopped dead in his tracks, his grip on me tightening as he let out a frustrated sigh. "Mylo," he said, his voice deeper than I'd ever heard it, "you're drunk."

"No shit, Sherlock," I muttered, barely able to keep my eyes open. "But I'm also serious. You could have me. If you wanted."

I didn't get a response to that. Instead, I found myself being lifted into strong arms.

"Ooo, strong alpha," I sighed, rubbing against his back.

His grip on me was firm but careful—or at least that's how it felt, because I was barely conscious by the time we reached my room. I vaguely registered the feeling of being lowered into bed. His hands were gentle as he tucked the covers around me, and I could've sworn I heard him mutter, "Goddess help me," under his breath.

I could swear I also got a kiss on my forehead before he left.

Then again, I could have imagined it.

Because no way in hell would a guy like Holden—this strong, silent, brooding, and so damn hot alpha—actually care about someone like me.

Right?

CHAPTER TEN

HOLDEN

I couldn't remember the last time I'd woken up in this good a mood.

One of those moods that made you feel like you were on top of the world. And I probably looked crazy to everyone with just how much I was smiling. I wasn't sure my facial muscles—at least the ones needed to smile—had gotten this much of a workout in a very long time.

It was new for me because I never woke up smiling. Even my bear, who had been cussing me out the last few weeks, seemed to be humming contentedly. There was a sense of lightness that hadn't been there in... too long for me to even remember. I could freely admit that it was a nice change.

I even found myself whistling on my way into the office, which definitely made a few of the guys I passed do a double-take. I couldn't say I blamed them, though—even I knew it was probably weird to see me so cheerful. But today, I didn't care. Today was a good—no, a great —day.

No particular reason.

Okay, there was one, and his name was Mylo.

Not that anything happened—I'd made sure of that. But last night, carrying him back to his room after the bourbon tasting, hearing the things he said even in his drunken—

especially in his drunken and slurred—honesty... it did something to me. It cracked something open, like the possibility that maybe, just maybe, this could work.

Maybe he could be mine.

Maybe when you tell him the truth, he won't run screaming.

"Holden."

Noah's voice stopped me, and I turned to find him with my little niece in a stroller.

"You're awfully chipper this morning," he said, his tone filled with curiosity.

I paused, a grin tugging at my lips. "It's a good day, Noah. Nothing wrong with that."

Noah's brows lifted, and he studied me for a second before a knowing smile appeared on his lips. "Alright, if you say so. Just don't scare anyone with all that cheerfulness. Might give someone a heart attack."

"I'd call you an asshole, but my beautiful niece is right here," I said.

He snorted. "I think you just did."

"But I didn't say it for her to hear," I pointed out.

"Baby steps," Noah replied, his eyes dancing, and I had a feeling half my family would be getting messages about this in the near future.

I bent over and kissed my niece, saying loud enough for Noah to hear, "Tell your daddy to mind his business and not go gossiping about your Uncle Holden."

Noah snorted again. “Fat chance. Have you met your family?”

I chuckled and waved him off, continuing my walk to the office.

Yeah, maybe it was weird. Maybe I was weird. Nothing had even happened with my mate, but hearing he wanted me... it felt damn good.

Maybe you should let him know you feel the same way.

Maybe I would.

Once I got to my desk, I powered through the paperwork I’d been putting off—numbers, inventory projections, new employee onboarding schedules. I even tackled the budget recalculations for the upcoming season, which I usually despised. Today, though, I had a rhythm going, and even the most annoying, most tedious tasks didn’t seem to faze me.

I didn’t notice my brother come in until he was already leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, giving me an amused look.

“You’re humming,” West said. The sound of his voice had me looking up to find him wearing a smile that said he was about to annoy me.

I blinked. Shit, he was right. I’d been humming. Who was I?

“Just in a good mood, I guess,” I said, shrugging it off, though I could feel the grin still tugging at the corners of my mouth.

West stepped fully into the office, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Okay, spill. What’s got you so happy? Did you win the lottery or something? Or better yet, your mate?”

“Nope,” I said, turning my attention back to my laptop, pretending to be busy. Of course, I knew he wouldn’t let it go.

“Uh-huh.”

I sighed, knowing it could never be that easy with West.

“You know I could just go ask everyone else until I get the answer, right?” he said, his voice laced with that teasing persistence only siblings could get away with. “Maybe I’ll start with Mylo.”

I groaned, leaning back in my chair and meeting his gaze. “Fine. If you must know, I had a... conversation with him last night.”

“Him who? Mylo? You mean you had a conversation with Mylo, your mate?”

“Why couldn’t I have been born an only child?” I muttered.

“Oh, please, you’d miss us,” West said. “Who else would help you get that stick out of your ass?”

“I guess you don’t want to hear what happened.” I shrugged and went back to looking at my laptop.

I could hear the smile in his voice. “So you were saying something about a conversation, huh? And here I thought you were avoiding the poor guy like the plague.”

I ignored him, scrolling through my laptop, pretending to be busy even though I wasn’t doing anything.

“You know I won’t leave until you tell me everything,” West said. “Or...” He drew out the word, and I had to look at him. “I could go ask Mylo what happened. I bet he’s a much better storyteller than you are.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “And I was,” I admitted, rubbing a hand over my jaw. “Avoiding him... and I still am... maybe. But he’s... different.”

“Duh,” West said, rolling his eyes. “Of course he’s different. He’s your mate. But different how?”

He finally walked further into the office, pulled up a chair, and sat across from me, clearly settling in for the details.

I hesitated, trying to find the right words. And maybe I did need to talk this out. “He’s... kind. Genuine. And he’s got this way about him that makes me want to protect him, you know? But also, he’s strong in his own way. And last night, he said some things... things that made me think maybe there’s a chance for us.”

West nodded slowly, his eyes softening. “Sounds like you’re into him. Like, really into him.”

“Duh, he’s my mate, ” I said, repeating his words back to him.

West snorted. “Fair enough.”

I huffed out a breath, a smile tugging at my lips. “Yeah, I like him. I don’t know everything, but from the little I do, I like him a lot.”

“So, what’s the plan then?” West asked, leaning forward, his expression turning serious. “Are you gonna tell him? About... you know, the shifter thing?”

I winced, my mood dimming slightly at the thought. “I don’t know. It’s complicated. He’s human, West. And telling him... it’s a lot. What if he freaks out? What if he looks at me the way James did? And it ends the way that did.”

West’s expression softened, and he reached out, squeezing my hand on the desk. “Holden, Mylo’s not James. And from what you’ve told me, it sounds like he’s into you too. I think he deserves to know. Adalbern wouldn’t send a mate that would?—”

“Run screaming,” I chimed in.

West’s face was serious. “You deserve to be happy,” he said simply.

I swallowed, the weight of his words settling in my chest. I knew he was right—intellectually, I knew that. But the fear still gnawed at me, like a living thing threatening to swallow me whole. It was always there, whispering that I was risking everything if I let Mylo in.

I would rather my mate be whole, happy, and alive... than the alternative.

What about with someone else?

My bear and I growled at the thought.

I was definitely not that good a person.

“Whatever that thought was should be all the motivation you need to tell him,” West said, amusement dripping from his voice.

“Maybe,” I said finally, my voice low. “But not yet. I want to win him over first, you know? Show him that we could work, that we could be something real. And maybe... maybe feel him out a bit, see how he’d react if he found out about shifters.”

West nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. “Alright, big brother. Just don’t take too long. You never know how much time you have.”

I nodded, his words hitting a little too close to home. “Yeah. Yeah. I hear you.”

He nodded once before standing up. “Alright, I’ll leave you to your paperwork. But seriously, Holden... don’t let fear hold you back. It won’t happen this time. You have to believe that.”

His words echoed in my head as I watched him leave the office. I knew I shouldn’t let fear lead. I sighed, but it was fucking easier said than done. It wasn’t even about him finding out about shifters or exposing our secret—it was about him running in fear, possibly hurting himself... because all he could see me as was a monster.

But for Mylo... maybe it was worth trying. Maybe he was worth everything.

I sighed. I just needed to figure out how to actually do it. There really ought to be a manual—How to Tell Your Human Mate You’re a Shifter Without Killing Him... or Making Him Run Screaming: The Comprehensive Guide.

I tried to focus back on work, but the numbers blurred in front of me for a second.

My bear rumbled softly, an agreement settling between us. We both wanted Mylo. And maybe, just maybe, we could find a way to make it work.

As the day went on, I found myself thinking more and more about him. About the way his eyes had lit up when I’d invited him to the bourbon tasting, the way he’d leaned into me when I’d helped him back to his room. He was everything I never knew I wanted—bright, kind, and so damn brave. And I couldn’t help but want to be the one who made him happy, who kept him safe.

Also, just thinking about what he'd said—about me ravaging him during his heat—I needed to count past ten before my cock went from attention to at ease.

By the time I finished up in the office for the day, the sun was already dipping low on the horizon, casting a golden glow over the resort. I made my way to the kitchen, hoping to catch Mylo before he left for the day. I needed to see him, to apologize for making myself scarce during the bourbon tasting. I'd been a coward, and he deserved better.

I headed over to his cabin, rehearsing my apology every step of the way. I knocked twice, but there was nothing—no movement, just quiet. Great. He wasn't home. I knew he wasn't working today; I'd made sure Noah told him he had the day off, but apparently, he wasn't here either.

Maybe it's a sign.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MYLO

I woke up with the kind of headache that felt like a jackhammer was trying to break free from my skull... or was it break my skull? My mouth felt like I'd been walking through the damn Sahara with no water in sight, and I was five seconds from puking my guts up like my life depended on it. I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut tighter, trying to will the headache away—like that would work.

Right. Bourbon tasting. Or, more accurately, bourbon drinking. I didn't even want to think about how much I'd had to drink last night. No wonder my brain felt like some cartoon mouse was trying to split it in half with an axe... or was it a cartoon cat?

Like it mattered. I tried to move but decided to just curl up and die where I was.

So this was a hangover. Never. Ever. Again.

A soft knock interrupted my self-pity party, followed by the creak of the door opening. I barely managed to crack one eye open, and Noah's face came into view, his expression a mix of amusement and sympathy.

"Rise and shine, lightweight," he said, his voice way too cheerful for my current state. And way too loud. Did he have to shout ? For fuck's sake.

He held out a glass of orange juice and two pills, which I prayed to all that was holy were some kind of painkillers, a small smirk tugging at his lips.

“Why are you so happy?” I grumbled, forcing myself to sit up. The room spun, and I grabbed my head with both hands like that might somehow steady it. “Ugh, kill me now.”

Noah chuckled, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “Sorry, kid. Welcome to Hangover 101. Lucky for you, I’ve been sent by—” he smirked “—Holden, to make sure you’re okay. He told me you got pretty smashed last night and to look after you. Also, you have the day off work, courtesy of said alpha.”

The mention of Holden’s name made me freeze, and my stomach did this awful twisty thing that had nothing to do with the hangover. I felt the color drain from my face as I dropped back against the pillows, covering my eyes with my hand.

“Oh, God. Holden. Kill me now. Please, just kill me now.”

“Care to share with the class?”

All I could do was groan.

Noah snorted, and I lifted my arm just enough to peek at him. His brow was raised in question, and I could tell he was thoroughly entertained by my misery.

“Whatever happened, it cannot be that bad.”

I threw my arm back over my face, wishing I could disappear. “Noah, I messed up. Shit, I messed up so badly. ”

“What did you do?” he asked, though by the amusement in his voice, I’d bet he already knew.

“I said things,” I mumbled from beneath my arm. “Bad, kill-me-now, horrible

things.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific.” Noah nudged me with his elbow, and I peeked out from beneath my arm, only to find him grinning at me.

“I told him that if he didn’t want to mate me, he could—” I took a deep breath, the humiliation making me want to puke more than any hangover ever could, “—he could at least help me through my next heat.”

Noah blinked, his eyes widening slightly. His lips twitched at first, and then he clearly couldn’t hold it in because he burst into laughter—full-on, head-thrown-back laughter that echoed through the room.

“It’s not funny!” I protested, my cheeks burning. “I practically begged him, Noah. Begged him to...” I trailed off. Yeah, those words were not coming out of my mouth again.

“You have to admit,” Noah said between laughs, wiping at his eyes, “it’s kind of funny. And hey, maybe he was flattered. I mean, who wouldn’t be?”

“Yeah, sure. Flattered. Or horrified,” I muttered, downing the aspirin with a sip of orange juice. “How am I ever supposed to look him in the eye again? He’s going to think I’m a desperate slut or something equally as bad.”

Noah raised a brow. “You’re not desperate, and Holden is smarter than that.”

I snorted. “Right!”

“You’re not,” Noah insisted. “Holden would be damn lucky to have you.”

“Have you met me?”

Noah growled, and I sighed. I knew he hated when I said shit about myself.

He could say whatever he wanted, but we both knew the truth: I was desperate. Desperate to be wanted. To be loved. But Holden was this handsome, wealthy, polished alpha who seemed to barely tolerate me on the best of days. And then, last night, he'd been so... gentle. So careful.

And I could swear he kissed my forehead before he left. Or maybe that was just me wishing he had.

It made my heart race in ways I wasn't ready to look too closely at... and had no business hoping for.

Noah seemed to pick up on my feelings because he patted my leg, his smile softening. "Listen, Mylo, it's not as bad as you think. Holden's not the kind of guy to freak out over something like that. If anything, he was probably worried about you. Besides, he should be flattered."

I groaned and fell back against the pillows. "That's even worse. I don't want his pity. And I bet he has a bunch of drunk omegas hitting on him... Seriously, look at the guy. He probably thinks I'm just one in a line of many. But it's worse because I work for him."

"Trust me, it's not pity," Noah said, his tone a little more serious now. "I've known Holden a long time, and if he didn't care about you, he wouldn't have stuck around last night. He wouldn't have taken the time to make sure you're okay."

I closed my eyes, trying to get my brain to believe what he was saying, but all I could think about was the way Holden had looked at me last night—I could swear it was a mix of frustration and something else I couldn't quite place. But definitely not jumping for joy.

“I don’t know,” I said quietly. “I just... I don’t want to make things weird between us. He’s my boss. And he’s... Holden. He’s so out of my league it’s not even funny.”

“Out of your league?” Noah scoffed, shaking his head. “Kid, you’re selling yourself way short. You’re smart, you’re talented, and you’ve got this great big, amazing heart. Anyone would be lucky to have you. Even Holden... especially Holden.”

I managed to give Noah a half-hearted smile, but I was definitely not convinced. “Thanks, Noah. But still. I think I’ll avoid him for the next decade or so.”

Holden should be with someone who knew you didn’t guzzle bourbon at a tasting.

Noah laughed again and stood up, ruffling my hair. “Good luck with that. You know he’s going to check in on you later, right?”

I groaned, pulling the blankets over my head. “Just kill me now.”

“Nah,” Noah said, his voice filled with amusement. “You’re tougher than you think—or give yourself credit for, Mylo. I know you’ll figure it out.”

With that, he left the room, the door clicking shut behind him, and I was finally left alone with my thoughts. My embarrassing, humiliating thoughts.

Way to go, Mylo!

I sighed and dragged myself out of bed, downing the rest of the orange juice before stumbling into the bathroom. One look in the mirror told me everything I needed to know—I looked like death warmed over. My hair was a mess, my eyes were bloodshot, and there were dark circles under my eyes that made me look like I could give a panda a run for its money.

“Good job, Mylo,” I muttered to my reflection. “Really great first impression.”

Okay, so it wasn’t a first impression, technically—but it was a shit show all the same.

I splashed some cold water on my face, trying to wake myself up, but no amount of water was going to wash away the humiliation. I’d practically... literally thrown myself at Holden, and now I had to face him, knowing he’d seen me at my absolute worst.

I might as well have gotten on all fours with my ass in the air, begging him to breed me.

Ugh! “You’re not supposed to get hard or wet thinking about that,” I growled at my reflection.

Then again, Noah had a point. Holden hadn’t run screaming. He hadn’t laughed in my face. He’d gotten me in bed, taken my shoes off, and covered me with a blanket. He’d been kind.

Maybe... maybe there was hope after all.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. Or maybe he’s just a decent guy. I couldn’t let myself think like that. I couldn’t let myself hope for something that probably... definitely wasn’t real. Holden was just being nice because he was a good guy, and he didn’t want me embarrassing his guest by being a drunken idiot.

That does not mean he wants anything more.

I sighed, heading back into the bedroom and flopping down on the bed. The hangover was still raging, but at least the aspirin was starting to kick in. I closed my eyes, trying to relax, but all I could think about was Holden. The way he’d looked at me...

okay, that part might have been wishful thinking. But those strong arms holding me up when I could barely stand on my own...

“You’re being ridiculous. Remember why you’re here, how you got here. No alphas,” I told myself. “Just let it go.”

But I knew that was easier said than done.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HOLDEN

I stared at the spreadsheets on my laptop, but I could honestly say I had no idea what I was looking at. For the last few days, I hadn't been able to focus to save my life. My brain was stuck on one thing: Mylo.

It was like, from the moment I'd carried him back to his room, his scent—that soft mix of sugar and citrus—had taken up permanent residence on my clothes...

Nice try. You're not wearing any of the same things.

But I couldn't shake his scent, no matter how hard I tried, or how he'd felt in my arms.

Showing up late to the bourbon event wasn't part of the plan. Okay, so it had mostly been part of the plan. But not that late. I could tell, when I appeared, that Mylo hadn't expected to see me, and I'd caught the flicker of hurt in his eyes. I'd planned to apologize that day at his cabin, but when I missed him, I convinced myself the goddess was trying to keep us apart. So, I'd stayed away—even though every inch of me hated it.

And, of course, my family made sure to let me know how they felt.

So, I'd avoided all of them. Hell, I was avoiding everyone. Most of all, I was avoiding Mylo.

Three days. It had been three damn days since I last saw him, and I was losing it. West kept giving me shit whenever we crossed paths—smug bastard. Indigo didn't hold back either; she'd skipped teasing and gone straight to calling me a coward, as if I needed the reminder. Even Hope threw in her two cents, which was surprising since she usually stayed out of my emotional damage. And Noah? He gave me that look—you know the one. Like, I get it, but you're still being an idiot.

Now, it was four days later, and I still hadn't worked up the nerve.

I tapped anxiously against the desk, the rhythm matching the restless energy buzzing through me. I'd spent years mastering discipline, locking things down tight, and yet Mylo waltzed into my life, and everything unraveled with one smile. It didn't make sense.

I could practically hear West's voice: Duh, he's your mate... what did you expect?

For one, I never expected him to be human... although, after meeting Mylo, I wouldn't change one perfect hair on that beautiful blonde head. It felt like a test—like maybe I was meant to figure out how to do it right this time. But what if I failed again? I couldn't take that risk.

But I wasn't sure how much longer I could stay away.

I leaned back in my chair, rubbed my hands over my face, and exhaled hard. The office felt too quiet. Too still. And my thoughts—well, those seemed to be getting louder.

A knock at the door startled me, mostly because I'd been such a bear to be around that my family, staff, and den had all been avoiding me. And when they weren't, I was catching shit for not appreciating the fact that I'd found my mate. Everyone kept reminding me how lucky I was.

I fucking knew how lucky I was... How could anyone think I wanted to stay away from him, or that it was easy for me to do it? I wanted him in my home, in my bed. I wanted to tell him that he was wanted, that he was welcome, and that I never wanted to imagine life without him.

So yeah, I wasn't ready to deal with anyone's shit right now. I ignored the knocking, hoping they'd take the hint and go away.

No such luck.

It came again, and I had a feeling the person wasn't going anywhere.

With a sigh, I dragged myself out of the chair and crossed the room.

