



Stalked by the Wolf (Gold Creek Wolves)

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Description: I thought I left my abusive ex-boyfriend in the past, but as it turns out, I'm pregnant with his child. When he darkens my door again, he transforms into a gigantic bear.

My savior comes in the form of a devilishly handsome man who just so happens to be a wolf shifter. Sebastian is dark, sarcastic, and fiercely protective. For some reason, he wants to defend me from the nightmare that's come into my life. But will this gorgeous male still want me when he learns I'm pregnant with his enemy's baby?

Sebastian

I'm no knight in shining armor. I'm the predator you pay to hunt down the worst of the worst.

For two years, the last of the McGregor bears has evaded me. For two years, I've been failing my pack.

When I finally find him, I also find Claire — the beautiful little human who somehow got herself tangled up with this monster.

The second I lay eyes on her, my wolf growls mine. It doesn't matter that Claire is way too young or that she's everything I'm not — sweet, optimistic, and good. Claire will never accept me, especially when she learns that I've been tracking her every move.

Stalked by the Wolf is a short and steamy shifter romance that can be read in a couple of hours. If you love OTT protective wolf shifters and age-gap, pregnant single mom romances, then you'll love Claire and Sebastian's story. Click to grab your copy now!

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CHAPTER ONE

CLAIRE

I feel a familiar surge of desperation as I tape the pink paper heart to the outside of Kevin's cage. It reads, "Hi, I'm Kevin! It takes me some time to warm up to new people, but once you get to know me, I'm all snuggles! I'll do best in a home without dogs and love hearing that I'm a handsome boy."

Kevin is a 16-year-old long-haired ginger cat who's been at Nine Lives since I started working here. Nine Lives is a no-kill shelter for senior cats with special needs, and My Furrever Valentine is our biggest event of the year. We hold it every February to boost adoptions before kitten season, when the chances of elderly cats like Kevin being adopted drop even lower.

Once I finish fussing with the heart, Kevin settles into the little indent on his bed and curls up into a ball.

I wish I could do that.

This morning I learned that we didn't get the grant we need to keep the shelter's doors open. If more funding doesn't come through soon, Kevin may be without a home, and I'll be out of a job.

The news could not have come at a worse time.

Placing a hand over my belly, I take a deep breath and hope that the little being inside

of me can't sense my stress. "It's all right," I whisper. "We'll figure something out."

The truth is, I don't know what I'm going to do if the shelter closes. Landing a job at a nonprofit is hard enough when you're not pregnant. Even if I manage to hang onto my position, I have no idea how I'm going to pay for daycare or diapers or the million other things this tiny human will need.

A few tears roll down my cheeks as a fresh wave of despair washes over me. But I wipe them away and focus on hanging the heart-shaped signs for the other feline "residents."

There's Polly, the nine-year-old calico who won't use a litter box; Hamish, the Scottish Fold who needs to be an only cat because of his aggression toward other cats; Tator Tot and Nugget, ten-year-old bonded siblings with cerebellar hypoplasia, which makes them walk with a bit of a wobble; and Yo-Yo, a silver tabby who's missing half his tail and freaks out anytime someone turns on a small kitchen appliance.

The shelter actually has capacity for up to sixteen cats, but ever since we learned that our funding was in question for this year, we stopped taking in new residents. The ones who are left have proven the most difficult to adopt out, so we'll be looking for families who are willing to foster them if we have to close.

Once I've hung all the signs and put up the Valentine's Day decorations, I check everyone's food and water and turn to lock up for the night. Pulling the front of my coat tight, I glance around the empty parking lot and make a beeline for my car. Thankfully, it starts right away, so I crank the heat and head for home.

Even though it's dark and the temperature has already dropped to single digits, there are still people out on the streets. I live in what you might call a rough part of town. It's one of the few pockets of the city with affordable housing, but over the last year

and a half, developers have been buying up the falling-down old buildings and putting in chain coffee shops and high-end grocery stores. A lot of people like it because it's good for property values, but I know it's only a matter of time before a developer buys my building, too.