When I opened the door, there he was, like I'd conjured him just by thinking about him—Mylo. And he had a plate of cookies. The scent hit me first—warm vanilla and chocolate, sweet and comforting, just like everything about him.

Our eyes met for the briefest second before he looked away, clutching the plate a little tighter, like it was the only thing holding him together. He looked like he was five seconds away from bolting.

“Hey.” He bit his bottom lip, his eyes flickering up to meet mine before darting away just as fast.

There it was again—that damn flutter in my chest, the one I hated for how out of control it made me feel. But I also kind of loved it, because it reminded me he was here, and it was real.

“I, uh...” Mylo shifted his weight awkwardly, holding the plate out in front of him. “I brought these... Thought I'd come by and... you know, apologize. For... everything.”

I could tell he'd practiced those words many times before finally working up the nerve to come over here. And why did that make me feel so damn small?

He looked so vulnerable. Too vulnerable.

Something in me cracked at the sight of it. He had no idea how close I was to dragging him inside and doing something we'd both regret—or not regret at all.

“Come in,” I said, stepping aside.

I decided to listen to the side of me that was saying everything would be fine... not the panicked one. I figured the panic had gotten its way for too long, and neither Mylo nor I seemed happier because of it.

He hesitated for half a second, then shuffled past me, being careful not to brush against any part of me. I shut the door behind him, the click of the latch somehow sounding louder in the now silent office.

Mylo placed the plate of cookies on the edge of my desk, still not looking at me. “I’ve been meaning to say I’m sorry... for putting you in an awkward position. It’s my problem. My feelings. You don’t need to worry—I won’t make an ass of myself. And you shouldn’t feel pressured or anything.”

I didn’t respond right away, because honestly, I didn’t trust my voice. The way he stood there—shoulders hunched, head down, voice small—it knocked the air right out of my lungs. How didn’t he see what he was doing to me?

For a moment, there was silence—an awkward, tension-filled kind of silence. He wouldn’t look at me, his gaze fixed on his lap. “I just wanted to make sure you knew I was sorry about... what I said. About wanting... you know.”

“I should apologize too,” I said. “For the way I acted the other day. I was late to the tasting, and... I probably wasn’t the nicest.”

Mylo glanced up, his cheeks flushing briefly. “And... uh, you don’t have to apologize for the bourbon thing either. I mean, you already have. I think. Although maybe next time, try doing something that doesn’t need an apology?” His eyes widened. “I’m not saying there would be a next time or that there should be, or that I expect it—” He groaned. “Sorry.”

The corner of my mouth twitched before I could stop it. “Fair point.”

He huffed a small laugh, clearly surprised by his own words—clearly, that wasn’t part of the practiced speech. And something about that sound, about how brave he was being... and kind of calling me out—it undid me.

The tension between us buzzed, sharp and electric, and I couldn’t help it... or maybe I didn’t want to this time. I took a step closer; it felt like some invisible force had yanked me forward. Mylo noticed—of course he noticed—and his breath hitched.

“What’s with the hot-and-cold thing?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “One minute you’re distant, and now... now you’re—” He gestured vaguely with his hand.

He didn’t finish the sentence, and he didn’t back away. His lips parted, and he licked them—and that was all the permission I needed.

I grabbed him by the waist and pulled him into me, my lips crashing into his. He gasped against my mouth, his hands flying up—like he didn’t know whether to push me away or pull me closer.

He chose the latter. Thank the good goddess.

The kiss was messy and desperate, all teeth and hunger, like we'd been starving for this moment but didn't know how to do it right. Mylo whimpered, the sound so raw it punched me in the gut—and broke what was left of my restraint.

I backed him up until his hips hit the desk, and in one quick motion, I lifted him onto it. Papers scattered everywhere, but I didn't give a fuck.

Mylo pulled back, breathless, eyes wide with disbelief, his lips swollen from our kisses. "What the hell, Holden?"

I kissed him again instead of answering, because words felt useless. There wasn't a single way to explain how I'd fought this—how I'd tried to stay away—and failed so spectacularly.

I'd never taken so much pleasure in failing.

His hands found their way to my shoulders, gripping tight like he was trying to anchor himself. "I had no idea..." he whispered against my lips. "You... you wanted this?"

I groaned, the sound rumbling deep in my chest. "You have no idea."

His laugh was shaky. "I thought you hated me."

"Far from it." My fingers slid under the hem of his shirt, tracing the warm skin there. He shivered under my touch, and it sent a jolt of heat straight through me.

"This whole time..." Mylo shook his head, still trying to process. "You acted like I didn't exist."

I pulled back just enough to look him in the eye, my thumb brushing over his cheek.

“I thought if I stayed away... I could protect you, and maybe it would go away.”

Liar!

He blinked up at me, confused. “Protect me from what? And did it?”

“Not even close.” I decided to ignore the first part.

I must’ve said the right thing because his eyes shifted—something changed in him, something I felt more than saw. His grip tightened on my shoulders, and for a moment, all that vulnerability melted away, replaced by something braver, something more determined.

“I’m not a charity case,” Mylo whispered, leaning in close, his breath warm against my skin. “And I’m not going to wait around for you to figure out what you want.”

His words hit me like a challenge. And damn if I didn’t rise to meet it.

It was a mix of seeing him so brave, standing up for himself, and the idea that I might lose him—to someone who definitely didn’t deserve him. Even though I wasn’t sure I deserved him, I knew I would do everything to make sure I did.

I kissed him harder this time, pouring every ounce of frustration and longing into it. Mylo kissed me back just as fiercely, his hands sliding into my hair, tugging just enough to make me groan.

We were a mess—a beautiful, chaotic mess—but I couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to stop. Not until I’d had all of him.

He tugged at my shirt, his fingers clumsy but determined. “Holden...” His voice was a broken plea, and I swore right then and there that I’d never let him feel unsure about

this—about us—again.

This wasn't going to end on an apology. Not this time.

I lifted him further onto the desk, papers forgotten beneath us, the rest of the world falling away. This wasn't just desire—it was everything. Hope, possibility—all tangled together in the space between us.

He looked up at me, breathless, and for the first time, I saw it. Not just the vulnerability. The want. The same ache that had been gnawing at me from the second I scented him.

And I'd be damned if I didn't give him exactly what he needed.

I was his mate—it was my duty and my pleasure.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MYLO

I just wanted to make things right with Holden—nothing more. I walked over to his office, cookies in hand, rehearsing my apology the whole way there. It was supposed to be simple. Just a little peace offering to smooth things over. After all, I owed him that much after everything I'd said when I got majorly wasted. But as I stood there in his office, the cookies still warm in my hands and my nerves getting the best of me, my stomach flipped in ways that said my breakfast was threatening to make an appearance.

What if this made things worse?

I'd walked into that room with my heart still pounding. I had no idea why I was so nervous—this was just an apology. Maybe it was because this was Holden. He was an alpha, he was my boss, and oh yeah—someone who could rip this new life I'd somehow stumbled into, and definitely didn't want to lose, away with two words: You're fired.

So I definitely hadn't seen any of this coming. The kiss... and more!

But deep down, I'd hoped.

The world tilted beneath me as he kissed me, the heat of his body pressed between my legs where he had me balanced on the desk. It was all so much—too much—and somehow not enough. His hands roamed up my back, fingers pressing into my skin

like he was scared I'd disappear if he let go.

I wasn't sure who was making all the little sounds—him or me—but it didn't matter. All that mattered was him, here, now.

I couldn't believe it. After all the hot-and-cold, after the way he kept pulling away like he couldn't stand to be near me, we were finally here. And he was kissing me like his life depended on it.

And maybe mine did too—or at least the part that hoped for more than just surviving.

My hands were lost in his hair—that thick, wild hair that always looked perfectly styled. I'd wondered what it would feel like, and now I knew—soft, but not too soft, and something I could hold onto when my world felt like it was spinning. I tugged a little, and the growl that rumbled out of him was enough to send a shiver straight down my spine.

“Holden,” I whispered against his mouth, feeling the heat of his breath mingle with mine.

He pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes dark and filled with something I couldn't quite name. “What is it?” His voice was hoarse, the words catching like they didn't quite want to come out.

I swallowed, feeling my heart pound in my chest, and tried to get my bearings. “I still don't understand... all this time, you kept pushing me away, like I was some kind of?—”

“Mistake?” His voice cracked, and something raw flashed across his eyes before he closed them, exhaling hard. “You have no idea how hard I've tried to do the right thing, Mylo. I didn't want you hurt because of me.”

“I don’t need protecting,” I said, sharper than I meant to, but damn it, he needed to hear it. I wasn’t fragile—not in the way he thought, at least. Sure, I’d been through some stuff, and maybe I had scars from it. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t decide what I wanted for myself. “I’m not some kid who needs saving.”

Holden’s eyes snapped open, and for a heartbeat, I thought I’d ruined the moment, said too much. But then, he smiled—this slow, almost reverent smile that made my stomach flip. He leaned in, forehead pressing against mine, his breath ghosting over my lips.

“I know, but that doesn’t mean you don’t need to be protected,” he whispered, his voice cracking just enough that I could feel how real this was for him. “But it’s not just that, Mylo. You’re not like anyone I’ve ever known. You make me want things I’m not sure I deserve.”

I blinked, my heart stuttering in my chest, and suddenly everything felt too raw—like he was peeling me open and showing me something too vulnerable.

“You deserve whatever you want, Holden. You’re a good guy... better than most.”

He pulled back, looking at me like he wasn’t quite sure if he believed me. I took a deep breath, deciding that maybe I needed to be the brave one here. I cupped his face, brushing my thumb over the scruff of his jaw.

“You want me, right? Because... I want you too.”

There. I’d said it.

Holden closed his eyes, letting out a shuddering breath before opening them again, and when he did, there was nothing held back in those beautiful brown depths.

“Yeah,” he said, voice barely a rasp. “I want you. More than anything.”

And then his lips were back on mine, gentler this time, like he was savoring me instead of devouring me. It felt like something clicked into place, something I hadn’t even realized was broken. His fingers slipped under my shirt, and as I felt his hand against my skin, I leaned into him, letting the world slip away. His lips moved against mine—slow and sweet—while his hands slipped under my thighs to pull me even closer. I let out a soft sound, my body melting into his.

My clothes came off quickly, and I was lifted onto his large desk. The desk was solid beneath me, cool against the backs of my legs as Holden settled me there, and for a moment, I almost forgot how to breathe. Everything about him was overwhelming—his touch, his presence, the intensity in his eyes—but in the best possible way. His large, warm hands cradled my face, and the way he looked at me... it was like I was something precious, something he was afraid to break.

The gentleness took me by surprise. Holden wasn’t what I’d call gentle—not in the way he walked, not in the way he spoke. But now, with me, every touch felt careful, like he was scared I’d vanish if he wasn’t cautious enough. His thumbs traced my cheekbones, brushing over my skin in the lightest way, and warmth spread through my chest.

“You okay?” he asked, voice low, the words rumbling out of him. He was so close, his forehead resting against mine, our breaths mingling in the small space between us. The vulnerability in his voice caught me off guard. For a second, he looked like he wasn’t sure if I wanted this—if I wanted him .

“Yeah,” I whispered, nodding as my hands rested on his chest. “More than okay.”

His lips curved into the smallest smile—a smile I could feel against my own mouth as he leaned in to kiss me again. It wasn’t desperate like before. This kiss was slow,

deliberate, like he wanted me to understand how much this meant to him. And I did. With every careful tilt of his head, every gentle caress of his lips, I felt it—the unspoken promise that this was real, that he wanted this as much as I did.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer, and he let out a low, satisfied hum. His hands slid down to my waist, his touch grounding me in the moment. He pulled me to the edge of the desk, and I felt his warm breath against my neck, steady and reassuring. He made me feel safe—grounded—like no matter what happened, he had me.

“Holden,” I breathed, arching into his touch.

He chuckled low in his throat before sliding a finger inside me—slowly, surely—pressing into my tight channel. I cried out with each entry, every movement sending shockwaves from my toes to the crown of my head. He held my gaze as he worked his thick fingers deeper, and I couldn’t help but moan as he found the spot inside me that made stars burst behind my eyes.

I bit my lip, panting as he curled his fingers, brushing against that bundle of nerves. My body tightened around him, the sensation so intense it was almost painful. He smiled—not smug, just pleased, like he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“Holden,” I gasped, my voice thick with need. “Please...”

He withdrew his fingers slowly, licking them clean one by one. Then he leaned down, brushing those same fingers against my lips. I opened for him without hesitation, tasting myself as his tongue slipped inside.

Oh fuck, he knew exactly what he was doing.

He smirked, stepping back from the desk and stripping off his clothes with quick

efficiency. He was beautiful—all hard lines and muscle. His cock stood tall and ready, and I couldn't help but stare as he returned, climbing over me until we were chest to chest.

“You're so beautiful,” he whispered against my lips before kissing me again. His hands roamed up my legs, caressing gently before pushing them open wider to fit between them.

I gasped as the head of his cock nudged my entrance, and then, finally, he slid inside me—filling me completely.

His lips found my neck, and my eyes closed, a shiver running through me. I let my head fall back, giving him more room, and he took it, kissing a path down my throat, each kiss making me feel more cherished than the last. It was like he was memorizing me, taking his time to show how much he cared—like I was something that mattered.

His kisses trailed down my collarbone, his stubble scraping gently along my skin. He thrust deeper with every movement, his muscles flexing as his skin slid against mine. The friction sent sparks through me, making me arch and cry out with pleasure.

He groaned into my neck, the vibrations sending more shivers down my spine.

His cock slid into me, stretching me in all the best ways. The sound of our bodies meeting filled the room, and with every thrust, I moaned louder, my body begging for more.

The scent of sex thickened the air, mingling with the smell of his aftershave and something so uniquely Holden—something that made me want to taste every inch of him.

His mouth found mine, and his hands slid up my back, the sensation making me

tremble. He held me like I was fragile, like he never wanted to hurt me—even as his cock split me open in the most delicious way. And it was strange, but it made me want to cry. Not from sadness—far from it—but because I hadn’t realized how much I needed this. How much I needed someone to look at me the way Holden did.

Like I mattered.

I let out a shaky breath, my hands tightening on his shoulders.

“Holden,” I whispered.

He kissed me as I wrapped my legs tighter around him, pulling him closer. My nails dug into his skin, and our breath mingled as I panted his name. My body trembled beneath him, my walls grasping at his cock, pulling him deeper. He groaned into my mouth, our hips moving together in perfect rhythm.

I wanted to remember this moment forever—every kiss, every touch. His mouth left a trail of kisses down my neck, making me shudder.

He thrust harder, hitting that perfect spot inside me, and we both cried out. His grip on my hips tightened, his thrusts relentless as the sound of our bodies echoed in the room.

“So close. So good,” I panted, my heart pounding in time with every thrust. My world narrowed to nothing but Holden—the feel of him inside me, above me.

He pulled back slightly, meeting my gaze. His eyes were steady, filled with concern, desire, and something deeper—something real.

“I’m here,” he whispered, his forehead resting against mine, his voice soft and steady.

“I’ve got you, Mylo. Always.”

Something in me relaxed at that—like it was what I'd been waiting to hear.

And for the first time in a long time, I believed it.

I believed someone wanted me. That someone would stay.

Maybe I was a little drunk on the feeling, but I didn't care. I leaned in, cupping his face, and kissed him—pouring every bit of what I felt into that kiss.

He made me feel safe, wanted, cared for. And I wanted him to know how much that meant.

I arched my back with a moan, my fingers sinking into Holden's shoulders, gripping like my life depended on it. Every time our hips slid together, that sweet friction set me on fire, sending waves of heat rippling through my body until I could barely breathe. My skin felt tight, every nerve alive and thrumming with want, as if I might shatter from the force of it.

Holden's hands dug into my hips, rough and possessive, his breath hot against my neck as he moved deeper, faster, with a rhythm that made me see stars.

Each thrust hit that spot inside me—the one that narrowed the world down to just him, just us. Sweat slicked between our bodies, skin gliding against skin, hot and desperate. The sound of it—the slap of our hips, the heavy breaths, the groans—filled the space around us, thick and electric, like even the air was in on it.

“Fuck,” I gasped, my head falling back as he bottomed out, pleasure coursing through me in waves that left me clinging to him like a lifeline. I couldn't think—didn't want to think. I just needed to feel him everywhere, all at once, as if maybe that would be enough to hold me together.

His scent, the taste of salt on his skin where my mouth found him, left me dizzy. My lips moved along his shoulder, across the curve of his neck, not so much kissing as clinging—anchoring myself to him, needing more, always more. And God, the way he filled me, like he belonged there, like this was the only thing that had ever made sense.

I wrapped my legs tighter around him, the desk biting into my back, but I didn't care. I welcomed it, needed the bite of discomfort to keep me grounded. My nails scraped down his back, leaving thin lines behind, desperate to mark this moment, to make it real.

The heat between us built, like it was too big, too wild to contain. My breath hitched, turning into broken sounds I couldn't hold back. Every thrust pushed me closer to the edge, my body bowing beneath him, chasing that high like I might never come down.

His hand shifted, gripping my hip tighter, like he couldn't get close enough. And I felt it then—the way my body opened up to him, not just physically but deeper, in ways that scared me, made me feel raw and exposed. But I didn't pull away. I couldn't. He had me, and that was all there was.

The pace turned frantic, our movements losing rhythm but gaining urgency, like we were running out of time. My moans grew louder, sharp and breathless, bouncing off the walls, filling the room until there was nothing left but us—our bodies moving, crashing together, over and over.

I was so close it hurt, every muscle tensed, every nerve stretched thin. My fingers clutched at him, desperate, as if holding tighter might stop everything from slipping away. He thrust deeper, hitting that spot again, and a white-hot burst of pleasure ripped through me, leaving me trembling beneath him.

“Please,” I whispered, not even sure what I was asking for—just that I needed it,

needed him, needed this moment to never end.

The pressure built, a tidal wave rising higher and higher, and I teetered on the edge, every nerve alive, every part of me locked into this moment. His body pressed down into mine, sweat-slick and solid, his breath warm against my neck. I arched into him, gasping, surrendering completely.

And when I fell, I fell hard—every part of me unraveling, shaking apart beneath him. The world blurred, pleasure crashing over me in waves that left me weightless and lost, clinging to him like he was the only thing keeping me tethered to the ground.

And maybe he was.

He kept thrusting until he came deep inside me.

I felt cherished . That was the only word I could think of to describe it. Cherished and loved, like I finally belonged somewhere. Like I had a home. And as Holden kissed me, his touch gentle, I knew I'd never felt anything like this before.

He pulled back, resting his forehead against mine, both of us breathing hard as the moment stretched between us. Then he smiled—a real smile—that made my chest feel like it might burst. He brushed his thumb over my cheek, his gaze soft, searching mine.

“You’re everything,” he whispered, his voice barely above a breath.

I felt my heart catch at the raw sincerity in his voice. My breath hitched, and I nodded, my hands tightening around his shoulders.

“So are you,” I whispered back, my voice trembling slightly. And in that moment, I knew it was true. No matter what happened next, Holden was everything. And I

hoped I was his too.

He pulled away just enough to catch his breath, his forehead still resting against mine.

“Mylo... I have to leave for a couple of weeks. Work.”

I blinked, trying to make sense of his words through the haze of heat and satisfaction.

“What? When?”

“Tomorrow.” He swallowed, his eyes searching mine, like he was trying to gauge my reaction. “I didn’t want you to think this had anything to do with... with us. I’m happy this happened. More than happy.”

Something inside me twisted—a mix of relief and disappointment. I nodded, brushing my fingers over the back of his neck.

“Okay,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “But just so you know, when you come back... we’re picking this up right where we left off.”

A smile tugged at his lips, and he nodded, leaning in to press a soft kiss to my forehead.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“How about you stay the night with me till I leave?”