As I drive under the overpass, I see a few familiar faces: a bearded man bundled in a dirty red sleeping bag, a young guy with his dog, and the elderly lady who pushes a shopping cart laden with her belongings up and down Nevada Avenue.

I have to look away when I see the pregnant woman standing outside the gas station across from my apartment building holding a cardboard sign: HUNGRY. ANYTHING HELPS.

That could be you , says a scared voice inside my head, but I hurriedly shove it away .

Although I'd do anything to keep Nine Lives open, I have to plan for the worst. It's not just me I have to worry about now. In just a few short months, I'm going to have another little person to provide for.

The thought scares the crap out of me.

Pulling up in front of my apartment building, my heart sinks even lower. The dumpster outside is overflowing, someone has graffitied the wall by the steps, and there's a new "Out of Order" sign on the door to the laundry room.

"I promise I'll find us something better," I whisper, looking down at the barely there bump hidden beneath my sweater.

I never planned on being a single mom, but I've grown too attached to the little bean inside of me to even think about giving him up. Even if I can't afford a better

apartment or one of those fancy strollers I've seen women pushing around the park, my baby will always know that he is wanted and loved.

Ignoring the heaviness pressing down on my chest, I get out of the car and trudge up the stairs that lead to my unit. But when I reach the top, my muscles go slack, and I drop my keys on the ground.

There, standing outside my door, is the man I thought I left behind.

SEBASTIAN

It's been sixteen months that I've been hunting Dane Murphy. Sixteen months of chasing dead ends. Sixteen months of failing my pack.

For someone with my track record, sixteen months is unacceptable.

For the life of me, I can't work out how he managed to evade me for so long. No matter how hard they try, people always leave digital bread crumbs: a credit-card transaction here, a text message there, or even having their license plate captured going through a toll plaza.

In the end, I found Murphy by hacking into petrol-station surveillance cameras and running the footage through a facial recognition program. I had to purchase five more servers to run the software at that scale, but it was worth it.

He popped up at a 7-Eleven in Colorado Springs, but he didn't just fill up and leave. No. He stayed parked outside in his shitty pickup, watching. Waiting for something.

I knew he had to be in contact with some of the McGregor bears who fled the night Adrian killed their leader. I thought perhaps he was waiting for one of them, but no one ever showed.

Since I was an hour and a half away in Gold Creek, I wasn't going to catch him that night, but the idiot paid with a credit card belonging to a woman named Claire Belmont. I figured the bastard probably just nicked it until I realized the card hadn't had any activity until a couple of months ago. Murphy's been using it ever since at petrol stations, fast-food restaurants, and once at an electronics store.

It usually doesn't take a person two months to cancel a stolen credit card — unless she doesn't realize it's been stolen.

This makes me think that Murphy knows Claire Belmont, so I do what I do best.

I start with a basic background check and credit report. I learn that Ms. Belmont is twenty-two, unmarried, and lives alone in a seedy apartment complex off Las Vegas Street. Given Murphy's history, I'd expected a rap sheet, but Claire Belmont hasn't had so much as a parking ticket, and she's got a credit score of almost seven hundred. Not exactly the delinquent I'd been expecting.

Her place of employment is listed as a place called Nine Lives. A quick Google search brings up a strip club on the north side of town.

For some reason, my wolf keeps telling me that Claire Belmont is the key to finding Murphy. So I set about learning everything I can about the woman who's been funding his life.

I find death certificates. Medical records. Even a student support plan from a high-school guidance counselor.

Texting myself her address, I pull up the street view of her apartment complex. It's a run-down building that used to be a motel, located next to a strip mall with a liquor store, nail salon, and a Vietnamese restaurant .

Scouring social media turns up nothing apart from an account for a woman with the handle “ClaireWhoLovesCats.” She’s a pretty little thing with fair hair, blue eyes, and curls for days. This Claire makes videos of sad old cats that are up for adoption.