I wasn’t sure there were any better words I’d ever heard in my whole life.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HOLDEN

I kept my hands on the wheel, trying to focus on the road. But my mind? My mind was back in my office with Mylo. Goddess, it was good. Too good. The kind of sex that got under your skin and stayed there, making it impossible to think straight.

And there it was again—guilt, sharp and constant. I still hadn't told him. Not about me, not about what I was. And yet, we'd crossed that line. He deserved more than I was giving him. Hell, maybe more than I knew how to give.

But damn, the sex. I hadn't even known it could feel like that—like my whole body exhaled for the first time in years. It wasn't just physical; it was grounding, like my soul had found the thing it was missing all along. The kind of thing I didn't believe in until it hit me like a freight train.

Because it had been waiting. For him.

Bishop shifted next to me, long legs kicking against the dash like we weren't in my damn truck. "You're real quiet."

I grunted, tightening my grip on the wheel. "Just thinking."

"About Mylo," Bishop said, not even pretending to ask.

I shot him a quick glance, but he was already smirking—that knowing, smug little

smile that said, You're an idiot, but I love you anyway.

"You know," he said, tapping his fingers on the armrest, "for someone who's got their shit together, you're a disaster at this."

"Yeah, well," I muttered, "it's complicated."

"It doesn't have to be." Bishop leaned back against the window, settling in like we had all the time in the world. "He's your mate."

That word—it hit hard, settling deep and so fucking right.

I swallowed. "I haven't told him. Not... about any of it."

Bishop stayed quiet, letting the confession hang between us for a second. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and steady, like it was just a fact. "If Cairo had been my mate, I would've told him."

That knocked the air right out of my lungs. Bishop never talked about Cairo. Not like this.

I glanced over, but he kept his gaze on the road ahead. "He wasn't my mate, though," Bishop added, like he was explaining something simple. "That's why I didn't say anything. But if I thought—if I knew—he was? I'd have told him everything. No hesitation."

That hit hard, the way truth always does when you've been avoiding it.

"You gotta tell him, Holden." Bishop's voice softened, but the weight of what he was saying didn't. "You can't keep him in the dark. Not if you want him to stay."

I let out a slow breath, my chest tight with guilt and fear tangling together until I couldn't tell which was worse. The thought of telling Mylo the truth felt like jumping off a cliff—and the thought of not telling him? That was a free fall I wouldn't survive.

Bishop didn't push. He'd said his piece, and that was enough for him.

The GPS pinged, breaking the silence, and I made a right turn down the gravel drive that led to the shifter event. Cars and bikes were lined up along the road, marked with symbols from packs across the region. The air buzzed with energy—old rivalries, new alliances, and everything in between.

“Looks like the Wrights are already here,” Bishop said, nodding toward a black SUV parked by the entrance.

I groaned, pulling in beside it. “Of course they are.”

Bishop chuckled. “Maverick likes to be early for everything. Probably hasn't been late to a damn thing since birth.”

We stepped out of the truck, the cool mountain air biting against my skin. Eyes tracked us from every direction—the way they always do at these things. The lodge sat nestled among the trees, quiet and tucked away, but inside it would be anything but. Shifter events were a controlled kind of chaos—half business, half territorial pissing contest.

Sure enough, Maverick and Tristan Wright were standing near the entrance, locked in conversation. Maverick, sharp-eyed and serious as ever, looked like he was picking apart some poor alpha's business strategy. Tristan, cool and calculating, stood back, like he was already three moves ahead of everyone else.

Maverick's gaze locked on us, his face breaking into a slight smirk. "Holden."

"Wright." I gave him a nod, keeping my voice casual.

Tristan's half-smile tilted just enough to be annoying. "Didn't expect to see you here."

I crossed my arms, the corner of my mouth twitching despite myself. "What, the Rockies not keeping you busy enough?"

Maverick's smirk widened. "Just broadening our horizons."

Bishop snorted beside me. "More like scouting competition."

Maverick caught that without missing a beat. "Wouldn't want your resort getting too comfortable."

Bishop rolled his eyes. "Please. We've been running circles around you since day one."

It was always like this with the Wrights—banter, but no real malice. Just the kind of rivalry that kept you sharp.

"You still tapping away on that computer of yours?" I asked Tristan, shifting the topic.

He shrugged, smooth as ever. "Someone has to make sure we don't end up as front-page news."

Maverick looked between Bishop and me. "What about you two? Finally taking some time off?"

I tensed before I could stop myself. “Something like that.”

Bishop, the traitor, leaned in with a grin. “More like running from something.”

I shot him a glare, but he just grinned wider. Maverick didn’t press, though. He gave us both a nod, his smirk lingering. “Well, try not to cause too much trouble.”

With that, the Wrights slipped back into the crowd, leaving us standing by the entrance.

Bishop nudged me with his shoulder. “You know you’d win this little pissing match you have with Maverick if you showed up with Mylo, right?”

I huffed out a breath, the thought settling heavier than I wanted it to.

“Yeah,” Bishop said, softer now. “But that’s not why you need to tell him.”

I knew he was right. Hell, I’d known it all along. But the idea of telling Mylo the truth—of watching his face shift into something I couldn’t take back—scared the shit out of me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MYLO

Holden had been gone for four days now, and I was starting to lose it. Sure, he'd been texting—brief check-ins that reassured me he hadn't vanished off the face of the earth or run screaming just because we had sex. He'd even called a few times, late at night, his deep voice rumbling in my ear, telling me about his day and asking about mine. It should've been enough—should've been comforting. But it wasn't. Not really.

I didn't know if it was because I felt like there was something he wasn't saying.

But I wanted him here—not just on my phone. I wanted to be sure where we stood. I wanted to know if... I wasn't even sure. The sex felt like a moment out of time. Maybe I needed dates... wooing.

Just thinking it felt silly, but nothing felt concrete. And maybe I shouldn't expect more... but there was a connection between Holden and me. It wasn't just wishful thinking.

It was ridiculous. Deep down, I knew that. He'd been clear before he left—he wanted me. He'd enjoyed what we'd done together. But the longer he was gone, the harder it got to remember—or believe—it.

It's been four days!

No matter how many times I reminded myself, it didn't seem to help. Part of it was

missing Holden, and part of it was feeling like we'd been cut off just when we'd finally figured things out. But the truth was, everything I had—my job, the roof over my head—was tied to him.

He was my boss... I'd slept with my boss's boss. And the what-ifs were eating me alive. What if things went south between us? What if he decided this thing between us wasn't worth the hassle? Would I lose my job? Would I be kicked out, left with nowhere to go?

The thought gnawed at me, this creeping anxiety that twisted in my gut and made it impossible to focus on anything else. I'd been down that road before—with Chuck. I'd thought we were building something together, thought I had a future with him. And then, in one instant, it was all gone. I'd shown up, ready to start our life together, and he'd been with someone else. Just like that, everything shattered.

And sure, Noah had been there to pick up the pieces, to make sure I wasn't left out in the cold. But this time... there wouldn't be a Plan B.

Holden's not Chuck—I knew that. But it didn't stop the fear from creeping in. What if this ended the same way? What if I ended up thrown away, alone, with nowhere to go and no one to turn to?

And it wasn't just about the job. It was about Holden. It was about the way he made me feel—the way he made everything feel like it was finally falling into place. Like I'd finally found something... someone... worth holding onto. The thought of losing that—of losing him—felt like losing a part of myself.

It was terrifying, like the loss of something vital—like food or shelter.

Not to mention Sarah, Noah, Hope... I'd never had people like this before.

Even now, with him gone, there was this ache in my chest, this emptiness I couldn't shake. It wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before. Not even when I'd found Chuck with someone else. This was different. Worse. And it made me realize just how deeply I was in this—how much Holden had come to mean to me in such a short amount of time.

Silly you for letting that happen.

There was a part of me that wanted to run before I got told to leave... but another part, maybe a stupider part, still found a way to hope.

I was trying to keep myself busy, trying to keep my mind off it. But it wasn't working. I'd spent the last hour stress-eating my way through the kitchen—leftovers, snacks, anything I could get my hands on. I didn't even realize how much I'd eaten until I looked down at the empty plates in front of me, my stomach uncomfortably full.

“You okay there, Mylo?”

I jumped, nearly knocking over a stack of dishes in my surprise. Sarah stood in the doorway, her eyes narrowing as she took in the scene—the mess of plates, the look on my face. She stepped closer, her brow furrowing with concern.

“You look like you're about to crawl out of your skin,” she said, her voice softening. “What's going on?”

I hesitated, not sure if I should say anything. But Sarah had always been kind to me—patient. And, if I was being honest, I needed someone to talk to.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair, tugging at the ends in frustration. “It's just... Holden,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. “I'm freaking out a

little. I don't know if I'm being stupid or..."

Sarah moved closer, leaning against the counter beside me. "Why are you freaking out?" she asked gently.

I swallowed, my throat tight. "He's been gone for four days. And I know he's coming back—I do. But... I can't help but feel like... I don't know. What if something happens? What if he decides this—us—just isn't worth it?"

Sarah's expression softened, and she reached out, resting a hand on my arm. "Mylo, Holden's not like that," she said gently. "He's not going to just throw you away."

"But how do you know?" I asked, my voice cracking. "How can you be so sure?"

She hesitated, her eyes flickering away for a moment before meeting mine again. "I just do," she said, her voice careful.

My heart sank, frustration bubbling up inside me. There it was again—that feeling that everyone around me knew something I didn't. That they were keeping something from me.

"Right," I said, my tone flat. "You just do."

Sarah's eyes widened, panic flashing across her face. "It's not like that, Mylo," she said quickly. "I?—"

"Forget it," I muttered, pushing away from the counter. "It's fine."

"Mylo, wait?—"

But I was already walking away, the frustration and fear swirling together, making it

hard to breathe. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want more reassurances when she couldn't even give me a straight answer. I just wanted... I didn't even know what I wanted.

I ended up in my room, flopping down on the bed with a groan, my hands covering my face. This was a mess. I was a mess. And Holden wasn't even here to help me untangle any of it.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, and I reached for it, my heart skipping a beat when I saw Holden's name light up the screen.

Holden: Hey. Just checking in. Everything okay?

I stared at the message, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. I wanted to tell him everything. I wanted to tell him that I was scared, that I missed him, that I didn't know how to do this—whatever this was. But I couldn't. I didn't want to put that on him, not when he was out of town, dealing with whatever business had pulled him away.

So instead, I typed out a simple reply:

Me: Yeah. Everything's fine. Just miss you.

It was true, even if it wasn't the whole truth. I hit send, my stomach twisting as I waited for his response. It came a moment later.

Holden: Miss you too. I'll be back before you know it.

I sighed, my chest aching. I hoped he was right, because the thought of him not coming back—of losing everything I'd started to build with him—was too much to bear.

The rest of the day passed in a fog. I went through the motions without really being present. I helped out in the kitchen, cleaned up, did whatever I could to keep myself busy. But the anxiety was still there, gnawing at me—a constant weight on my chest that I just couldn't shake.

Later that evening, Sarah found me again. She didn't say anything at first, just handed me a cup of tea and sat down across from me at the table. I glanced at her, then down at the tea, watching the steam curl up from the cup in slow, lazy spirals.

"I'm sorry," she said after a moment, her voice soft. "I didn't mean to make you feel like you couldn't trust me."

I shook my head, my shoulders slumping. "It's not your fault," I said quietly. "I just... I don't know what's going on. I feel like everyone knows something I don't, and it's driving me crazy. I just want to understand."

Sarah nodded, her gaze sympathetic. "I get it," she said. "And I promise, no one is trying to keep anything from you to hurt you. It's just... complicated."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Yeah, seems like everything is complicated around here."

She reached across the table, her hand resting on mine. "I know it's hard, but Holden... he's not going anywhere, Mylo. He cares about you. I can see it. We all can."

Her words were kind, clearly meant to reassure me, but they only made the ache in my chest grow stronger. Because that was the problem, wasn't it? I cared about Holden too—more than I wanted to admit, even to myself. And the thought of losing him—of losing everything I'd found here—was more than I could handle.

I forced a smile, nodding even though I didn't quite believe her. "Thanks, Sarah."

She gave my hand a gentle squeeze before letting go. “Anytime,” she said softly. “And if you ever need to talk... I’m here.”

I nodded again, my throat tight. “I appreciate it,” I managed to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

She smiled, stood up, and gave my shoulder a gentle pat before walking away, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I stared down at the cup of tea, watching the steam rise in slow tendrils, and took a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

Holden would be back soon. And when he was, maybe... maybe I could finally get some answers.

Maybe I could finally figure out if this thing between us was real—or if I was just setting myself up for heartbreak all over again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HOLDEN

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this happy—the kind that made everything seem better... like it didn't suck.

I was finally back home. And Mylo... he was here too. That thought alone had me smiling like an idiot the whole way back, with Indigo's teasing voice echoing in my head: "You look like you swallowed a love potion."

Maybe I had. Who could say?

Maybe I had. Who could say? Or, I finally got a clue, according to West.

I managed to rope her and Sarah into helping me set up a romantic dinner for us in my house. Everything had to be perfect, from the lighting to the food. Soft candles cast a warm glow in the room, illuminating the simple, rustic table set with dishes of finger foods.

The moment he walked in, I swear every doubt melted away. He looked around the room, a mix of surprise and hesitation playing on his face, before he met my eyes with a soft smile.

"All this for me?" he asked, his voice holding a note of disbelief, like he couldn't quite imagine he deserved any of it.

I stepped closer, taking his hand in mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Of course it’s for you,” I said, leading him to the table. “I missed you.”

His cheeks flushed just a little, and he nodded, his fingers brushing over the back of mine as we sat down to eat. I had to remind myself not to rush—to savor this, savor him.

My mate.

Those words felt right.

We ate slowly, sharing bites, and as the minutes slipped by, I asked him more about himself—things I’d always wanted to know but hadn’t had the chance to ask yet. He hesitated at first, and I could see it—that familiar guarded look, the kind of defensiveness that only comes from years of being hurt, of not knowing where you belong.

“I grew up in the foster system,” he finally said, his voice soft. “Bounced around a lot. Never really had a home, you know?” He glanced up at me, as if gauging my reaction, like maybe that would change how I saw him.

It didn’t. If anything, it made me want to pull him closer, wrap him in every bit of warmth I had to give, and promise him that he had one now.

“That sounds rough,” I said quietly, my gaze locked on his. “But it doesn’t make you any less perfect, you know. You’re here now, and that’s all that matters.”

He gave me a shy smile, but there was a sadness there too. “I don’t even know my family or where I came from. I’m just... some guy without a history.”

“No,” I said, reaching across the table to cup his cheek. “You’re not just anything,

Mylo. My family already loves you. You have them now. You have me.”

He closed his eyes for a second, leaning into my touch, and when he opened them, there was a shimmer of something there—something hopeful.

I knew I had to work on making him feel safe and convincing him he would never have to leave again, but I swore to myself it would happen. I wouldn’t stop until I erased every ounce of doubt he’d ever had about not belonging.

“How did you meet Noah?” I asked, wanting to know everything that had shaped this amazing man—the one the goddess, the fates, had somehow deemed me worthy of having.

Mylo smiled then, a real, genuine smile that lit up his eyes. “I met Noah in Charlotte. He was volunteering as a big brother, and even though I was technically too old for the program, he kind of just... picked me. Said I needed someone looking out for me, and he wasn’t wrong.”

“Sounds like Noah,” I said, smiling too. “He’s got a good heart.”

“He does,” Mylo agreed, his voice softening. “He’s the closest thing I’ve had to family. Until now, I guess.”

My heart clenched at that, and I reached for his hand again. “You’re not alone anymore, Mylo. Not ever.”

He held my gaze, like he was looking to see if I meant it, and I didn’t look away until he finally nodded. I knew saying the words once wouldn’t suddenly erase years of trauma, but I planned to spend the rest of my days proving it to him.

The rest of dinner passed in comfortable conversation, filled with laughter, shared

stories, and those little touches that seemed to mean more than words. By the time we made our way to the hot tub, the world felt quieter, as if it was just the two of us, and nothing else mattered.

I settled in first, the warm water easing some of the tension I hadn't realized I'd been carrying. Mylo followed, sinking into the bubbles with a sigh. He turned down the champagne I'd offered, shaking his head with a sheepish grin.

"I think I've learned my lesson after the bourbon tasting," he said, his cheeks flushed, and I chuckled.

"Fair enough," I said, setting the glass aside. If he wasn't drinking, neither was I. Not tonight. Not when I needed to be clear-headed for what I had to say.

Or what I wanted to say. Then again, liquid courage might've been the way to go.

"Although I had no problem with what you had to say while you were drunk." I couldn't help teasing him.

Mylo snorted. "Yay, bourbon then, I guess."

I chuckled, but inside, I was all twisted up. I knew I was stalling. All the way back from Moonridge, I'd practiced what I needed to say. Over and over again, I'd repeated the words in my head like a mantra: "I'm a shifter. I'm a bear shifter." It seemed easy enough when I wasn't staring into those blue eyes. But now, sitting here, with Mylo so close, his leg brushing against mine under the water, it felt impossible.

The words seemed to be stuck in my throat.

You have to do it, though. He deserves to know the truth.

My bear was right. I couldn't keep lying to him, not if we had any chance of being... everything.

"There's, um, there's something I need to tell you," I started, my voice rougher than I'd intended.

He turned to me, his eyes wide, curious. "Okay... What is it?"

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry. The words were right there, but every time I tried to push them out, all I could see was James—the terror in his eyes, the way he'd run, the way he'd dropped out of sight before I could get to him.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block out the memory, but it was like it was burned into my mind. I couldn't do it. Not yet. Not when the fear of losing him was so raw, so real.

"It's... complicated," I finally said, my voice barely above a whisper. "And I'm not sure how you'll feel about it."

His brow furrowed, concern filling his eyes. "Hey, whatever it is, you can tell me. I promise."

I wanted to believe that. Great goddess, I wanted to believe it so badly. But the risk... it was too much. And unless I was ready to leave Rockmount—ready to give up everything: my family, my home—I couldn't keep pretending forever. It wasn't like I could stop everyone from shifting around him, not in a town full of shifters.

"It can wait," I said, my voice cracking just a little.

He studied me for a long moment, then nodded, his expression softening. "Okay. I trust you, Holden."

Those words did something to me—made something in my chest tighten, ache. He trusted me. Despite all the hot and cold, despite every time I'd pushed him away, he still trusted me. Even with everything he'd been through in his life. I didn't deserve that.

But I'd do everything I could to earn it.

I leaned in, brushing my lips against his, soft at first, testing, waiting for him to pull away. He didn't. Instead, he kissed me back, his hands finding my shoulders, pulling me closer until there was no space left between us.

The kiss deepened, and I could feel the emotion behind it—the want, the need, the hope. It was raw and real, and it made me feel like maybe, just maybe, I could have this. Have him.

I pulled him onto my lap, the water sloshing around us as he straddled me, his fingers tangling in my hair. He looked at me, his eyes searching mine, and for the first time, I saw it—the same fear, the same hope, the same longing. We were both scared, both unsure. But we had each other.

“You're perfect,” I whispered against his lips, my hands running up his back, feeling the shiver that ran through him. “You're everything.”

He let out a shaky breath, his forehead resting against mine. “Holden...”

I didn't let him finish. I kissed him again, deeper, my hands roaming, wanting to feel every inch of him, to memorize the way his skin felt beneath my fingers. He was warm, so warm, and the way he moved against me—it was like he was made for me, like every part of him fit perfectly with me.

The world around us faded away until it was just him—just Mylo. His breath, his

touch, his soft gasps as I kissed along his neck, his collarbone. I wanted to make him feel cherished, loved. Because that's what he was. He was my mate—my everything.

We moved together, the water rippling around us, the steam rising, mingling with our breathless kisses. His fingers dug into my shoulders, his head falling back as he let out a soft moan, and it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard.

“Holden,” he whispered, his voice breaking, and I knew—I knew I'd do anything to protect him, to keep him safe, to make sure he never felt alone again.

I carried him to the bedroom, our lips never breaking, our hands never stopping. I laid him down gently, hovering over him, my eyes meeting his. He looked up at me, his gaze filled with so much trust, so much love, and it broke me.

I didn't deserve him. But I'd spend every day trying to.

I kissed him again, slow and deep, my hands caressing his sides, his hips. He arched into me, his breath hitching, and I knew—this was it. This was everything.

And as we moved together, as our breaths mingled, as our bodies fit perfectly, I realized—maybe I could have this. Maybe I could have him, and not tell him everything just yet. Maybe I could keep this secret a little longer, keep him safe a little longer.

But deep down, I knew—if I wanted this to last, if I wanted him to be mine forever, I'd have to tell him. I'd have to trust him the way he trusted me.

But tonight, I let myself just have him. I let myself love him, cherish him. And maybe, for now, that was enough.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MYLO

The evening air was cool, and the sun was mostly gone for the day when we came out of the cinema. Holden's fingers were wrapped around mine, his grip firm and steady. It was ridiculous how much comfort I found in that—in him.

It felt like he was saying to everyone, I'm with him... and he didn't care who knew it.

We'd just walked out of the cinema, and honestly? It had been perfect in that low-key kind of way—sitting next to him in the dark, our fingers brushing together in the popcorn we were sharing. I'd never done the whole making out in the theater thing before, and I had to admit, it was really fun.

Now, we were heading toward the ice cream shop I'd spotted earlier. Holden insisted that he owed me for letting him pick the movie.

“So, tell me again why you thought that action movie was romantic?” I teased, nudging his shoulder lightly as we walked. This wasn't my first time in town, but I'd only popped in a couple of times with Noah—and usually just for an errand. I'd never strolled down the street like this.

The street was lined with small shops, each with its own charm.

Holden looked at me, his lips lifting in that half-smile that always made my stomach do flips. “Hey, it was romantic. The guy literally almost died trying to save her. It

definitely falls into the romance category.”

I rolled my eyes, though I couldn’t help but smile. “Sure, if you ignore all the explosions and, you know, cars flying.”

He shrugged, squeezing my hand as he looked ahead. “Details, details.”

The ice cream shop came into view—a small place, tucked between a bakery and a cute little baby boutique. I tried not to stare too hard at that one, even though my brain—or maybe it was my heart... or both—kept imagining a time when Holden and I might have to go in there because we were expecting a little one of our own.

Don’t run before you can walk, Mylo... baby steps.

The sign above the door was faded, but the window was decorated with colorful scoops and little doodles of sprinkles and cherries. It looked homey, and honestly, that’s all I wanted right now—just something simple.

Holden opened the door for me, and I walked inside, the bell above the door chiming softly. The scent of freshly made waffle cones hit me, and I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face. This was what happiness was supposed to feel like—easy and light, like I wasn’t carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders for once.

We made our way to the counter, and I pretended to study the flavors, even though my mind was only half there. The other half was busy memorizing every detail about Holden—the way his eyes crinkled at the corners as he watched me, the way he stood just a little closer than he needed to. Like he wanted me near him.

“I’m going with chocolate,” Holden said, interrupting my thoughts. He leaned in a little, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “But if you want to get the mint chip, I promise not to make fun of you.”

I let out an exaggerated gasp. “Mint chip is a classic, okay? It’s refreshing.”

“It’s toothpaste,” he countered, his grin widening.

“You just don’t appreciate the finer things in life,” I said, giving him a playful glare before turning back to the teenager behind the counter. “One scoop of mint chip, please.”

“Sorry, Holden, I have to agree,” the kid at the counter said with a grin, and I shot Holden a smug look.

“Not you too, Davie,” Holden groaned, shaking his head as he handed over the cash to pay for both of us before I could even think to argue.

We grabbed our cones and found a spot near the window, sitting on one of the stools as we watched people pass by outside. I could feel Holden’s knee brushing against mine, and every little touch sent sparks skittering up my skin. It was crazy—how something so simple could feel so big. I’d spent so long wanting this—wanting someone to care about me, wanting to feel like I belonged. And now, here I was, holding hands with the guy who made me feel all of that and more.

“Hey,” Holden said softly, drawing my attention back to him. His eyes were warm, searching mine, and he looked almost hesitant. “I’m really glad we’re doing this.”

I swallowed, my heart doing that stupid, fluttery thing it did whenever he looked at me like that—like I was the only thing that mattered. “Me too,” I whispered, giving his hand a squeeze.

We were still sitting there, our cones half-eaten when the door opened, and a voice cut through the moment.

“Mylo?”

My stomach dropped, and even though I wished it wasn't, there he was—Chuck his arm around him. His mate. Something inside me twisted. It was the same guy from that day at the house, and maybe I'd been too shocked last time, but this time, I really took him in. He was handsome—tall, athletic, the kind of guy who looked like he had it all together. The kind of guy Chuck would be with.

I forced a smile, even though my insides were in knots. “Chuck,” I said, nodding at him. My voice came out steady, which I was kind of proud of, all things considered.

“Wow, it's been a while,” Chuck said, his eyes flicking to Holden, then back to me. There was something in his gaze—something smug, like he thought he still had a hold over me. “Didn't expect to see you here.”

Holden shifted beside me, his presence solid and reassuring, and he slid his arm around my waist, pulling me a little closer. “Yeah, well, Mylo's here with me,” he said, his voice calm but firm. He looked at Chuck, his gaze steady, unflinching. “Mylo's mine.”

Something about the way he said it—so sure, so certain—made the tension in my chest loosen, just a little. Chuck raised a brow, his lips curling into a smirk, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he just gave a nod, his eyes lingering on me for a second longer before he turned away, his mate following him out of the shop.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding, my shoulders slumping as the door closed behind them. Holden's arm stayed around me, his thumb brushing against my side in slow, soothing strokes.

“You okay?” he asked, his voice soft, his eyes searching mine.

I nodded, leaning into him. “Yeah. I just... I wasn’t expecting that.”

Holden’s brow furrowed, his gaze darkening. “He didn’t bother you, did he?”

“No,” I said quickly, shaking my head. “It’s just weird, seeing him again. I mean, after everything that happened...” I trailed off, not really wanting to go down that road. Not now. Not when things were finally starting to feel good.

Holden was quiet for a moment, then he nodded, his arm tightening around me just a little. “If he ever bothers you—if he ever tries anything—you tell me, okay?”

There was a fierceness in his voice that made my heart swell. I looked up at him, meeting his eyes, and I could see it there—the protectiveness, the care. He meant it. He would stand by me, fight for me if it ever came to that.

I smiled, my chest tightening in the best way. “Okay. I promise.”

He leaned down, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead, and I closed my eyes, letting myself sink into the warmth of him, the safety of it. Of him.

We stayed like that for a while, just sitting there, his arm around me, the world outside the window moving on without us. And for once, I didn’t feel like I was on the outside looking in. I felt like I was right where I was supposed to be.

“You know,” Holden said after a while, his voice lightening, “I think we’ve still got time to hit up Everwild before they close. I’ve got a couple of things I need to pick up, and I haven’t checked in with them for some time.”

I blinked up at him, surprised. “The Everwild Outfitters store here?”

“Yeah,” he said, grinning. “Did I forget to mention that? My family owns it. It’s kind

of our thing.”

I stared at him, my jaw dropping slightly. “You mean... your family owns Everwild? Like, the whole thing?”

Holden chuckled, nodding. “Yep. It started here, and now it’s all over. I guess you could say we’ve been pretty lucky.”

“Wow,” I said, shaking my head. “I had no idea. That’s... that’s amazing.”

He shrugged, but there was a hint of pride in his eyes. “Yeah, it’s something. Come on, let’s go. I’ll give you the grand tour.”

That feeling like he was maybe out of my league returned...

He stood, taking my hand, and I let him lead me out of the shop, our ice cream long forgotten. As we walked down the street, his fingers laced with mine, I felt it again—that sense of belonging. It felt like Holden was my person, and I was his. And whatever came our way, we could face it together.

Maybe it was too soon, and maybe I should be more careful, but I couldn’t help it. I was too damn happy.

We got to Everwild Outfitters, the sign above the door familiar now that I knew the story behind it. Holden pushed the door open, the bell chiming softly, and I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face as we stepped inside.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HOLDEN

As we walked into Everwild Outfitters, I felt a surge of pride in my chest. This store was more than just a business to my family—it was part of our legacy. The rustic yet modern space, filled with the scent of fresh wood and the vibrant colors of outdoor gear, embodied everything we stood for: adventure and a deep connection to nature. The store reflected us perfectly.

I led him through the aisles, pointing out different sections and sharing the story behind each product line. I wanted him to know everything. He deserved to know it all.

“This is the flagship line,” I said, gesturing to a row of insulated jackets. “It’s designed for versatility. Keeps you warm on the trails and still looks good enough for a night out.”

Mylo ran his fingers along the fabric, his eyes widening. “It’s so light. You wouldn’t even know it was insulated.”

“Exactly. It’s all about the materials. Everything we use is sustainable—recycled polyester, organic cotton, responsibly sourced wool.” I watched his expression as I spoke, noting the curiosity and surprise. It made me smile.

“You really put a lot into this, huh?” he asked, looking up at me.

I nodded, my chest swelling with pride. Sharing this with my mate felt incredible. This was his too—he just didn't know it yet, but one day, our kids would be the ones in charge. "My family's been doing this for a long time. It's part of who we are. And now, you're part of that too."

He flushed, his gaze dropping to the floor. "I don't know if I'll ever really fit in, Holden. You're all... so established. You have this huge family, this legacy. I don't even know where I came from."

I reached out, cupping his cheek, making sure he couldn't look away. "None of that matters to me. You're perfect just the way you are, Mylo. You don't need a history for that. You've got us now, you've got me. And I wouldn't change a thing."

His eyes softened, and he leaned into my touch for a moment before straightening, that small smile back on his lips. "You're pretty convincing, you know that?"

"It's one of my better qualities." I winked, leading him further into the store. We moved past the section of hiking boots and trail runners, and I found myself telling him about the time my brother Knox and I had tested the waterproof features by wading into a mountain stream. "He's got this way of turning any practical product test into an adventure," I said, laughing. "We ended up soaking wet—not because the boots failed but because Knox dared me to try catching trout with my bare hands."

His laugh echoed through the store, and it was like the whole space lit up just a bit more because of it. I couldn't get enough of that sound—this must be what it felt like when something that had been missing for a long time was finally falling into place.

We rounded a corner, and I paused, noticing someone familiar at the front desk. Chuck. Of all people, here he was, organizing something behind the counter. Mylo must've seen the look on my face because he followed my gaze, his posture stiffening as recognition set in.

Chuck glanced up, and his eyes widened when he spotted us—mostly when he spotted me. He opened his mouth, then seemed to think better of it, swallowing whatever greeting he'd first considered.

“How may we serve you today?” he finally managed, his tone cautious, and I could see the gears turning in his head as he tried to piece things together.

I approached the counter, Mylo by my side. “Chuck,” I said evenly, offering him a small nod. “How’s everything going this week? You’re new, right? Settling in okay?”

He blinked, confusion furrowing his brow. “Wait... you’re...?”

“Your boss? Yeah.” I smiled, watching the realization wash over him, his cheeks paling slightly. “My family owns Everwild Outfitters. I’m sure they mentioned that during the interview process.”

Chuck’s eyes darted to Mylo, then back to me. He cleared his throat, nodding. “Right. I... uh, didn’t realize.”

I could practically feel Mylo’s discomfort beside me—the way he shifted his weight, his gaze bouncing between Chuck and me. So I decided to put this little awkward reunion to good use.

“You know, Chuck,” I said, my voice light but firm, “I should thank you. Really. For bringing Mylo to town. And for fucking up.” I smiled wider. “Because now he’s with me.”

Mylo’s eyes went wide, his head snapping to look at me, but I kept my focus on Chuck. The guy opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, like he didn’t quite know how to respond. Honestly, there wasn’t much he could say to that.

“Right,” Chuck finally muttered, looking thoroughly defeated.

I turned to Mylo, leaning down to press a soft kiss to his temple, ignoring Chuck’s stare. “Come on,” I said. “Let’s keep going. There’s still a lot I want to show you.”

Mylo blinked up at me, his cheeks flushed, but a small smile tugged at his lips. He nodded, letting me lead him away from the counter, away from Chuck. His hand slipped into mine, and I gave it a gentle squeeze.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said quietly as we moved deeper into the store, his gaze fixed ahead of us.

“Do what?” I asked, feigning innocence, even though I knew exactly what he meant.

“Tell him I’m yours. Rub it in his face like that.”

I stopped, turning to face him, my expression softening. “But you are mine, Mylo. And I want the whole world to know it. Especially guys like Chuck, who didn’t appreciate what they had when they had it.”

He looked up at me, his eyes searching mine for a moment before his lips curved into a small smile. “You’re ridiculous,” he murmured, but there was no heat behind it. Only affection.

“Maybe,” I said, shrugging. “But I’m your ridiculous.”

He shook his head, letting out a breath that was almost a laugh, and then he leaned up, pressing his lips to mine—a quick, soft kiss that left my heart pounding in my chest.

“Come on,” I said, my voice a little hoarse as I pulled away, trying to ignore the way

my pulse raced from a simple kiss... but it was the first one he'd initiated. "I want to show you the camping gear. I think you'll like it."

We moved through the store together, hand in hand, and I couldn't help but feel like this was how it was meant to be. Mylo by my side, his laughter filling the space around us, his curiosity lighting up every corner of my life. He was home... my home.

When we reached the camping section, I picked up a lightweight tent, showing him how easy it was to set up. "This one's perfect for backpacking. It's light, but it'll hold up in pretty much any weather."

Mylo nodded, his eyes wide as he listened, his fingers brushing over the fabric. "You really know your stuff," he said, glancing up at me.

"I've been doing this for a long time," I said, smiling. "My dad used to bring me here when I was a kid. He'd let me test out all the new gear. It's kind of in my blood."

"Maybe you could take me camping one day," he said. "I've never been."

"Best offer I've ever gotten," I replied simply.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MYLO

I was scrubbing dishes in Holden's kitchen, the soapy water turning lukewarm as I worked my way through the last of the plates. The soft clink of glass against the ceramic sink was the only sound around me, but my mind was far from quiet. No, it was running a full marathon of overthinking, and I couldn't help it.

My brain kept replaying those moments—Holden trying to tell me something, his voice cracking, the way he looked at me, like he was holding the world's biggest secret. And I kept wondering what on earth it could be. I wanted to let it go—maybe I could've been more patient if it wasn't for everyone else. The knowing glances, the way people went quiet when I walked into a room, like they all knew something I didn't.

I rinsed off a mug, setting it on the rack to dry. The pit in my stomach? Yeah, it was the size of the Grand Canyon by now. It twisted, gnawed at me every time I saw Holden—every time we kissed, every time he looked like he wanted to say something but didn't. It was like waiting for a bomb to go off, with no idea when or how bad the damage would be.

I shook the water off my hands, drying them on a dish towel as I replayed my conversation with Noah. I'd tried talking to him, hoping he'd spill something—anything—that would make me feel less crazy.

"Noah, just... tell me what it is. Please," I had said, my voice practically cracking

with frustration.

He'd looked at me, then away, his lips pressing into a thin line. "Mylo, it's not my place."

"Not your place?" I'd laughed, but it wasn't funny—not even a little bit. "Come on. You know what this is doing to me, right? I feel like I'm on the outside, like I'm not even part of this whole thing. Everyone knows, Noah. Everyone except me."

Noah had sighed, reaching out like he was about to touch my arm but thinking better of it. "He'll tell you. When he's ready, he will. You just have to trust him."

Trust. Right. I'd nodded, swallowing down that awful feeling—the one that tasted like betrayal and fear.

I put the towel down, leaning against the counter, staring out the window at the evening light filtering through the trees. I'd trusted Chuck once, and the rug had been pulled out from under me.

And I wanted to trust Holden... but he always looked so guilty whenever the subject came up. The one thing I hated more than anything was feeling left out of the loop, like I was standing outside in the rain, watching everyone else warm and happy inside.

I let out a sigh, pushing away from the counter. Now, my imagination had officially gone off the rails. Was Holden hiding some dark secret? Was he a serial killer? A part of some weird cult? Or—and this one made my stomach churn—maybe he had a secret family somewhere.

It wouldn't have been this bad if I hadn't known there was a secret. But knowing, and not knowing what it was? That was torture.

And it sucked, because Holden was so perfect. He treated me like I was the best thing that had ever happened to him. I'd barely even gone back to my cabin since he came back. And somehow, that only made it worse. If it was nothing, why couldn't he just tell me?

"You could be overreacting," I muttered to myself, shaking my head.

But even though I wanted to ignore the elephant in the room and just keep living in this bliss Holden and I had found, I couldn't. So I grabbed my phone, drying my hands one more time before shooting a message to Tyler. We'd kept in touch since I moved, and I'd recently filled him in about Chuck and everything else.

Me: Hey, you around?

Tyler: Always. What's up?

Me: Just... trying not to lose my mind.

Tyler: Uh oh. Holden trouble?

Me: Yeah, everything's good. Like, really good... except for this one huge, frustrating, soul-crushing thing.

Tyler: Spill. What's he doing?

Me: It's not what he's doing. It's what he isn't doing. There's this secret, Ty. Something he won't tell me, but everyone else seems to know about it.

Tyler: Wait, like a huge secret? What kind of secret are we talking here? Secret baby? Secret wife?

Me: Could be. I honestly don't know. He keeps saying he'll tell me when he's "ready." But how am I supposed to be with someone when there's this big thing hanging over us?

Tyler: Yeah, that's... weird. Are you sure it's not something small and he's just being dramatic?

Me: If it was small, why would Noah know and not tell me? Why would everyone know but me? It feels like they're all in on some big inside joke, and I'm just standing here looking stupid.

Tyler: Damn. That sucks, man. Have you tried demanding answers?

Me: You know me. I've tried everything. I've asked nicely, I've hinted. It's like running into a wall.

Tyler: So what are you gonna do?

Me: I don't know. I really like him, Ty. He makes me feel things I didn't think I could feel anymore. But this secret... it's like a wall between us, and I'm starting to think I'll never get past it.

Tyler: Ugh. I hate that for you. He needs to step up. You deserve to know what's going on.

Me: Yeah. If he doesn't tell me soon, I think I have to walk away. I can't keep doing this—being in the dark. It's making me feel sick, like my stomach's twisted all the time.

Tyler: You gotta look out for yourself too, you know? If you need anything, I'm here. You know you can always come crash with me.

Me: Thanks, Ty. I just needed to vent.

Tyler: Always, bro. Just don't let it eat you up. Either he steps up, or he doesn't. You'll be okay, I promise.

I was pacing Holden's living room, drumming my fingers nervously against my thigh. The quiet of the house pressed in on me. I couldn't keep doing this—waiting, hoping, feeling like something was about to explode.

Why did Holden act like telling me would be the end of the world? It only highlighted how much I didn't belong and made my heart ache in ways I couldn't even put into words.

I paused by the window, staring out at the fading light. The mountains were just shadows now. I loved it out here, but even the beauty couldn't calm me down. I'd tried. I really had. I told Holden he could tell me when he was ready. But the longer it dragged on, the worse it got.

I couldn't take it anymore.

I glanced at the door to Holden's office. He'd gone in there after dinner to handle some emergency at the resort. I knew I was probably making him nervous, but I was past caring. Every time I looked at him, all I could think was: Why won't you just tell me?