She can’t be Claire Belmont, and yet I can’t stop cyberstalking her until I’ve watched every video in her feed. Call it disbelief porn — as in, I can’t believe that people like her actually exist.

As a freelance pen-tester who spends sixty-plus hours a week trying to think like hackers and scammers, I’ve seen it all. Scammers pretending to work for the IRS. Phishers texting old people pretending to be their bank so they’ll give up their passwords. Creeps who hack home-security systems and plaster people’s private moments all over the internet. So the fact that there’s somebody out there trying to get a bunch of mangy old cats adopted fucking amazes me.

Reluctantly closing my laptop, I leave the shed where I keep all my tech and walk the short distance to my house. The sun has already dipped below the mountains, and the pretty blue gaze of ClaireWhoLovesCats is seared into my brain.

It’s official — I’ve been at this for far too long.

I’m dying to call up Adrian and tell him that I have a lead on Murphy. But I can’t bring myself to pick up the phone in case this trail goes cold.

I’ve done nothing but disappoint my alpha these last sixteen months. I won’t do it again.

As I emerge from my cyberstalking fog, I realize I haven’t eaten all day. I’ve been cooped up in my shed since early this morning, and my wolf is fucking ravenous.

Opening the fridge, I lean on the door and stare at the empty shelves. I normally get

prepared meals delivered, but we recently got a fresh heaping of snow, so the delivery driver hasn't been able to make it up to my place.

I like a good pho as much as the next guy, and it seems like the perfect excuse to pay Ms. Belmont a visit.

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CHAPTER TWO

CLAIRE

My heart pounds in my throat when I see Dane standing on my doorstep. The guy is well over six feet tall, two hundred and fifty pounds, and looks as though he could crush my car if he just leaned on it wrong.

There was a time when I found the big, hulking man attractive. Now, the sight of him outside my apartment just makes me feel sick to my stomach.

Dane's nostrils flare as he looks me up and down, and I instinctively cross my arms over my chest. The move causes my coat to fall closed over my middle, hiding the tiny bulge beneath my sweater.

I've never been a very good liar. My parents were tree-huggers who told us we could come to them with any problem, and as a result, I never learned to do it well.

I can't let Dane catch on to the fact that I'm starting to look a little pregnant. He's not the brightest bulb in the box, but if he thinks back to what we were doing three and a half months ago, there's a chance he'll put two and two together.

"What are you doing here?" I ask softly, my voice wavering despite my best efforts.

Dane's mouth twitches in a sickening grin that doesn't meet his silver eyes. "Now that's not any way to greet your man."

“You’re not my man, Dane,” I grit out. “Not anymore.”

“Aw, come on, darlin’. You’re not still sore about the last time I came to visit, are ya?”

My whole body goes rigid at the memory, and a suffocating shame works its way up my throat.

I never thought I’d be the type of girl who had a boyfriend who hit her. That was when I still believed there was such a thing as a type of woman who got hit, rather than the type of man who did the hitting.

There’s a first time for everything.

The first time he raises his voice.

The first time it scares you.

The first time he punches the wall.

The first time he hits you instead of the wall.

I wish I could say it was just the one time, but it wasn’t. It took him showing up and scaring the shit out of me before I was done with him for good.

I cast a nervous glance down the hallway in the hope that one of my neighbors might pop out for a smoke. Dane’s got balls, but I don’t think he’d hurt me if we had an audience.

“You should go,” I say, hating how weak and pathetic I sound. My heart is a frantic drumbeat in my chest, and I get the feeling that he knows exactly the effect he has on

me.

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do,” I say with as much steadiness as I can manage, drawing my shoulders back and forcing myself to meet his gaze. Dane might have hurt me, but he’s not getting anywhere near my baby.

Summoning up my last shred of courage, I shove past him and jam my key into the lock. I won’t feel safe until he’s gone, but if I can just get inside and close the door, then I’ll know he can’t hurt me.

My hands are shaking so badly that it takes me several seconds to get the door unlocked. I open it a few inches, intending to slip inside, but then Dane’s massive hand shoots out — shoving the door wide open.