Taking a deep breath, I gathered whatever courage I had left and crossed the room. I knocked on the door, barely waiting for his quiet "Come in" before opening it.

Holden looked up from his laptop, his eyes meeting mine. For a moment, I almost lost my nerve. He looked so tired, like the weight of whatever he was holding back was pressing down on him just as much as it was on me.

“Mylo?” Holden said, his voice gentle. “Everything okay?”

“We need to talk.” The words came out shakier than I wanted, and I hated it. I wanted to sound firm. But this was Holden, and every time I looked at him, all I could think about was how much I wanted this to work. How much I wanted him. How right it felt when I was around him, like every horrible thing in my life had led me to this moment.

He set the laptop aside and stood up, concern written all over his face. “Okay. What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

I crossed my arms, more to have something to do with my hands than anything else. “I can’t keep pretending like everything’s okay when I know you’re keeping something from me. It’s driving me crazy, and it’s... it’s not fair, Holden.”

He winced, his gaze dropping to the floor. I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his hands curled into fists at his sides. He didn’t want to do this. I knew that. But I also knew I couldn’t keep waiting.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” I pressed on, my voice trembling just a little. “And I get it, maybe it’s complicated. But whatever it is, it can’t be worse than what my brain’s been coming up with. I just want the truth. I just want you to trust me enough to tell me.”

He didn’t answer. He just stood there, staring at the floor. That silence—God, that silence said everything.

My heart sank, a lump forming in my throat as the realization hit me. He wasn’t going to tell me. He couldn’t.

I blinked back tears, biting the inside of my cheek, trying to hold myself together. I’d

promised myself I wouldn't cry. Not here. Not in front of him.

"I can't keep doing this," I said, my voice breaking. "I thought we had something real, Holden. I thought you felt the same way."

His head snapped up then, his eyes filled with something I couldn't quite read—pain, regret, maybe even fear. "I do," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "I do feel the same way. But it's not that simple, Mylo. Please, just... give me more time."

I shook my head, the tears finally spilling over. "I've given you time. I've been patient. But I can't keep waiting. I can't keep feeling like I'm the only one a hundred percent in this."

Silence. Heavy, suffocating silence that stretched on forever.

I nodded, swallowing hard, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "I... I'm done, Holden," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "I can't do this anymore."

I turned, each step away from him feeling like a knife twisting in my chest. I made it to the doorway before I heard him.

"Mylo, wait?—"

I paused, my hand on the doorframe, my heart pounding, hoping—praying—that he'd say it. That he'd finally let me in.

But he didn't. There was nothing but silence behind me.

I swallowed hard, my vision blurring as I walked out of the room, out of his house. Every step felt heavier than the last, and by the time I reached my cabin, I felt like I was falling apart.

I sank onto the bed, burying my face in my hands as the tears came—hot, bitter, unstoppable.

How stupid could I have been? To think I could have something good. Something real. I'd let myself believe it, let myself fall for him, and now...

Now, I was right back where I started. Alone.

And the worst part? Despite everything, I still loved him. And that hurt more than anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HOLDEN

I stood outside Mylo's cabin for what felt like hours, staring at the door, praying he'd open it. I'd knocked until my knuckles ached, called his name until my throat went raw. Nothing. Not even a rustle from inside. He was done with me. And honestly, I couldn't blame him.

I finally dragged myself back to the house, the weight of it all pressing down on me. It was one thing for Mylo to push me away, but knowing I was the reason—knowing I was the one who messed this up—made my chest feel like it was caving in. By the time I walked into the living room, my head was pounding, and all I wanted was something—anything—to make the noise in my brain stop.

West, Knox, and Law were already there, sprawled across the couches with beers in hand. They looked up when I walked in, and I knew they could see it all over my face—the defeat, the heartbreak. I didn't even bother hiding it. What was the point? They knew everything anyway.

Hell, everyone probably knew by now.

“Didn't go well, did it?” West asked, his voice softer than usual.

I shook my head and dropped into the armchair across from them. “He wouldn't even open the door.”

Knox winced, taking a slow sip of his beer. “I mean... can you blame him? You’ve been keeping a pretty big secret, Holden. And not just any secret—a shifter secret. He probably thinks you’re hiding something worse.”

I ran a hand through my hair, frustration bubbling inside me. “I know. I fucking know, okay? I hate this. I hate that it’s gone on this long. I hate myself for not just telling him.”

“So tell him,” Law said, like it was the simplest thing in the world. “Get it over with. Rip off the damn band-aid.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Yeah, because it’s that easy. I tried. I really did. But every time I opened my mouth to say it, all I could think about was James. The way he looked at me when he found out. The fear in his eyes. I can’t... I can’t do that again.”

Maybe it was stupid, but it felt like if I could postpone it long enough—savor the time we had together—then by the time he found out, if he decided to walk away... at least I’d have the memories.

It was stupid.

“This isn’t James,” Knox said quietly. “This is Mylo. Your mate. You’re not the same person you were back then. You’ve got to stop letting that one moment control your whole life. Mylo deserves the truth. Hell, he deserves the choice to decide if he wants to be with you or not.”

“And what if he decides he doesn’t?” I asked, my voice cracking despite my best effort to keep it steady.

“Well, he’s already done that because you didn’t tell him,” Law pointed out bluntly.

“Helpful,” I growled.

Law just shrugged, completely unfazed.

“Then at least you’ll know you tried,” West said, his gaze steady. “Right now, you’re not even giving him a chance. You’re deciding for him, and that’s not fair. Not to you, and definitely not to him.”

I closed my eyes, the exhaustion settling deep in my bones. They were right. I knew they were right. But knowing it and actually doing it? Those were two very different things.

“Noah offered to tell him for you,” Law said after a moment, his tone careful. “Why don’t you let him?”

“What kind of mate... what kind of alpha does that make me?” I snapped, the words sharper than I intended. “I can’t have someone else tell him. It has to come from me.”

“So tell him then.”

I really wanted to punch my cousin.

“That’s not fuckin’ helpful, Law.”

He just smirked, like the little shit he was.

“Okay, okay,” Knox said, raising a hand in surrender. “What about writing it down? Maybe if you put it in a letter or something, it’ll be easier.”

I snorted. “Yeah, right. Like we’re passing notes in high school. ‘Hey, by the way, I’m a bear shifter. Are you cool with that? Circle yes or no.’”

West chuckled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm serious, Holden. You've got to do something. Not telling him is doing more damage than telling him ever could. He's already gone, man. What's the worst that could happen?"

"He could die." My voice was barely above a whisper. "He could run from me... and literally die."

"He won't," Knox said, his voice calm and certain. "You're not a monster, Holden. You're his mate. He deserves to know that."

"Yeah," Law added. "You're only holding back because you're scared. And I get it. But you're hurting him by keeping this from him—which isn't what a good alpha does."

I flinched at that.

"So why not just... tell him?"

The silence that followed was heavy and suffocating. I stared down at my hands, my fingers curling into fists. They were right. I knew they were right. But the fear of losing Mylo—of seeing that same look in his eyes that I'd seen in James'—paralyzed me.

"I'll think about it," I muttered, my voice rough. It was the best I could offer right now.

West sighed, leaning back against the couch. "Just don't take too long, okay? He's not going to wait around forever. And you don't want to lose him over something like this."

"I hope it's that simple when it's your turn," I shot back.

West held my gaze for a second, then looked away, a shadow crossing his face. “You’re right—it’s not simple. But it’s not impossible either.”

“And you won’t be the first shifter to break the news to your mate,” Knox added. “Even the council doesn’t forbid it.”

I nodded, though the thought of Mylo moving on—finding someone who could give him everything without all the secrets and baggage—made my chest ache in ways I couldn’t describe.

I wanted to be that person for him. The one he could trust, the one he could rely on. But I had to let go of my own fear first. And that? That was the scariest part.

Because if I let go of that fear—if I told Mylo everything—there was no guarantee he’d stay. And the thought of losing him... it was almost too much to bear.

“Just... think about it, okay?” Knox said, his voice softer now, almost gentle. “We’re here for you, whatever you decide. But you’ve got to make a decision, Holden. Before it’s too late.”

I nodded again, swallowing hard. They were right. I knew they were right. But knowing it and actually doing it? Those were two very different things.

And as I sat there, the weight of everything pressing down on me, I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d ever be brave enough to take that step. To trust Mylo with the truth. To trust him with my heart.

Because that’s what this was really about, wasn’t it? It wasn’t just about being a shifter. It was about letting someone in—giving someone the power to break you.

And after everything I’d been through, after losing James, after years of keeping

everyone at arm's length... that was the scariest thing of all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MYLO

Had I messed everything up? I knew I was the one who ended things with Holden, but that didn't stop the ache in my chest.

For the past three days, I'd been holed up in my cabin with the curtains drawn, my phone off, trying to shut out the world. I wasn't proud of it. My eyes felt raw from all the crying, and the worst part? It didn't make anything better. If anything, I was left with more questions—questions not just about Holden but about myself. Why did I let my fears take over, driving a wedge between me and the only person who made me feel safe and wanted?

Noah had stopped by at least twice, his knock loud enough to be heard over the pounding in my head. I stayed on the couch, pulling the blanket tighter around me, hoping he'd get the hint. I didn't want to see anyone—not even him. Especially not him. Because if I opened that door and saw his kind eyes, I'd break down all over again. And I was done breaking. Besides, I was still mad at him too.

Maybe I was overreacting. Maybe... maybe I'd made a mistake. Sure, Holden was keeping something from me, something big. And yeah, it hurt to be left in the dark while everyone else seemed to know. But did it really matter? So what if my mind had run wild—turning him into a serial killer or cult leader? Maybe—just maybe—I should've been more patient, given him the time he needed. Because whatever he was hiding, it couldn't be worse than this emptiness gnawing at me now.

I shut that thought down quickly. This wasn't who I was. I wasn't the kind of guy who let people keep secrets from him, even if they thought it was for my own good. I'd worked too hard to become independent, to trust myself, to let that happen again.

But damn, I missed him. I missed his voice, his warmth, that ridiculous half-smile that made my stomach do stupid little flips. And I hated myself for still loving him, even after everything.

I needed out of here—out of my head, out of this cabin, and away from the endless loop of self-pity that wouldn't quit.

I pushed myself off the couch, grabbed my jacket, and pulled on my boots. Fresh air. I needed fresh air. And maybe a ride—that always helped. Holden and I had been riding almost every day, and even without him, the thought of taking Snowdrop out brought some comfort.

The late afternoon air hit me the second I stepped outside, sharp and cold, but it felt good. It reminded me that the world was still out here, even if my head was a mess. I made my way to the stables, shoving my hands deep into my pockets as if that might help me hold everything in.

When I reached the stables, a guy—Mark, I think—gave me a small smile. “Hey, Mylo. Haven't seen you in a few days.”

I managed a weak attempt at a smile. “Yeah, just needed some time.”

He didn't press, thank God. He just nodded and led me over to Snowdrop's stall. “Heading out for a ride?”

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing Snowdrop's neck. Her warmth and steady strength beneath my hand were grounding. “Just need to clear my head, you know?”

Mark gave me a knowing nod. “I’ll get her ready for you.”

In no time, Snowdrop was saddled, and I guided her away from the main grounds, letting her set the pace. The gentle sway of her gait, the cool breeze against my face, the rhythmic clop of her hooves—all of it helped. It didn’t fix anything, but it gave me something solid to hold onto, something real.

As I rode, my thoughts wandered to what it would mean if I left. Tyler had offered me a place to stay, even a job at his family’s restaurant. I had options. But the thought of leaving Holden behind—leaving behind this feeling of belonging—made my chest ache.

Holden was here. As much as it scared me—the idea of some awful secret lurking beneath the surface—I didn’t want to leave him. I didn’t want to lose this chance at something real, something good.

Snowdrop’s ears flicked as we rode deeper into the property, and I realized I hadn’t been paying attention. The trees grew thicker here, the air cooler. I wasn’t sure where I was.

Then I heard it—a low growl that made my heart jump into my throat.

Snowdrop tensed beneath me, her ears flattening. I looked up and saw them—wolves. Three of them, their eyes locked on me, bodies low to the ground, muscles coiled. Panic clawed at me, my heartbeat hammering in my chest as I tried to stay calm.

Snowdrop shifted beneath me, sensing my fear. I tightened my grip on the reins, forcing my voice to stay steady. “Easy, girl,” I whispered, my breath shaky. “We’re okay. We’re okay.”

But we weren’t. The wolves were circling now, closing in, their growls growing

louder.

My mind raced. What the hell was I supposed to do? Turn back? Try to run?

Snowdrop whinnied, her muscles bunching beneath me, ready to bolt. If she did, I'd be thrown. Or worse.

“Hey!” I shouted, my voice cracking. “Back off!”

The wolves didn't flinch. If anything, they moved closer, eyes locked on me, teeth bared.

I was frozen—absolutely frozen.

The growling surrounded me, my heart pounding in my ears. This was it—I was about to die. I couldn't even take a proper breath, let alone think. Every instinct I had screamed at me to run, but I was frozen. Snowdrop shifted nervously beneath me, and I tried to steady her, but my hands were shaking so badly I could barely hold the reins.

I should've listened to Holden. I should've... I don't know, paid more attention to where I was riding instead of letting my mind wander. My eyes darted around, catching sight of the wolves inching closer, their eyes locked on me like I was prey.

I tried to turn Snowdrop around, hoping to find a gap to escape through, but as soon as I moved, a massive wolf—its fur almost black—stepped forward and growled. The deep, guttural sound made my heart stop.

This was it. I was going to die because I'd been stupid and careless. The pit in my stomach twisted painfully as I closed my eyes, waiting for it to be over.

Then a snarl ripped through the air—louder, sharper than the others. My eyes snapped open, just in time to see a large wolf leap between me and the others. Its fur was a deep auburn, muscles rippling as it landed in front of me, teeth bared at the three wolves.

For a moment, silence hung in the air. The other wolves hesitated, their ears flattening. And then chaos erupted.

The three wolves lunged at once, and the auburn wolf met them head-on—teeth gnashing, fur flying. Snowdrop reared back, her fear overwhelming her, but I was frozen in place, unable to move. My heart pounded so hard it hurt.

The auburn wolf was fighting to protect me, but there were three of them and only one of it. They tore into each other, and I could barely breathe as I watched. Time seemed to slow, the scene unfolding in jagged flashes—growls, yelps, bodies colliding—and then the auburn wolf hit the ground with a thud, one of the others sinking its teeth into its side.

I needed to do something. I needed to help. But I couldn't even scream.

The fight ended almost as suddenly as it had begun. The auburn wolf lay still, blood staining the dirt beneath it, and the three other wolves turned their attention back to me. My heart stopped. This was it. They were going to kill me. And I hadn't even been able to save the wolf that tried to protect me.

Before they could move, a roar shattered the air—deep, earth-shaking. I whipped around, eyes wide, just in time to see a massive bear charge out of the woods. It barreled into the wolves, swiping at them with paws bigger than my head.

The wolves scattered, their snarls turning into yelps as they fled, tails tucked between their legs.

My brain screamed that I should run too—because if three wolves were terrifying, what was I supposed to do with one bear?

The bear stood there for a moment, chest heaving with each breath, and then it turned, locking eyes with me. My breath caught in my throat as it padded over to the auburn wolf, nudging it gently with its nose.

Right in front of me, the wolf shifted—its body contorting, bones cracking—and suddenly Noah lay there, unconscious and battered.

“Noah?” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

The bear turned to me, and then it shifted too—its form blurring, rearranging itself—until Holden was standing there, fear etched into every line of his face as he looked at me.

“Oh,” I said flatly, numbness washing over me. It was all I could manage.

Holden didn’t waste a second. He moved to Noah, lifting him effortlessly into his arms, and then glanced back at me. “Follow me,” he said, his voice gentle but firm. “We need to get him back.”

I nodded, still too stunned to say anything else.

Holden leaned close to Snowdrop, his voice low but reassuring. “Go home, girl. You know the way.”

Snowdrop whinnied softly, her ears flicking back as if she understood. With a nudge from Holden, she turned and began trotting down the trail toward the compound.

Holden carried Noah toward the main grounds, and I followed, my body on autopilot

while my mind reeled.

Bear shifter. Wolves. Noah.

Somehow, in the strangest way, it all made sense. But I didn't know what that meant—for me, for Holden, for any of this. All I knew was that right now, I had to keep moving. I had to make sure Noah was okay.

Everything else... I'd figure out later.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HOLDEN

The entire walk back to Bishop's clinic, I didn't say a word, even though my brain was screaming. I focused on getting Noah's limp body to my brother. That was the only thing that mattered right now. Still, I could feel Mylo's eyes glued to my back.

It was easy—for now—to ignore the fact that I'd just shown him exactly who I was. He'd seen me shift. He'd seen Noah go down for him. Everything I'd dreaded, everything I'd tried so damn hard to avoid, happened in a single heartbeat.

But I couldn't think about that. Not yet. Not until I knew Noah was okay.

Over and over, my brain reminded me: Mylo knows. There was no undoing it.

I kept replaying that look on his face—the way everything clicked in his head, that soft “Oh,” so detached, so unlike him. Like he'd shut down to process it all in that methodical way I'd come to know so well. And the longer I thought about it, the worse it got.

By the time we reached the clinic, Bishop was prepped and waiting. One look at Noah's unconscious body, and Bishop was rushing us inside, his voice sharp and professional. I barely had time to set Noah down before Bishop started barking orders.

“Everyone else, out. Now.”

Mylo stood beside me, silent, his eyes wide, face pale as a sheet. I wanted to pull him close, tell him everything was going to be okay—that we were going to be okay.

But I didn't. Because I wasn't sure it was true. And I was terrified he'd never want to speak to me again.

Instead, I watched him sit down, his shoulders trembling just slightly, like he was holding it together by a thread. Mylo—my mate—who was usually so full of life, looked like a shadow of himself. And it was all my fault.

Yeah, because you're the biggest coward to ever coward.

The rest of the family arrived in the next few minutes—Hope, Indigo, Sarah, Knox, Law. They didn't say much, but their looks spoke volumes. Worry. Blame. Disappointment. I carried it all on my shoulders, where it belonged. I should've told Mylo the truth ages ago. Maybe if I had, we wouldn't be here now.

Mylo sat hunched over with his elbows on his knees, staring at the floor like it held all the answers. I kept searching for the right words— anything —but every time I opened my mouth, I saw that same look in his eyes: fear, betrayal. I'd put that there.

I'd been so afraid of losing him that I'd done the one thing guaranteed to push him away.

"He'll be okay," Hope said softly, breaking the silence. She gave Mylo's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Noah's tough. He'll pull through."

Mylo nodded, jaw clenched so tight I could see the muscles twitching. "It's my fault," he whispered, though I could hear every word clear as day.

"No," Hope said firmly, her voice sharp with anger. "It's their fault."

I knew we'd have to deal with Noah's family—his real pack. They had a point. Mylo had crossed into their territory, and there would be consequences. But that didn't make this any easier.

"I'm sorry," Mylo whispered.

Hope sighed and wrapped her arm around him, even though he stayed hunched over. "He's going to be fine, Mylo. Trust me."

I stepped closer, my boots scuffing the clinic floor. I had no idea what I was going to say, but I couldn't just stand there and do nothing.

"Mylo," I whispered.

He finally looked up. The pain in his eyes hit me like a punch to the gut. "I... I'm sorry. I should've?"

"Not now," he interrupted, his voice hoarse. He shook his head and looked away. "I can't... I can't think about this right now. Not until I know Noah's okay."

I swallowed hard and nodded, even though he wasn't looking at me. "Okay. I understand."

The silence that followed was suffocating. I leaned back against the wall, my eyes never leaving him. Mylo was right. Now wasn't the time. Noah was fighting for his life in the next room, and I was standing here, trying to fix things that couldn't be fixed—not yet.