Before I know what’s happening, he’s crowding me into my apartment and slamming the door behind us.

A familiar terror squeezes my insides, and adrenaline floods my system. My mind flashes back to that night in my old apartment, and I get the horrible sinking feeling that it’s going to be even worse this time.

This time, I’m not the only one who might get hurt.

SEBASTIAN

I make it to the north edge of Colorado Springs just in time to hit rush-hour traffic. It’s bumper to bumper from Garden of the Gods to Nevada Avenue, and by the time I pull off I-25, my wolf is ready to rip somebody’s head off.

I come to a stop at a red light, and my beast growls as a homeless man shuffles toward my window. He's draped in a filthy sleeping bag, and his hands are red and swollen from the cold. He's got the rotten teeth of a long-time drug user, and his eyes are sunken and lifeless.

Blazing through a light, I whip into the alley behind the Vietnamese restaurant and park beside the dumpster. My fully loaded Mercedes G550 sticks out like a sore thumb around here, and I hit the lock button twice.

Slinking around the corner, I spot a familiar rusted blue pickup and catch the sour musk of bear.

My wolf's hackles go up.

Murphy is here. Now. After all these months of searching.

A satisfied growl works its way up my chest, and my skin itches with the urge to shift.

Soon , I promise my wolf.

Soon Murphy will be nothing but a cold pelt at our feet, but I need to get him alone to make the kill. Even with the cover of darkness, there's too much activity this time of night. Someone is bound to see .

Ideally, I'd like to leave Claire Belmont out of it, but I won't let Murphy slip through my fingers again.

There's fresh graffiti spray-painted on the wall facing the parking lot, and the walkway out front is littered with cigarette butts. Following the stink of bear, I move silently up the stairs along the outside of the building.

Low, angry voices reach my ears. They're coming from the other side of the closed door in front of me, but my sensitive shifter hearing picks up on every word.

A woman is speaking, her voice shaky and fearful. "You can't be here, Dane. We broke up."

"We didn't break up. You left — ran away like a scared little bitch. That don't mean it's over."

My hands curl into fists, and I have to grit my teeth to keep from snarling. That's the problem with men like Murphy. They just can't take a hint.

The woman scoffs, but even through the flimsy door, I can smell her fear.

"I ran because you hurt me," she says. "I'm sorry but . . . it's over."

Thunderous footfalls shake the landing, and it takes all of my willpower to remain rooted to the spot. I can't just burst into this poor woman's flat. I don't want her to witness the carnage when I rip her ex apart.

But then Murphy speaks again, and I can barely hear him over the roar of blood in my ears. "It ain't over 'til I say it's over. "

I bare my teeth, practically foaming at the mouth at the audacity of this bastard.

Before he gave us all the slip, Murphy put Adrian's mate through hell. He beat her and belittled her until she believed she didn't deserve any better. Now he's doing it to this poor girl.

Murphy thinks he owns her, and after a few more months of his abuse, Claire will start to believe it too.

My skin suddenly feels much too tight. My wolf is pushing to the fore, demanding to be unmuzzled.

But I can't shift in front of a human. That's a mess I don't need.

Then the woman speaks again, and the devastating resolve in her wobbly voice does something to my animal. "I said it's over, Dane, "Now get out , or I'll —"

"Or you'll what ?" Murphy's voice is dripping with fury and scorn, and my wolf registers the threat.

I don't consciously decide to shift. I just start shucking off clothes.

A roar vibrates through my chest, but it didn't come from me. It came from the other side of the door. The landing trembles as the woman screams, and the sound snaps the last of my self-control.

Sweet agony swamps my body as I succumb to the Change. Fur spreads over my skin as bones and ligaments rip apart. My wolf bursts out of me, and I land on four paws — remade and ready to kill.

There's a groan of metal as I barrel into the door, ripping it half off its hinges. A dozen unfamiliar smells bombard my senses, but my wolf brain only registers hers.

She smells like sunshine and honeysuckle, and I latch onto that scent. My gaze snags on the woman crouched beside a grubby brown recliner, and I realize that I was wrong.

Claire Belmont isn't some human. The woman is a fucking angel.

Wispy white-blond curls frame a terrified face set off by a pair of lush pink lips. Her

eyes are the color of sea glass, and they are wide with horror.

Mine .

The instinct roars through me with such certainty that it steals my breath away.

Claire Belmont is mine to protect.

Mine to claim.

Mine to kill for.

I must have made an audible sound, because her eyes focus on me. Claire's mouth opens in a terrified scream, but I snap my head around and focus on the real threat — the gigantic, hulking bear.

In animal form, Murphy probably weighs close to eight hundred pounds. And even though I'm larger than a mundane wolf, I am still outmatched.

So I go for his throat.

The bear roars as I sink my fangs through fur and flesh, and Murphy thrashes to dislodge me. Razor-sharp claws rake across my back, but I refuse to let go. The scent of Claire's panic mixes with the tang of blood, and my predatory instincts kick into overdrive .

I lose myself in the clash of teeth and claws, but then Murphy hits me with a strike that sends me flying into the edge of the coffee table.

Stars erupt in my vision, but I am fully wolf. And a wild wolf will fight to the death to defend what is his.

Rolling to my feet, I lunge at the bear. Murphy roars in pain as my fangs rip through his pelt, taking a piece of him with me.

The bear shakes his head, and then he starts to retreat — backing toward the door.

I hold my ground in the middle of Claire's living room, hackles up and teeth bared. Thick ropes of drool hang from my jaws, some of it dripping onto the carpet. My senses are alive from the scent of blood and bear. I am ravenous for the kill.

But then the huge bear backs onto the landing, and I hear a distant scream. He turns and blunders off into the night, leaving me alone with Claire.

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CHAPTER THREE

CLAIRE

Holy shit.

Ho-ly shit.

Dane just turned into a gigantic bear, and there's an actual wolf in my apartment.

My head spins, and I very seriously consider jumping out the window.

I took a wildlife safety course as part of a volunteer program in Yosemite, but I can't remember a thing about wolves. Am I supposed to make myself big and try to scare him away, or is it better to appear nonthreatening?

The wolf in question is fucking huge — way bigger than any wolf should be.

His head reaches the top of my ribs, and if he stood on his hind legs . . . I don't want to think about it. His body is covered in glossy black fur, and he has a pair of glowing amber eyes that seem to see right through me.

Then the animal shudders and starts to change. Horror grips me as the muscles thrash beneath his fur, which disappears before my eyes. His snout shortens as the fur recedes, and he rises up on two legs.

Two very human legs. Two human legs attached to...

I look away, cheeks flaming, but then I do a double take. There's a man standing in my living room where the wolf just was — a very naked man.

“What the —” I break off. I think I'm going to be sick.

The man in question towers over me. He's lean, well-muscled, and hot as hell, with a broad chest, sculpted shoulders, and defined six-pack abs. His jet-black hair is enticingly disheveled, and his piercing cobalt eyes blaze with an intensity that steals the air from my lungs.

“Easy, love,” he says quietly, holding out his hands in a placating gesture. His voice sounds like rich dark chocolate, if dark chocolate could make a sound, and he's got a British accent that would make my panties instantly damp if it weren't for the queasy feeling in my stomach. “You're all right.”

He says the words in a soothing tone one might reserve for a child or a skittish animal, and some of the tension in my chest eases.

He extends a hand, palm up, and I take it.

My head spins as I get to my feet, and I lurch forward on wobbly knees. The man catches me against his solid chest, and I have to fight the urge to flick out my tongue to lick his warm skin. He smells like expensive leather, bergamot, and something I can't quite place. The combination is intoxicating.

Then I remember he's naked.

Heat laps at my cheeks as I push out of his embrace, nearly falling into the coffee table.

“Easy,” he repeats, reaching out to steady me. “You're in shock.”

Luckily, he moves to the side as he guides me down into the recliner. Otherwise, I'd find myself staring directly at his impressively large . . . er, manhood.