You let it get to this point.

Minutes stretched into what felt like hours. Finally, the door to the back room

opened, and Bishop walked out, wiping his hands on a towel. He looked exhausted, but there was a small smile on his face.

“He’s stable,” Bishop said, and the tension in the room eased. “He’s going to be okay. It’ll take time, but he’ll recover.”

Before I could react, Mylo shot to his feet and bolted from the room.

“Mylo!” I called after him, my heart slamming against my ribs.

He was already gone.

I moved to follow, but Hope’s voice stopped me.

“Let him go for now,” she said gently.

I turned toward her, confused. “I need to make sure he’s okay.”

Hope gave me a knowing look, her lips twitching into a faint smile. “He just needs some space to process everything. And if... if he’s pregnant, that’s a whole other set of emotions to work through.”

The words hit me like a freight train. “What?”

She shrugged, her expression light but serious. “I’m just saying... throwing up like that, running off the way he did—it wouldn’t be the first time someone acted like that because they’re pregnant.”

My stomach dropped. “Pregnant?”

Hope just smiled and gave my arm a pat. “Just something to think about.”

I stood there, stunned, my mind racing. Pregnant. Mylo. Mylo, carrying my child. Could it be true? My thoughts tumbled over themselves as I replayed every moment we'd spent together—the kisses, the nights, every shared touch.

No, I would've known. He would've said something. Right?

But then again, I hadn't exactly been forthcoming with him, either.

"You think..." I trailed off, unable to finish the question.

Hope just smiled again. "You'll figure it out."

I pushed away from the wall, heart pounding. If I was really pregnant, everything just got a whole lot more complicated.

Did it though... having a child with my mate... it was more than I deserved.

But complicated or not...I couldn't let fear hold me back anymore. Not for him. Not for us.

"Holden!" Knox called after me as I headed toward the door Mylo had run through.

I didn't stop. I couldn't.

Not until I found him. Not until I made this right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MYLO

The moment Bishop said Noah was going to be okay, I was up and out of that clinic faster than I even knew I could move. I felt Holden's eyes on me, burning holes into my back as I shoved past the doors and bolted outside. I barely made it around the corner before I puked—everything I'd eaten today, everything I'd felt, all of it coming out in one gross wave.

I felt weak, drained, and my brain wouldn't stop spinning. There was a tightness in my chest, an ache in my stomach that had nothing to do with what I'd just thrown up. The world had shifted on its axis—like everything I thought I knew had been a lie, and now I had to figure out what was real and what wasn't.

I walked home, each step heavy, my heart pounding like it was trying to jump out of my chest. Shifters. Holden's a bear. Noah is a wolf. Shifters.

People turned into animals...

When I got inside, I slammed the door behind me out of pure instinct. The small cabin was dim, the lights still off, the place feeling colder and emptier than it ever had. I dragged myself to the freezer, grabbed an ice pack, and pressed it to my head. The cold bit into my skin as I flopped onto the couch. It was supposed to help clear my thoughts, ease the pounding in my head—but nothing was working right now.

"Shifters," I mumbled out loud, shaking my head. "Like, what the hell even..."

My voice sounded strange in the silence—too loud, too unsure. I squeezed my eyes shut, taking a breath, trying to make it all fit together in my mind. Noah. God, Noah. The one person who'd been there for me when I needed someone most. The one who'd shown me kindness when I thought I'd never have a family. And he'd been a wolf this entire time?

I sighed, letting my head fall back against the couch. I couldn't wrap my brain around it. I knew what I saw. Noah had saved me. He'd fought for me, protected me like he always did, except this time... he wasn't even human.

And that weirdly didn't change anything.

Noah was still Noah—still the man who'd treated me like I was someone worth protecting.

I guess I should've been terrified—I probably should be terrified. But I couldn't be.

Because if Noah was still Noah, then... Holden was still Holden, right?

"Holden..." I whispered, running my fingers over my temple, trying to massage away the ache. His face flashed in my mind—the way he'd looked at me in the clinic, desperate, like he was ready to take on the world for me. It made my heart twist, and not in a good way.

Because even though I knew Holden would've done anything to keep me safe, the truth was... I didn't fit here. Not really.

The ice pack slipped from my forehead, landing on the floor, but I didn't move to pick it up. I was too busy trying to figure out where I went from here. Holden's a bear. That's what I'd seen—that's what I'd been running from. He'd shifted right in front of me, fought off those wolves, and then looked at me like... like he was scared

I'd never look at him the same again.

"And maybe I don't," I admitted, my voice shaky. "Maybe I don't know what to think anymore."

It felt like my whole world had tilted—like all the pieces I thought I had figured out had been scattered, and now I was scrambling to put them back together. And the truth was, I wasn't sure they would fit the same way again. I'd thought I was finally finding a place for myself, a home. I'd thought maybe Holden was it. But now...

I closed my eyes, letting out a slow breath. Were they all shifters. The whole resort. Hell, the whole damn town. And here I was, some guy who didn't even know where he came from—who didn't have a real family, a real home. Who the hell was I kidding, thinking I could belong here? Thinking I could have a place in this world that didn't really belong to me?

"Maybe I should've just stayed in Charlotte," I muttered, shaking my head. Maybe Chuck had done me a favor after all, screwing things up the way he had. Maybe it was my sign that I was never meant to stay—never meant to have any of this.

And yet, the thought of leaving made my chest ache. The idea of walking away from Holden, from everything I'd started to build here—it hurt. And that was the problem, wasn't it? I didn't fit, but I wanted to. More than anything, I wanted to belong here. To be a part of Holden's world, even if it was a world I didn't understand.

"Damn it," I cursed, scrubbing a hand over my face. "What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

I sat there, staring at the ceiling, waiting for some kind of answer that never came.

I shouldn't have been surprised when the knock echoed through my cabin. I knew it

was coming—knew who was on the other side of that door before I even dragged myself off the couch to answer it. I paused for a second, staring at the door, then let out a shaky breath. Might as well get this over with.

When I opened it, there he was. Holden, standing there like he'd been ripped straight from my thoughts—which, considering how much space he took up in my brain lately, wasn't too far off. His face was tight, worry etched into every line. His eyes were locked on me, searching for something.

“Bear,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest, because I had to say something, and what the hell else was there to say?

Holden blinked, taken aback for a second, and then his brow furrowed. “Are you pregnant?”

I looked away, biting my lip. It wasn't exactly a yes-or-no question. Or maybe it was, but the answer wasn't that simple. I shrugged, my gaze falling to the floor. “I don't know. I think so.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” he asked, his voice soft, full of something that made my chest ache. He sounded... hurt. And I hated that.

I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “I hadn't decided what I was going to do yet,” I admitted. “So, I didn't want to find out and make it real. After all, I'm not exactly in a stable situation, am I?”

Holden's face twisted, and he took a step closer, his hand reaching out like he was about to touch me, but he stopped just short. “Mylo, I'm so sorry,” he whispered, his eyes filled with regret. “I never wanted to make you feel like this. Like you couldn't trust me, or like you weren't safe here. I... I messed up. And I promise, I will never keep anything from you again.”

I looked up at him, meeting his eyes, and for the first time, I saw something there that I hadn't allowed myself to see before. Vulnerability. Fear. He meant it. Every word. And that's when I knew—really knew—that he wasn't just saying this because he felt guilty. He was saying it because he wanted me to stay. Because he cared.

“Tell me everything,” I said, my voice barely a whisper.

Holden nodded, his shoulders sagging like a weight had just settled on them. He took a deep breath, and then he started talking.

He told me everything. About shifters. About how they worked, how they lived, the rules they followed. He told me about his family, about the town, about all the people I'd met who were just like him—who had this whole other side to them that I'd never known about. It was a lot. A whole lot. But I listened, because this was Holden. And I needed to understand.

And then he told me about James.

“I was twelve,” he said, his voice low, his eyes distant, like he was seeing back in time. “He was my best friend. We'd been friends since we were kids—we'd always been inseparable. And I... I thought I could trust him. I thought...” He shook his head, a sad smile tugging at his lips. “I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought he'd understand.”

I swallowed, my throat tight. “What happened?”

I knew this wasn't going to go well.

Holden's jaw clenched, his eyes closing for a moment before he looked at me again. “I told him. I broke the rule—the most basic rule of being a shifter. Keep the secret. But I told him. And he didn't believe me. So, I shifted.”

My heart pounded, my stomach twisting as I watched the pain flash across his face. He took a shaky breath, his gaze dropping to the floor.

“He panicked,” Holden continued, his voice barely audible. “He ran. He wasn’t looking where he was going—he was looking back at me. I’d shifted into my bear. I thought... I thought it would be easier to believe, and we’d been friends forever. I figured he would just see me, so it wouldn’t be as scary, you know? But it wasn’t. And he ran.”

I could feel my chest tightening, my heart breaking for him. I took a step closer, my hand resting on his arm. “Holden...”

“I didn’t shift back,” he said, his voice cracking. “I didn’t even think to. If I had, maybe I could’ve warned him. Maybe I could’ve...” He shook his head, his eyes glistening. “He ran off a cliff. He didn’t see it. And I... I watched it happen. I buried him, Mylo. And then I promised myself I’d never break the rules again. That I’d never let anyone get that close again.”

My chest ached, and I felt tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. I stepped closer, wrapping my arms around him, holding him tight. He stiffened for a second, then relaxed, his arms wrapping around me in return, holding me like I was the only thing keeping him grounded.

“I was so afraid, Mylo,” he whispered against my hair. “I was afraid that if I told you, you’d freak out. That you’d run, and I... I can’t lose you. I can’t do that again.”

I pulled back just enough to look up at him, my hand resting on his cheek. “I’m not going anywhere,” I said, my voice steady. “I’m not James, Holden. And I’m not going to run.”

As I said the words, I realized I meant them.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with something that looked like hope—like maybe, just maybe, he could believe me. He let out a shaky breath, his forehead resting against mine.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “For everything. For keeping this from you, for making you feel like you couldn’t trust me. I’ll never keep anything from you again. I swear it.”

I nodded, my fingers brushing against his jaw. “Okay,” I said softly. “But you’re going to have to help me understand all of this. Because right now, it’s a lot. And I... I don’t know how to feel about it yet.”

Holden nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. “I will. I’ll tell you everything. I’ll help you understand. Just... don’t give up on me. On us.”

I smiled, leaning up to press a soft kiss to his lips. “I won’t,” I whispered. “I promise.”

Holden’s arms tightened around me, pulling me closer, and for the first time in days, I felt like maybe—just maybe—things were going to be okay. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t easy. But it was real. And for now, that was enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

HOLDEN

I stood there, my breath caught in my chest, staring at Mylo. He was right in front of me but, I felt like I was miles away from him. The uncertainty in his eyes made my throat tighten. He looked at me like he was still deciding if he could trust me—if I deserved him. And maybe he was right. Maybe I didn't. But hell, I was going to try anyway.

“Mylo, I—” The words caught in my throat, and I swallowed, trying to clear away the tightness. I felt like a bear stuck in a trap—big, strong, and entirely helpless. This wasn't a battle I could win with strength. Not when the stakes were my heart. Not when I was standing here, vulnerable in a way I'd never let myself be.

If you were stronger from the time maybe you wouldn't be here.

“Look,” I said, my voice breaking just a little. “I know you have every reason to walk away—every reason to say no. But, Mylo please, I need you to stay. I'm begging you. I will get it right this time if you let me. I'll do my best to give you everything you've ever wanted. Be everything you need. You just have to accept me—all of me.”

I was begging but I didn't care.

Mylo's eyes softened, and I could see him wavering. That familiar strength I'd admired from the start was still there—the kind that had nothing to do with muscle or power. It came from being knocked down a hundred times and standing back up

anyway. I admired that strength more than I could ever say. And right now, I needed it—because without him, I had nothing.

“I don’t know,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “I have so many questions. I mean... accepting your bite, what does that even mean? What happens after that?”

I took a step closer, feeling the tension between us. The air felt oppressive, like we were on the edge of something big. Maybe we were. I reached out, taking his hand in mine. His fingers trembled slightly, and I squeezed them gently, hoping he could feel just how much he meant to me.

“It means you’ll be mine,” I said, my voice low. “It means you’ll be part of my world—that I’ll protect you with everything I have. You’ll be connected to me in a way that’s deeper than anything else in this world. And I promise, Mylo, I’ll never keep anything from you again. No more secrets.”

His eyes searched mine, still filled with questions. I couldn’t blame him. This was big—bigger than anything he’d ever had to decide before. And I had to give him the truth—all of it.

“There’s more than just bears. Wolves like Noah, mountain lions, foxes... and even more than that. Vampires, warlocks—it’s all real. I know how it sounds—like some kind of fairytale gone wrong—but it’s my life. It can be our life, if you’ll have me.”

His eyes went wide, and I could hear his heart pounding in the quiet room. I couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at my lips. This world must’ve seemed insane to him, but he was still here. Still listening. Still considering it.

“And mates?” he asked, his voice cracking just a bit. “What does that mean?”

My chest tightened, and I stepped even closer until there was barely any space

between us. I let my forehead rest against his, closing my eyes for a moment, breathing him in—the scent that had driven me crazy from the moment I first caught it.

“It means you’re my everything,” I whispered. “You’re the only person in this world for me. The only one I’ll ever want, ever need. You’re the goddess’ perfect gift to me—the only person that has been perfectly made for me. And for me, that’s you, Mylo. It’s always been you. You’re strong, you’re kind, you’re caring... and you’re perfect for me. You’re the person I want by my side, the one I want to help me run the pack when the time comes.”

He held my gaze, his eyes glassy with unshed tears. “Why me?” he whispered. “I don’t even know where I came from. I don’t know who I am... I don’t have... I don’t have anything to offer,” He whispered.

“You have everything to offer,” I said fiercely, not letting him look away. “You’re everything I need, Mylo. And my family? They already love you. You have them now. You have us. You’re not alone anymore.”

A tear slipped down his cheek, and I wiped it away with my thumb, my heart aching at the vulnerability in his eyes. He was strong, but he’d never had anyone tell him that. He’d never had anyone show him how much he was worth.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “Stay. Let me be the one to love you. Let me be the one to show you what it means to have a family—to have a place where you belong. I’ll give you everything, Mylo. Just... don’t walk away.”

He stared at me, his eyes searching mine, and I held my breath, waiting for his answer. The seconds stretched, my heart pounding, my hands shaking as I held onto him. I’d never been this vulnerable—never put myself out there like this. But for him? For Mylo, I’d do anything.

Finally, he nodded, a shaky breath escaping his lips. “Okay,” he whispered. “Okay, Holden. I’ll stay... but I need to figure out—I need time to think, okay?”

Relief surged through me, and I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. I pulled him into my arms, holding him close, my heart pounding against my ribs. He was staying. He was mine. And I’d spend the rest of my life proving to him that he’d made the right choice.

“Thank you,” I whispered against his hair, my voice breaking. “Thank you, Mylo.”

I knew it wasn’t a yes to forever—not yet. It wasn’t even a promise to accept the bite. But he hadn’t run, and that was more than I could have asked for.

So if he needed time to process it all, I’d give it to him—even though both my bear and I wanted to hold on tight and never let go now that he knew everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MYLO

Don't you wish life-changing decisions announced themselves? I wished there was some kind of flashing neon sign saying, "This way to your destiny," or a voiceover giving me a pep talk.

Instead, it was more silent, but you had this weird feeling in your gut—like that moment at the top of a rollercoaster, right before the drop. Probably how skydivers felt before they jumped out of the plane.

Right now, that feeling had me pacing my cabin like a crazy person. My heart felt stuck somewhere between panic and... hope? Maybe.

Like maybe this time it would be different. Like I'd finally get the happily ever after, even if I definitely hadn't seen it coming with shifters...

But they were still them. Or maybe they'd always been shifters—that was probably the better point.

I tried imagining what it would be like to have such a big secret to tell. Maybe I would've hesitated too.

My phone was in my hand, but I hadn't texted anyone. I thought about calling Tyler, but yeah, that definitely couldn't happen.

I wanted to call Noah, but—well, aside from the fact that he was one of them—he'd literally almost been torn to pieces because of me.

And then there was Holden.

Since he'd left my place a couple of hours ago, I could still see his face, the way he looked at me with those eyes—like I was his entire universe. And damn if that wasn't terrifying—and exhilarating.

I'd spent so long feeling like an outsider looking in, like everyone else had their lives figured out and were just floating along, while I was over here trying not to drown. But Holden... he was holding out his hand to me. He made me feel like I finally belonged somewhere. Like I belonged with him.

I wasn't sure what was scarier—the fact that I felt that way, or the fact that I was ready to risk everything for it again.

Because yeah, the last time I let myself get close, I ended up face-planting hard. And maybe the logical part of my brain was still screaming at me to be cautious, to protect myself, but... it felt right. And maybe it wouldn't be. But I was tired of the walls I'd built around myself—they hadn't helped. And being alone sucked.

I sank down on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

It wasn't perfect—none of this was. But Holden, he'd put everything on the line. He'd shown me his world—the one filled with bears and wolves and a whole bunch of stuff I never could have imagined was real. And instead of running, instead of freaking out, I'd felt... okay. Hell, maybe even a little excited.

Like I was finally a part of something bigger than myself. Like I'd finally found my people.

And so what if they turned into predator animals?

I shook my head, a wry smile tugging at my lips. Was I really considering this? Was I really ready to dive into this world, into this life?

I so was.

Because Holden wasn't just some guy. He was... everything. He was the person who looked at me like I was more than just some kid with no name... no family. He saw me—the real me—and he still wanted me. And for the first time in my life, I believed I deserved to be wanted like that.

The thoughts kept coming, each one louder than the last. Before I knew it, I was up and out the door, halfway across the grounds. It almost felt like my feet had a mind of their own. It wasn't until I was at Holden's doorstep that I realized my heart was pounding.

I paused, staring at the door. I knew I could still walk away. I could turn around, pretend none of this had ever happened. But I'd go back to... what? Being alone? Pretending I was okay with just getting by?

No. No, I wasn't going back.

I knocked, and the door swung open almost immediately, like Holden had been waiting. His eyes widened when he saw me, and for a moment, neither of us moved. His gaze was intense, searching, like he was trying to figure out if I'd come to break his heart or...

"Mylo?" His voice was a whisper, barely audible over the sound of my own heartbeat. "What are you doing here?"

I drew in a deep breath and made myself take a step closer, closing the distance between us. “I... I thought about everything you said. About what you offered. About being your mate.”

His eyes flickered with something I couldn’t quite place—fear, maybe, or hope. He opened his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it.

“And I’m scared, okay?” My voice cracked, and I hated how small it sounded. “I’m scared because I’ve done this before. I’ve taken the risk, and it blew up in my face. I’m scared because this —you—it’s all so big, and I don’t know if I can handle losing it. But I...”

I looked up, meeting his eyes.

“But I want to try. Because I think... no, I know... that this is different. You’re different.”

Holden didn’t say anything. He just reached out, cupping my face in his hands, his thumbs brushing gently over my cheekbones. His eyes were soft, filled with so much emotion it made my heart ache. And in that moment, I knew—I’d never felt safer than I did right there, in his arms.

“Mylo,” he whispered, his voice cracking under the weight of his emotions. “You’re everything to me. I’ll do whatever it takes to make you feel safe. To make you feel like you belong. Just... please, don’t walk away.”

I closed my eyes, leaning into his touch. “I’m not walking away,” I whispered, my voice barely audible.

He pulled me into his arms, holding me tight, and I let myself sink into him. The fear was still there, gnawing quietly at the edges of my mind—but it didn’t feel as

overwhelming now. Not when he was holding me like this, like I was the most precious thing in the world.

“I’m not perfect, Holden,” I murmured, my words muffled against his chest. “I’ve got so many flaws, so many things that are just... messed up. I don’t even know if I deserve this.”

Holden pulled back just enough to meet my gaze, his eyes burning with quiet intensity. “You deserve everything. You’re perfect—at least to me. You’re strong, you’re kind, and you’re mine. If you’ll have me.”

I nodded, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat. “Yeah,” I whispered, my voice soft but steady. “I’ll have you.”

He smiled, and it was like the sun breaking through the freakin’ clouds—warm and bright and exactly what I needed. He leaned in, his lips brushing softly against mine, hesitant, like he was still scared I might change my mind. But I didn’t. I kissed him back, my fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt, holding onto him like he was the only thing keeping me grounded.

Maybe he was.

We pulled apart, breathless, and I rested my forehead against his. “I’m still scared,” I admitted. “But I want this. I want you.”

“Then that’s all that matters,” he whispered, his voice low and rough. “We’ll figure the rest out together.”

I smiled—a real smile this time—so wide it made my cheeks ache. “Together,” I repeated. And for the first time in a long time, I believed it. Maybe—just maybe—I’d found where I belonged.

Holden took my hand, threading his fingers with mine, and led me inside. The door closed behind us with a soft click, and yeah, it was sappy, but it felt like I'd shut out the past and stepped into something good.

It hadn't been easy. But we were here. And it was ours. And that was enough.

We sank onto the couch, and Holden didn't let go of my hand—not even for a second. He looked at me, his eyes scanning mine, like he was searching for any trace of doubt. Checking if I was really okay, if I was really ready for this.

And I was.

I'd made my choice. I wasn't backing out now.

"Tell me everything," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "I want to know it all—about shifters, about your world... about us."

He nodded, his thumb brushing gently over the back of my hand. "It's a lot," he warned softly. "But I'll tell you everything. No more secrets."

I smiled, leaning back into the cushions, letting my head rest on his shoulder. "No more secrets," I echoed. And for the first time, it felt like maybe—just maybe—I'd finally gotten it right.

Holden paused, his gaze catching mine. I could see the question lingering there, like he was still trying to gauge if I really wanted to see everything. If I was ready to know every part of him.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Do you want to meet him?" he asked quietly, his voice just above a whisper.

I frowned, tilting my head in confusion. “Meet who?”

“My bear.” The words left his lips carefully. And in his eyes, I saw it—that same vulnerability, raw and hopeful, like he was waiting to see if I’d accept this part of him too.

I blinked. “Your... bear.” The words felt strange on my tongue, like trying to speak a language I didn’t fully understand yet. But then it hit me—of course I was saying yes to all of him. Holden wasn’t just a man; he was a bear too. A part of him I hadn’t truly met yet. A part he wanted me to see. A part he needed me to accept.

Slowly, I nodded. “Yeah, I think I do.”

He gave me that look—half smile, half something softer, like he was teetering between hope and uncertainty. Then, gently, he took my hand and led me toward the back of the cabin. We stepped through the door and into the clearing beyond. The air felt still, like the world was holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

Holden released my hand, taking a small step back. “Just... stay right there, okay?” His voice was careful, like he was still bracing himself for me to freak out or change my mind. And I hated that. I gave him my best reassuring smile.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said softly.

He exhaled, relief flickering in his eyes, though the tension in his shoulders didn’t ease entirely. His gaze held mine, steady and searching, as if locking onto me for the courage he needed. Then, with a nod and a slight shift in his stance, his jaw set with quiet determination.

And then... he changed.

I'd seen Noah shift before—or technically, I had—but this was different. This was Holden. My Holden.

His body twisted, reshaped, bones cracking in ways that should have sounded painful, though he didn't flinch. It was like watching the most surreal, beautiful transformation—human skin and bone melting into something primal and wild. And suddenly, the man I knew disappeared, replaced by a massive bear.

His fur was deep and dark, almost black, and it shimmered slightly beneath the moonlight filtering through the trees. But his eyes—those were still Holden's eyes. Soft, familiar, and steady. They held the same gentleness, the same hope, as if asking, Is this still okay?

For a moment, all I could do was stand there, heart pounding so hard it felt like it might burst. But there wasn't fear—not exactly. There was awe. This was Holden—every part of him.

And without even thinking, I took a step forward.

Holden—the bear—made a low, rumbling noise, like a warning. But I didn't stop. I took another step closer, then another, until I was standing right in front of him. My hand hesitated for just a second before I reached out, my fingers brushing against the thick fur on his shoulder.

It was softer than I expected, warm beneath my palm, and the touch sent a strange sense of comfort washing over me. He made another sound—a softer one this time, almost like a sigh.

“Hey,” I whispered, my voice a little shaky but steady enough. “It's okay. I'm not scared.”

And I realized, in that moment, I wasn't scared. Not even a little. Because this was Holden. Whether he stood before me as a man or a bear, he was still him. Still the same person who looked at me like I mattered, who made me feel like I finally belonged somewhere.

And I wasn't going to let a little thing like fur and claws scare me away.

I let my hand glide over his fur, feeling the power thrumming beneath it—the raw strength I knew he held. Holden turned his head, nudging my shoulder gently with his nose, and a surprised laugh escaped me, light and breathless.

“You're huge,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief. “Like, seriously. Wow.”

He huffed, a sound that was almost like a chuckle, and I grinned, my heart feeling lighter than it had in days. This was real. This was us. And it was perfect, in its own crazy, messed-up way.

“You're incredible,” I murmured, my fingers sinking deeper into his fur. “All of you.”

Then, just like that, the fur receded, and his body shifted back into the familiar human form I knew so well. Suddenly, Holden stood before me—naked, vulnerable, with his eyes locked on mine, his expression raw and open.

“Mylo,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. He stepped closer, his hand cupping my cheek, his thumb brushing tenderly over my skin. “You're not afraid?”

I shook my head, holding his gaze. “No. I'm not afraid of you, Holden. I never could be.”

Without a second thought, I stepped into him, wrapping my arms around his waist

and pulling him close. He exhaled shakily, his arms circling me, holding me as if I was the only thing keeping him grounded. I could feel the tension leaving his body, the weight of his fear lifting as I pressed myself against him.

He leaned back slightly, his eyes searching mine, and then he kissed me—soft, tentative, like he was still afraid I’d change my mind. But I didn’t. I kissed him back, my fingers trailing up his chest, holding onto him like he was the one thing in the world keeping me steady.

“I love you,” he whispered, his voice hoarse and filled with something so tender it made my heart ache. “I love you, Mylo. Every part of you. And I swear, I’ll spend the rest of my life proving that to you.”

I closed my eyes, pressing my face against his chest, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I knew I was home.

“I love you too, Holden,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. “And I’m not going anywhere. Not ever.”

When we finally pulled apart, I looked up at him, my breath coming in short, shaky bursts. My heart raced, but I knew exactly what I wanted. “I want you, Holden,” I whispered, the words barely audible. “All of you. Claim me. Make me yours.”

His eyes darkened, flickering with a storm of emotions—desire, love, fear. For a moment, he hesitated, as if weighing the gravity of what I was asking. Then, his gaze softened, filled with nothing but devotion.

“Are you sure?” he whispered, his voice low, reverent.

I nodded, my pulse thrumming in my ears as I bared my neck to him, exposing the vulnerable skin. “I’m sure. I trust you.”

He let out a shaky breath, his lips brushing over my skin—soft and warm. He kissed me there, his breath hot against my neck, and I closed my eyes, a shiver running through me. Then I felt his teeth—a sharp sting as they sank into my skin—and a rush of warmth flooded through me. It was strange and overwhelming, like I was finally whole.

When he pulled back, his eyes glowed, locked on mine, and for a second, it was like nothing else existed. He leaned in, kissing me deeply, and I felt everything in that kiss—the promise, the commitment. He was mine, and I was his, and nothing else mattered.

We moved inside, our hands never leaving each other, the world shrinking down to just us. Before I knew it, we were in his bedroom. Holden stood close, his hands skimming under my shirt, slowly pushing it up and off. The way he looked at me—like I was something sacred—made me tremble. My shirt hit the floor, and his hands were on me again, warm and sure, like he couldn't stand the distance between us.

His lips brushed against mine, down my neck, and over my shoulders. Holden was everywhere, and I couldn't get enough of him.

The moment his mouth claimed mine, I gasped, the kiss igniting something deep in my chest. He kissed me like he'd been waiting for this moment forever. His tongue tangled with mine, and his hands traced slow, deliberate patterns along my back, sending goosebumps trailing in their wake. When he nibbled my ear, a soft, needy sound escaped me before I could stop it. His touch was light, teasing, but it carried a weight—a claim that held me in place. I arched into him, needing more.

His mouth drifted lower, leaving kisses down my neck. He lingered at the bite mark, kissing and sucking, making it sting and pulse with every beat of my heart. My thoughts scrambled, and I was nothing but a mess of need, his mouth working magic

on my body. My head tipped back, and for a moment, it felt like I could come from that alone.

Holden kissed his way lower, dragging his lips down my chest and stomach. When he reached the waistband of my pants, he paused, glancing up at me through hooded eyes. The weight of his gaze burned through me, leaving me breathless.

He tugged my pants down slowly, deliberately, like he had all the time in the world. When his breath ghosted over me—barely brushing the tip—I trembled, a soft whimper escaping as his mouth finally wrapped around me.

My hips jerked off the bed at the feel of him sucking me, chasing the heat of his mouth. Every pass of his tongue, every deliberate tease, pushed me deeper into the haze of pleasure. His hands slid over my ass, firm and possessive.

By the time Holden shifted between my legs, I was half-gone, lost in the feel of him. When he pushed into me—slow and deliberate—I thought I'd come undone right then and there. The stretch of him filled me in ways I hadn't known I needed. My head hit the pillow, a ragged moan slipping past my lips as he slid deeper, his eyes locked on mine. They burned with heat and something heavier—something that said mine without a single word.

Each slow thrust had me teetering on the edge of something I couldn't name. Then he picked up the pace, and the world narrowed to the sound of our bodies moving together—the slap of skin on skin, the creak of the bed, and our gasps filling the space between us. My nails dug into his shoulders, leaving little crescents behind, clinging to him like he was my anchor. He kept hitting that spot inside me that sent fireworks behind my lids, driving me closer to the edge until I wasn't sure where I ended and he began.

I clutched at his hair, dragging him down into a messy kiss. His mouth met mine with

the same frantic energy, tongues tangling as we fed off each other's need. The tension coiled tighter and tighter in my body, and when I finally let go—when I shattered around him, muscles clenching hard—I saw stars. A desperate sound escaped me as the orgasm ripped through me, waves of pleasure crashing so hard they left me shaking beneath him.

“You are mine,” Holden whispered against my neck, his voice rough and possessive. Then his teeth sank into the same spot, the sharp bite heightening everything. Pain and pleasure wove together, leaving me breathless. I shivered hard, pressing into him, moaning against his skin as he sucked at the bite, drawing out every last bit of sensation until I was trembling all over again.

He didn't stop. His hips kept moving, each thrust harder, deeper, driving me past every limit. I clung to him like he was the only thing keeping me grounded, holding on for dear life as we found a rhythm that felt primal and desperate. It wasn't just sex—it was more than that. With every thrust, every grip of his hands on my hips, it felt like something permanent was being etched into me.

When Holden finally let go—when he came with a low growl that rumbled deep in his chest—I felt it everywhere. The heat of him filled me, and my body tightened around him in response. A second orgasm hit me out of nowhere, just as intense as the first, leaving me gasping beneath him.

Holden's thrusts grew erratic, his movements wild and uncoordinated as he rode out his release. His fingers tangled in my hair, holding me close, and I didn't care how messy or desperate we were—it felt perfect.

When he flipped us so I was on top, his cock still buried deep inside me, I'd never felt so stretched, so complete. Our foreheads touched, and his dark eyes locked on mine, the promise we'd made reflected in their depths.

When he finally slipped free, I slumped against him, weak and satisfied in ways I hadn't known were possible. Holden wrapped his arms around me, pressing soft kisses to my temple, my cheeks, my neck. I sighed contentedly, nuzzling into him, savoring the warmth of his skin against mine.

"You are mine," he whispered again, softer this time, his lips brushing against mine.

And I believed him.

We barely caught our breath before Holden slid back inside me, making love to me slowly this time. His touch was reverent, like he was worshipping every part of me. And I let him. I let myself feel everything—the love, the connection, the belonging.

When he knotted me a second time, claiming me fully, it was everything.

I knew without a doubt this was where I was meant to be. With Holden. My mate.

Afterward, we lay there tangled together, our breaths mingling in the quiet room. His hand rested on my stomach, his thumb brushing lazy circles over my skin. I smiled, my eyes drifting shut, content and at peace, maybe for the first time in my whole life.

"Thank you," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "For loving me. For choosing me."

He kissed the top of my head, his lips lingering. "Always, Mylo. Always."

And for the first time in my life, I felt like I was home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HOLDEN

Driving back from town, the pregnancy test in hand felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. My heart pounded, and I couldn't wipe the ridiculous grin off my face even if I tried. This was it—the next step. The step Mylo and I had both been too nervous to say out loud but equally desperate to take. I'd considered asking Bishop to run the test, but Mylo wanted us to find out for ourselves first. Just us. And that's exactly what I wanted too—this moment, the possibility, just for us.

When I opened the door to our cabin, the smell of something incredible hit me immediately. My mate was in the kitchen, cooking—a sight that always made my chest feel too full, like it was hard to breathe because of how lucky I was. He had his back to me, a dish towel slung over his shoulder, humming under his breath as he plated whatever masterpiece he'd whipped up this morning.

"You're just in time," he called over his shoulder without turning around, but I could hear the smile in his voice. "Sit your butt down—breakfast is ready."

I closed the door behind me, my smile widening as I held up the small pharmacy bag. "Got it," I said. Mylo turned, his eyes landing on the bag in my hand. For a second, something flashed in his expression—nervousness, excitement, hope—and then he nodded and drew in a deep breath.

"Great," he said, his voice steady even though I caught the slight tremble in his fingers. He reached for the bag, his gaze meeting mine. "You eat. I'll take this."

I hesitated, my eyes searching his, but then I nodded, pressing the bag into his hands. “Alright. I’ll eat,” I said, though I wasn’t sure I could stomach anything with the nerves tying knots in my gut. But Mylo gave me that look—the one that said I better do as he said—and I smiled, leaning in to kiss his forehead.

I loved that look. It made everything feel so real, so normal—like we were a couple through and through. And I knew we were. He’d moved into my house, wore my mark, but these small moments? They were the ones that reinforced it.

“I’ll be right back,” he murmured, and I watched him disappear down the hallway, the bathroom door clicking shut behind him.

I sighed, turning to the table. Mylo had gone all out—French toast dusted with powdered sugar, fresh berries, and whipped cream. Eggs cooked perfectly, bacon crisp but not too crispy. He’d even made fresh-squeezed orange juice. My heart twisted, and I sat down, picking up my fork. I took a bite, the flavors bursting on my tongue, but I barely tasted it—my mind was still on Mylo, on the test, on what this could mean for us.

Minutes felt like hours, the clock ticking loud in the quiet room. I was halfway through my plate when I heard the bathroom door open. My head snapped up, my heart in my throat as Mylo walked back into the kitchen, holding the test in his hand. His eyes met mine, and for a second, he just stood there, staring.

“Well?” I asked, my voice coming out rougher than I intended. Mylo’s lips curved into a soft smile—then widened until he was practically beaming.

“It’s positive,” he whispered, like he couldn’t believe it himself.

For a moment, I couldn’t breathe. I just stared at him, my chest so full it might burst. And then I was up, crossing the room in two long strides, pulling him into my arms.

He laughed, the sound muffled against my chest as I held him, my hand cradling the back of his head.

“We’re having a baby?” I whispered, my voice breaking.

Mylo pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes shining. “Yeah,” he breathed, his smile so bright it made my heart ache. “We’re having a baby.”

I kissed him, my lips crashing against his, and he kissed me back, his fingers curling into my shirt, holding me close. This was real. This was happening. Mylo was carrying my baby—our baby—and I’d never been so damn happy in my life.

When we finally pulled apart, Mylo was still smiling, his eyes searching mine. “I can’t believe this,” he whispered, voice thick with emotion. “I’ve dreamed about this, you know? About having a family. And now...”

I cupped his face, my thumbs brushing over his cheeks. “Now it’s real,” I said, my voice steady. “And I’m going to be here every step of the way. I promise, Mylo. You and our baby—you’re my everything.”

His eyes filled with tears, and he nodded, leaning into my touch. “I love you, Holden.”

“I love you too,” I whispered, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

Later that day, we drove to see Hope and Noah. Mylo insisted we tell them first, and honestly, there was no one else I’d rather share the news with. Noah had been up and about for a few days, recovering faster than any human could—one of the perks of being a shifter, I supposed. But seeing him standing there, grinning as he opened the door, made relief wash over me all over again.

“Look who decided to drop by,” Noah said, stepping aside to let us in. He gave Mylo a once-over, his eyes narrowing playfully. “You look like you’re glowing. What’s going on with you two?”

Mylo glanced at me, his eyes twinkling, and I nodded. He turned back to Noah, his smile widening.

“We’re having a baby,” he said, his voice full of joy.

Noah’s eyes widened, and then he let out a whoop, pulling Mylo into a hug. “That’s amazing!” he said, voice muffled against Mylo’s shoulder. He pulled back, looking at me with a grin. “Congrats, man. You’re gonna be a dad.”

I nodded, my chest tight with emotion. “Yeah,” I said, voice rough. “I am.”

Hope appeared from the kitchen, her eyes lighting up when she saw us. “What’s all the noise about?” she asked, and Noah grinned.

“They’re having a baby,” he said.

Hope squealed, rushing over to pull Mylo into a hug. “Oh my god, that’s amazing!” She pulled back, beaming. “I’m so happy for you two.” She turned to me, her expression playful. “I hear you’re a bit possessive with that bite of yours, huh? Making sure everyone knows Mylo’s off-limits?”

My cheeks heated, and Mylo laughed, his face turning pink. “It’s not like that,” I muttered, though it totally was.

Hope raised an eyebrow. “Uh-huh. Sure. You’re not the only one—Noah was just as bad when he claimed me.”

Noah grinned, wrapping an arm around her waist. “What can I say? When you find your mate, you don’t want to take any chances.”

Mylo rolled his eyes, still smiling. And that smile? It made my heart swell.

Noah laughed, clapping Mylo on the shoulder. “Man, you two are gonna have your hands full.”

“Damn right we will,” I added, pulling him close and pressing a kiss to his temple.

This was it—our future. And I was ready for every single moment of it.

The sun had barely begun to peek over the mountains when I shuffled into the kitchen, the chill of the early morning lingering in the air. Mylo was already there of course, moving around the kitchen with a sense of purpose, his hair was still tousled from sleep and my oversized hoodie was hanging loosely off him. He looked so soft and still a little sleepy, like he could use another hour under the covers—although I’d never say it aloud. I’d learned not to try and get him to slow down the last few months.

I leaned against the doorframe, just watching him for a moment. The gentle sound of eggs cracking, the sizzle of bacon in the pan, the smell of freshly brewed coffee—it all wrapped around me like a hug. Mylo had this way of turning even the most mundane mornings into something that felt special.

Or maybe it was just living with him, waking up with him... it was the day to day of life together.

He turned, catching sight of me, and his face lit up, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Morning, sleepyhead. Coffee’s on the counter,” he said, nodding toward the steaming pot.

“You’re a saint,” I muttered, pushing myself off the frame and moving toward the counter. I grabbed a mug from the cabinet, pouring the dark liquid as the warmth seeped into my palms. I took a long sip, sighing as the caffeine worked its magic. “You’re up early,” I added, eyeing him over the rim of my cup.