Grabbing a blanket off the back of the couch, he wraps it around his waist. Then he turns and steps out onto the landing, picking up a pair of discarded jeans.

I avert my gaze as he pulls them on, feeling an irrational jab of disappointment and wondering if I imagined it all.

There's definitely nothing imaginary about the blood staining my carpet, but monsters aren't real. Right?

My savior strides toward me, dressed in a pair of designer jeans and a midnight blue T-shirt that hugs his perfect biceps. "Did he hurt you?" he rumbles.

I shake my head. Not this time .

"Dane," I rasp, desperate for an explanation. "He turned into a giant b-bear."

I know I must sound certifiably insane, but not-so-naked guy doesn't bat an eye.

Instead, he goes into the kitchen, opens up a few cabinets, and pours me a glass of water. He returns to my side and hands me the glass, which I drain in a few breathless gulps.

"He's a bear ," I repeat. "A bear . . . man."

"Bear shifter," he corrects.

"And you're a . . ." My throat goes dry. "A werewolf?"

I feel ridiculous saying it out loud, and my handsome rescuer cracks a lopsided grin.
“Wolf shifter.”

“Right.”

“I’m Sebastian, by the way.”

“And do you shifter guys frequently get into brawls in other people’s apartments?” I ask.

“No. But I’ve been hunting that piece of shit for a year and a half. Yesterday, I finally found him.”

“Why were you looking for him?” I ask, my voice cracking slightly.

Sebastian lifts one dark eyebrow, and my stomach lurches.

“You were going to kill him?”

“I would have if the bastard hadn’t run off before I got the chance.” Sebastian cocks his head to the side, regarding me with interest. “Is that a problem?”

I just stare at him. What does he expect me to say? No, I’m totally cool with you guys waging your shifter war in my living room.

Then again, Dane hurt me. He barged into my apartment and threatened me. He might have killed me if Sebastian hadn’t shown up when he did.

I shake my head.

“Good.” Something like concern flickers across his face, and he kneels down in front

of me. “Are you sure he didn’t hurt you?” He keeps his voice low and gentle, and I get the feeling it’s not a tone he uses very often.

I nod.

“But he’s hurt you before.”

“Yes,” I whisper, my hand drifting down to rest protectively over my bump.

Sebastian doesn’t miss the gesture, and his jaw tightens.

“I moved to this place a couple of months ago to get away from him.” I swallow. “I don’t know how he found me. He must have followed me home from work. What if —” Panic swamps me as the possibility creeps in, and I fiddle with a thread that’s come loose from my sweater. “What if he comes back?”

Something fierce ignites behind Sebastian’s intense blue eyes, but then his expression softens. “Do you have any friends you can stay with tonight?”

Shame squeezes my insides. I’ve never been good at making new friends. I’ve always been better with animals. And although I have a few casual acquaintances from my yoga studio, the last couple months I was with Dane, I isolated myself to the point that I don’t feel comfortable calling any of them.

Understanding flashes across Sebastian’s face — understanding but not pity. Then he rises into a standing position and turns toward the door. “Right. You’re coming with me.”

“What?”

Surely I must have misheard him.

He turns to look over his shoulder, and I catch a glimpse of the beast he was in that stunning cobalt gaze. “I’m not leaving you here — not with that bloody bear still on the loose. You’re coming home with me.”

“N-no, I . . . What about my cat?” I blurt. It probably seems silly that I’m worried about my cat at a time like this, but I’m not leaving Shadow behind.

“Your what?”

The poor thing darted under the couch to hide the second Dane came barging in. In the few minutes we’ve been talking, he’s crept forward to peer at Sebastian, though his ears are tucked and his thick gray tail is puffed up to twice its normal size.

Sebastian follows my gaze to Shadow lodged underneath the couch, and one of his nostrils twitches. Then he lets out a resigned sigh. “I suppose he can come too.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

SEBASTIAN

Twenty minutes later, Claire has managed to wrestle her feline fleabag into his carrier and stuff him into the back of my Mercedes. The stench of the angry beast's terror fills the vehicle, though it's dampened somewhat by Claire's sweet honeysuckle scent.