He shrugged, flipping a pancake with a practiced ease that made me smile. “Yeah, well, someone’s got to keep this place running.” He shot me a look, his eyes twinkling. “And that someone is apparently me.”

I loved how confident he’d gotten and how much our house felt more like ours now with more of his touches everywhere.

“Hey, I’m not complaining,” I said, setting the mug down and slipping behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist. I could feel the slight bump of his stomach pressing into me—our baby growing, a reminder of the life we were creating together. He smelled like vanilla and something sweet—sugar maybe—and I buried my nose in his neck, pressing a soft kiss to his skin. “I’d eat cereal every morning if it wasn’t for you.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he teased, tilting his head slightly giving me more room.

“It is,” I replied, my lips brushing against his ear. “Cereal doesn’t come with a side of your smile.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re lucky I love you, you know that?”

I hummed, holding him a little tighter. “I’m the luckiest guy alive.”

He stilled for a moment, then leaned back into me, his body relaxing against mine. “You’re cheesy as hell, you know that?”

“You love it.”

“I do,” he whispered, almost as if he was admitting a secret. He turned his head, just enough for me to catch the soft look in his eyes before he turned his attention back to the pancakes. “But let go of me before I burn breakfast. You’re distracting.”

“I thought you liked distractions,” I said, my voice low, teasing.

“Yeah, yeah, let go,” he muttered, though he couldn’t hide the smile on his lips. I let my hands slip away, stepping back to grab my mug and lean against the counter, watching him work.

The kitchen... hell every moment with him, felt like a place outside of time—just Mylo and me, our little routines, our quiet moments. The bacon sizzling, the smell of coffee, Mylo humming some half-forgotten tune as he moved around. This was it, wasn’t it? The life I’d always wanted but never thought I’d have.

And almost fucked up.

Mylo paused for a moment, placing a hand on his lower back, wincing slightly. I frowned, setting my mug down. “Back still bothering you?” I asked, my voice laced with concern.

He looked over his shoulder, giving me a small smile. “Yeah, just a little. I swear this kid’s using my spine as a punching bag,” he said, trying to make light of it, but I could see the exhaustion in his eyes.

I stepped forward, resting a hand gently on his back, rubbing slow circles. “You know you don’t have to do all this, right? You could take it easy for once.”

He rolled his eyes, though there was a softness there. “I know. But I want to. Besides,

I like making breakfast for you. It makes me feel... normal.” He shrugged, his hand moving to rest on his belly, a tender look crossing his face. “And I think the little one likes it too. He’s been pretty active this morning.”

I smiled, leaning down to press a kiss to his shoulder. “Well, I think you’re both amazing. But promise me you’ll rest later, okay?”

He nodded, turning back to the stove. “Yeah, yeah. Now go sit down, breakfast is almost ready.”

I moved to the small table in the corner of the room, setting my mug down as I pulled out a chair. He joined me a moment later, setting down a plate stacked with pancakes, bacon, and scrambled eggs. He sat across from me, his eyes meeting mine, and for a moment, we just looked at each other—no words needed, no explanations.

“Thanks for this,” I said, my voice softer now.

He shrugged, but I could see the emotion in his eyes. “Anytime, babe.”

And I knew he meant it—not just breakfast, but everything. This life we were building, this love we were nurturing. It wasn’t always perfect, but it was ours, and that was enough for me.

As we ate, Mylo winced again, his hand going to his belly. I reached across the table, covering his hand with mine. “You okay?”

He nodded, giving me a small smile. “Yeah. Just a kick. A strong one.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I swear, this kid’s gonna be a linebacker or something.”

I chuckled, squeezing his hand gently. “Well, he’s got your determination, that’s for sure.”

He smiled, his eyes softening as he looked at me. “And your stubbornness.”

“Hey, I take that as a compliment,” I said, grinning.

“You would,” he replied, rolling his eyes, but there was no hiding the affection in his gaze.

The rest of breakfast passed in a comfortable silence, the kind that only came from knowing someone inside and out, from loving them through every high and low. And as I watched him, his hand resting on his belly, a soft smile on his lips...I couldn't imagine a better moment... until the next one with him

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MYLO

The kitchen at the resort was buzzing with activity, and I was smack dab in the middle of it, wielding a spatula like it was a weapon. The smell of roasted veggies and caramelized onions filled the air, blending with the sweeter scent of Sarah's dessert station. We were gearing up for the huge party later today—one of those high-profile events where everything had to be perfect.

And here I was, almost full term by bear shifter standards—standing in the middle of it all. Five months. I still couldn't believe it. Bear shifter pregnancies only lasted five months. It was kind of a blessing, but it also felt like I was on the express lane to parenthood. Holden had tried—and failed spectacularly—to convince me to stop working. He'd brought it up about a thousand times, but it only took Hope, Sarah, and his mom giving him that look to shut him down. I was pregnant, not sick, and there was no way I was sitting around all day doing nothing while everyone else pulled the weight.

"Mylo, don't forget to taste the marinade before you add the extra garlic," Sarah called from across the kitchen, her eyes flicking between the mixer and the tray of cupcakes she was decorating. She wore that hyper-focused look, the one that said her brain was juggling a dozen things at once.

"Yeah, yeah, I got it," I replied, shifting my weight from one swollen foot to the other. I'd learned the hard way—if Sarah said to taste the marinade first, you damn well tasted it first. I glanced at her and caught the smirk tugging at the corner of her

mouth.

“You know, I think my ankles are officially gone,” I said, gesturing to my feet. “Like, I had them a couple of months ago. Now? Just balloons.”

Sarah chuckled, shaking her head. “It’s all part of the process. You’re doing great, Mylo.”

She smiled at me, one of those comforting, warm smiles that had made her such a good friend from the start.

Honestly, I’d lucked out with the pregnancy so far. It had been surprisingly easy—except for the swollen feet, the constant backache, and... well, this weird thing where I couldn’t stand the smell of cinnamon. Cinnamon, of all things. It used to be one of my favorite spices, but now it made me gag. Sarah had found it hilarious the first time I recoiled from a fresh cinnamon bun like it was radioactive.

The door to the kitchen swung open, and I didn’t need to look up to know it was Holden. The kitchen seemed to shift whenever he walked in—my man had that kind of presence. And now that I knew he was officially in charge of the pack, it made even more sense. This place wasn’t just a resort; it was home for both bear and non-bear shifters.

He strode over to me, his eyes softening the moment they met mine, and my heart did that fluttery thing it always did when he looked at me like that.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he murmured, low enough for only me to hear. His hand rested gently on the small of my back, and I leaned into his touch without thinking.

“Hey,” I whispered back, tilting my head to look up at him. “You here to rescue me from kitchen duty?”

“Actually, yes.” His lips curled into a small smile. “Time for that check-up with Bishop, remember?”

Right. The check-up. Our final ultrasound before the baby arrived. Despite the exhaustion that clung to me, excitement buzzed under my skin. Our baby. Our son.

“Alright,” I said, giving Sarah an apologetic shrug. “Guess I’m cutting out early.”

Sarah waved me off, her eyes twinkling. “Go on, get out of here. We’ve got it covered.”

Holden helped me out of the kitchen—and by “helped,” I mean he hovered, ready to catch me if I so much as wobbled. It was endearing, even if it was a bit much.

Not that I minded. Who wouldn’t like feeling cherished?

The drive to Bishop’s clinic was quiet. I kept sneaking glances at Holden from the corner of my eye. He wore that focused expression—the one that made it seem like he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. His hand rested on my knee, his thumb tracing slow circles against my skin. It was a simple touch, but it made me feel grounded. Safe.

“You nervous?” I asked, breaking the silence.

He glanced over at me, his lips curving into a soft smile. “A little. But mostly excited. What about you?”

I shrugged, exhaling slowly. “Yeah. It’s just... surreal, you know? In a few weeks, we’re going to have a baby. Like... a real, tiny human being.”

Holden chuckled, squeezing my knee gently. “Half bear, half human. But yeah, a tiny

being that's ours."

When we arrived at the clinic, Bishop greeted us with a grin, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He led us into the exam room, and I climbed onto the table, Holden standing right next to me, our fingers laced together. The gel on my skin was cold, and I shivered slightly, earning a reassuring squeeze from Holden.

"There we go," Bishop said, focusing on the screen. "Let's see how this little guy is doing."

And there he was—our baby, moving ever so slightly on the grainy screen. My breath caught in my throat, and Holden's grip tightened around my hand. No matter how many times we'd seen him, it always took my breath away.

"He's perfect," Bishop murmured, his voice soft. "Everything looks great."

I glanced at Holden, and the look on his face made my heart squeeze. His eyes were locked on the screen, filled with awe, love, and something even deeper. He leaned down, pressing a kiss to my forehead, and I closed my eyes, savoring the moment.

"You hear that?" he whispered against my skin. "Our boy's perfect."

I nodded, my throat too tight to speak. He was right. Everything about this felt perfect—even if my feet were swollen, my back ached, and cinnamon had become my mortal enemy. This was our family. Our future. And I wouldn't trade it for anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HOLDEN

I caught sight of Mylo in the kitchen that morning, his hand instinctively moving to the small of his back. He tried to hide it—like he always did—putting on that brave front of his. But I knew better. The way he shifted his weight, the crease in his brow when he thought no one was looking—those told me everything. Mylo was hurting, and it made me feel helpless.

I couldn't exactly take the pain away, no matter how much I wanted to, but I could do something about it. At least, I could try.

The idea hit me as I watched him stir a pot of something delicious—like always—his lips pressed into a tight line, his eyes focused.

Great goddess, he was perfect, even when he was trying so hard not to complain about the pain.

When he turned and caught me staring, I grinned, leaning against the doorway. “Hey, chef extraordinaire. What’s cooking?”

He rolled his eyes, but the corner of his lips twitched up. “Just some pasta for lunch. You hungry already, or are you just here to steal bites?”

“A little bit of both,” I admitted, pushing off the wall to close the distance between us. I wrapped an arm around his waist and pressed a kiss to the top of his head.

“How’s the back today?”

Mylo’s shoulders tensed for a second, then he let out a sigh, leaning into me. “It’s fine,” he said, but there was a tightness to his voice that made my heart ache.

“You sure?” I asked, my thumb rubbing gentle circles on his hip. “Because I’ve got an idea. Something that might help.”

He tilted his head back, looking up at me with a raised brow. “Oh? And what’s that?”

“You’ll see,” I said, giving him a quick peck on the lips before stepping back. “Finish up here, and then come with me. Trust me, okay?”

He eyed me suspiciously, but there was a flicker of curiosity in his eyes that made me smile. “Alright,” he said, drawing the word out. “But if this is some kind of prank...”

“It’s not a prank,” I promised, holding my hands up in surrender. “Just... let me take care of you for once, alright?”

Mylo sighed, but there was a softness to it, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Fine. But you’re doing the dishes after lunch.”

“Deal,” I said, my heart giving a little flutter.

After lunch, I led Mylo to our room, his hand resting in mine, his fingers squeezing just enough to let me know he trusted me—even if he was still skeptical. I had the room set up already—candles lit, soft music playing, the scent of lavender hanging in the air. I’d moved the bed to the side, laid out a thick, plush mat on the floor, and set out some warm towels.

“Holden,” Mylo whispered, his voice soft as his eyes scanned the room, lips parting

in surprise. “What...”

“I know your back’s been hurting,” I said, my thumb brushing over the back of his hand. “And I’ve never done this before, but... I thought maybe I could help. You know, with a massage.”

He blinked, his eyes wide, then let out a soft, disbelieving laugh—so damn beautiful it made my chest ache. “You did all this? For me?”

“Of course, for you,” I said, tugging him closer, my other hand coming up to cup his cheek. “You deserve it, Mylo. You deserve everything. And if this helps even a little bit, then it’s worth it.”

He swallowed, his eyes glistening, and then he nodded, leaning into my touch. “Okay,” he whispered. “Okay, yeah. Let’s do it.”

I helped him settle onto the mat, his back resting against a few pillows, legs stretched out in front of him. I grabbed the bottle of massage oil I’d picked up in town—the lady at the store swore it was the best—and poured some into my hands, rubbing them together to warm it up.

“You comfortable?” I asked, and Mylo nodded, his eyes half-lidded as he watched me.

“Yeah. More than comfortable,” he murmured, his voice soft. “I still can’t believe you did all this, Holden. You’re...” He trailed off, searching my gaze, and my heart squeezed in my chest.

“I’m what?” I asked, my hands finding his shoulders, kneading gently into the tight muscles there. He let out a soft groan, his eyes fluttering shut as he relaxed under my touch.

“You’re amazing,” he whispered, barely audible, and warmth spread through me, filling every corner of my heart.

“Only because you make me want to be,” I said, my voice thick. “Now relax. Let me take care of you, love.”

He nodded, a small smile playing on his lips, and I focused on the task at hand—making him feel good, easing the tension from his body. My fingers worked over his shoulders, down his back, slowly loosening the knots that had built up. His breathing grew even, and every now and then, he let out a soft sigh, the sound going straight to my heart.

“You’re really good at this,” he mumbled after a while, his voice heavy with sleepiness. “I think you missed your calling, Holden. Should’ve been a masseuse.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Nah. This is just for you. No one else gets this kind of treatment.”

His eyes opened, meeting mine, and the look in them made my breath catch—soft, vulnerable, full of trust. “I love you,” he whispered, and I thought my heart might burst out of my chest.

“I love you too,” I whispered, leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead. “Always.”

He smiled, his eyes drifting shut again, and I stayed there for a moment, watching him, my heart so full it ached.

This was everything I’d ever wanted—to love and be loved by this man, to make him feel cherished, to remind him that he mattered.

And as I continued to work the tension from his muscles, his body relaxing under my

touch, I knew one thing for certain:

Whatever it took, Mylo was my everything. And I was never letting him go.

MYLO

The contractions hit me like a freight train, sharp and fast, with no mercy in sight. I was gripping the edge of the kitchen counter, breathing through it like I'd practiced, but it wasn't making it any easier. My back felt like it was on fire, and my legs were shaky, like they were about to give out any second.

"You good, Mylo?" Sarah called over from the other side of the kitchen, her eyes already full of concern. She could always read me, even when I tried to hide it. But this was impossible to hide.

"Yeah, just..." I forced a smile, even though I could feel sweat beading along my forehead. "You know, maybe time for a little break."

Sarah's eyes widened. "Break?" Then she caught sight of my expression, the way my breath was hitching, and she moved towards me with a speed that made my head spin. "Okay, that's it. We're getting you out of here."

I didn't argue. I couldn't. Another contraction rolled through me, and I swore under my breath, feeling my knees threaten to buckle. Sarah's arm came around me, steadying me, and she shouted for someone to call Holden. Everything blurred together after that—people moving, Sarah's voice somewhere in the background, and the rush of air as I was guided out of the kitchen.

Holden showed up and the next thing I knew I was sitting in the back of his truck, gripping the seat for dear life, my face flushed from the effort of keeping myself upright. His eyes went wide when he saw me, a mix of fear and excitement flashing

across his face.

“Mylo,” he breathed, leaning in to press a kiss to my forehead. “You ready to do this?”

I let out a shaky laugh. “Do I have a choice?”

Holden grinned, his hand coming down to cover mine, his warmth steadying me. “Nope. We’re doing this together.”

The ride to the clinic felt like it took hours. Each bump in the road made me bite my lip, trying not to cry out. Holden kept one hand on mine, his thumb brushing over my knuckles, whispering words of encouragement that were drowned out by the thumping of my pulse in my ears.

When we finally made it to the clinic, Bishop was already there, waiting for us, his face serious but his eyes kind. He helped Holden get me out of the truck, guiding me through the doors, and I felt like I was walking through a dream—a mix of adrenaline and pain and fear all tangled together.

“We’re right here,” Holden said, his voice low in my ear as we entered the birthing room. “I’ve got you, Mylo. I’m not going anywhere.”

I nodded, leaning into him as another contraction hit, my body trembling from the intensity of it. It felt like everything was moving too fast, and yet somehow too slow all at once. Bishop and Holden got me into position—squatting, just like I’d wanted. I couldn’t stand the idea of lying on my back, feeling like I had no control. This way, I felt like I was doing something, even if every inch of me was screaming.

“Alright, Mylo,” Bishop said, his voice calm and steady. “You’re doing great. Just keep breathing, and when the next contraction comes, I want you to push, okay?”

I nodded, gritting my teeth as I felt the next wave building, my whole body tightening with it. Holden was right there, his hands on my shoulders, his forehead pressed to mine, whispering that I was strong, that I could do this, that he loved me. And that was all I needed—that connection, that reminder that I wasn't alone in this.

The pain was unlike anything I'd ever felt, but I pushed through it, my body trembling, my breath coming in short gasps. Holden's voice kept me anchored, his love steadying me when I thought I couldn't take anymore.

"You're almost there, Mylo," Bishop said, his voice a lifeline in the chaos. "You're doing it. Just a little more."

I squeezed Holden's hand, my nails digging into his skin, and I pushed with everything I had, feeling the pressure shift, the pain peaking and then... relief. A cry filled the room, and my heart skipped a beat, my breath catching in my throat.

"That's one," Bishop said, his voice filled with awe as he held up the tiny, squirming baby, his cries echoing through the room. Tears blurred my vision, and I looked at Holden, seeing the same wonder in his eyes.

"A boy," he whispered, his voice breaking. "We have a son, Mylo."

I barely had time to catch my breath before another contraction hit, and I knew we weren't done yet. The second twin was coming, and I braced myself, leaning into Holden as I pushed again, my body shaking from the effort.

We were both surprised when on our last ultrasound we saw that we were having twins but we couldn't be more ready or excited.

"You've got this," Holden murmured, his lips brushing against my temple. "Just one more, love. Just one more."

I nodded, focusing on his voice, on the warmth of his touch, and I pushed with everything I had left. The room blurred around me, the pain blinding, and then... another cry. Another tiny, perfect cry that made my heart swell, my chest tightening with emotion.

“And that’s two,” Bishop said, his smile wide as he held up the second baby. “Another boy.”

I let out a sob, tears streaming down my face as I looked at Holden, my heart overflowing. “We did it,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “We have two sons.”

Holden’s eyes were filled with tears, and he kissed me, his lips soft and gentle against mine. “You’re amazing, Mylo,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I love you so damn much.”

Bishop handed us the babies, and I held them close, my heart feeling like it might burst from how much I loved them already. They were so small, so perfect, their tiny hands curling around my fingers, their cries softening as they settled against my chest.

“What should we name them?” Holden asked, his voice barely above a whisper as he looked down at our sons.

I smiled, looking up at him, my heart full. “How about their middle names be, Brett and Rhett,” I said, my voice steady. “After your dad and Hope’s dad.”

Holden’s eyes shone with tears, and he nodded, his hand coming up to brush my hair back from my forehead. “They’re perfect,” he whispered, his voice full of love. “Just like you.”

“We can pick their names later,” I said tiredly.

Later, when we were settled in our room, the boys sleeping in our arms, Noah and Hope came by to see us. Hope's eyes lit up when she saw the twins, her smile wide as she leaned over to kiss my forehead.

"They're beautiful, Mylo," she said, her voice filled with warmth. "You did so good."

Noah grinned, looking between the twins and then at me, his eyes twinkling. "Well, looks like we're tied now," he said, nudging Hope playfully. "Guess we need to up production, huh?"

Hope rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. "You're impossible, how about we get the first two out of diapers then we can talk," she muttered.

I laughed, looking at Holden, then down at our boys. "I think we're up for the challenge," I said teasingly.

There were days I still couldn't believe this was my life, because this—this was everything I'd ever wanted. A family. One that loved me, supported me, and made me feel like I truly belonged. And I didn't plan to take a single moment of it for granted.