I close my eyes and drink it in, hoping she doesn't notice the effect she has on me. I never planned on dragging an innocent human into this mess, but the second I laid eyes on Claire, my wolf refused to let her go.

I'd like to think she'll be safer with me, but there's nothing safe about my world.

After Adrian killed Clint McGregor, his remaining bears scattered like rats. I let Murphy escape that night — a mistake that still haunts me.

Adrian let the rest of the bears go without another thought, but he ordered me to kill Dane Murphy. After seeing him tower over Claire in animal form, I'm going to take great pleasure in ripping him to shreds.

Glancing over at the woman in my passenger seat, that wild protective instinct hits me full force again. I realize I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe — including hauling her back to my place where Murphy can't touch her.

It's surreal having Claire beside me after watching her through my computer screen.

She is ClaireWhoLovesCats, which makes me question everything else I thought I knew about her.

“You said Murphy followed you home from work?”

Now comes the hard part of being a cyberstalker — not letting slip that I know anything she hasn’t told me already.

She nods. “Dane knew where I worked. He even dropped me off a few times. But I never thought . . .” She breaks off and looks out the window as fresh tears fill her eyes.

“Aw, come on, love.” My hand moves from the steering wheel, but I stop myself before reaching for her. I have the inexplicable urge to comfort her, but I’m not good at this sort of thing. Instead, I decide to change the topic. “And . . . what is it that you do?”

Something tells me this woman is not a stripper.

Claire draws in a shuddering breath, mopping under her eyes before turning to face me again. “I work at Nine Lives. It’s a no-kill shelter for elderly cats with special needs. ”

“Seriously?” I ask before I can stop myself. “They actually have those?”

She nods.

I raise my eyebrows and focus on the road ahead. Now all her cat videos suddenly make sense. It also explains why she’d choose to keep that neurotic fur ball who’s hacking up a lung in the back of my Mercedes as a pet.

“You seem . . . surprised,” she observes, watching me closely.

I shrug. I can’t exactly tell her that I thought she worked at a gentleman’s club. “Humans don’t even take that good of care of their own elderly. They just stick them in a care home where they’re left to stew in their own excrement until the end of their days.”

Claire blinks at me, and I grimace.

What was I thinking, asking her to come home with me? Claire is sweet, idealistic, and fourteen years my junior. I might have been able to hide what a monster I am when I was playing the hero in her flat, but as soon as she gets to know the real me, she’s going to run screaming in the other direction.

“Well, Nine Lives might not be around much longer,” she says with a sigh. “We didn’t get our grant renewed this year.”

“What, they didn’t think it worthwhile to continue to house a bunch of geriatric cats?”

Fuck, what is wrong with me?

Murphy put this poor woman through hell, and I can’t manage to keep my shitty thoughts to myself. On top of that, she’s pregnant, if my instincts are correct.

The reminder makes my chest tighten. I wonder whose baby it is. She didn’t mention that she had a new boyfriend, and I didn’t see any sign of another male at her flat.

I take a deep breath and try to soften my tone. “How did you get hooked up with Murphy? He doesn’t seem like your type.”

Claire swallows. “We met last fall at a creek cleanup event up north. He was camping in the area and we . . . hit it off, I guess.” She stares down at her lap, shame reddening her cheeks. “When we started dating, he didn’t have a place of his own, so I told him he could stay with me for a while.” She shakes her head. “It was stupid.”

I’m not inclined to disagree, but it tracks with what I know of her so far — the do-gooder creek-cleaning cat rescuer. Always taking in strays.

“Things were all right for a few months, but sometimes Dane would drink, and he . . . scared me. One night, it got really bad, and I told him to leave.” She swallows. “He refused.”

My hands tighten on the steering wheel, and it’s all I can do to contain my wolf.

“After that night, after he —” She breaks off. “I just knew I had to get out of there.”

“He hit you?”

Claire nods.

“And the baby is . . . his? ”

She jerks her head up to look at me finally, her eyes wide with surprise. “How did you know?”

“Your scent,” I explain. “Females smell different when they’re pregnant. Richer, if that makes sense. And you put your hand on your belly earlier, almost like you were protecting something.”

Claire sucks in a breath and rests her head against the back of the seat, staring into space. “Yes. It’s his,” she says in a small voice. Then she turns to look at me. “Dane

doesn't know about the baby. He can't know about the baby."

I nod, swallowing down all my questions. "Your secret's safe with me." But there's one question that's eating me — one I can't hold back. "Are you going to keep it then?"

"Yes," she whispers, smiling faintly. "I could never . . . you know. It just doesn't feel right. No one gets to choose how they were brought into this world. He's innocent in all this."

"He?" I croak, my chest aching.

Claire's smile widens. "I don't know that it's a he. I think it's probably too early to tell. But I keep imagining that I'm having a boy."

Watching Claire place a tender hand on her stomach, I get a flash of temporary insanity.

I find myself wishing that I was the one who put a baby in her belly — wishing it were my pup she was protecting like that. Loving before he was born.

I give my head a little shake, as though I can physically dislodge the idea. It has to be the aftermath of the fight pushing my wolf to the fore. That's the only explanation.

Then Claire stiffens in her seat, and a panicked look comes over her. "Will the baby . . . be like him ? A bear shifter, I mean."

I grind my back molars together, hating that there's a piece of that scumbag inside of her.

But I swallow down my own feelings. My angel is afraid and needs reassurance.

“There’s a pretty good chance.”

At my words, all the blood drains from Claire’s face, and she reaches over to grip my arm. “Could it . . . will it change inside of me?”

“No,” I say, my voice husky. “Wolf shifters don’t experience their first Change until they’re seven or eight. I don’t know exactly when it happens for bears, but it can’t be much younger than that.”

A look of immense relief sweeps over her, and she sits back against the seat and releases my arm. I instantly mourn the loss of her warmth, but it’s just as well.

Claire shouldn’t get too close. She’ll only be disappointed when she realizes the type of male I am.

“Will he even know how to shift? I mean, does another bear need to show him how?”

I shake my head. “The urge to shift is instinctual — undeniable, actually. He or she won’t have any trouble. A lot of shifters who are orphaned or abandoned by their birth parents don’t know what’s happening the first couple of times. ”

“That’s horrible,” she murmurs.

I nod, and a cold fist clenches around my heart. “I thought I was dying the first time I shifted.” I flash a smirk, but it feels hollow. “I was in primary school . . . asked to go to the toilet. The first Change is always . . . sloppy. And it hurts like hell. I think I shifted halfway, passed out from the pain, and changed back. I woke up on the bathroom floor in a pool of my own piss.”

I glance at Claire, whose face is a mask of devastation. “How old were you?”

“Eight.”

She swallows. “And you didn’t . . .”

“I never knew my dad,” I say quickly. “And my mum was . . . Well, let’s just say she didn’t really know him either.”

Claire sucks in a breath and lets it out in a rush. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Sorry you had to go through that.”

I shake my head. “You don’t need to feel sorry for me.”

But Claire reaches back across the center console and takes my hand in hers. Her hand is tiny — almost childlike — and her skin is the softest I’ve ever felt.

It’s weird — I should hate this. It’s why I never tell people about my childhood. It’s bloody depressing, for one thing. And I fucking hate to be pitied.

But with Claire, I find I don’t mind being comforted. My wolf craves her closeness — like it’s something he’s been missing for a long, long time .

When I snap back to reality, I realize I’ve almost reached the exit for Gold Creek. I turn off the motorway and cut through town, taking the snow-packed dirt road up the side of the mountain.

Claire sits up in her seat and looks out the window, admiring the view of the town sprawled out below, its golden lights twinkling in the dark.

Soon the road gets rougher with jagged washboards, but I navigate the icy switchbacks with ease. My G-wagon is the 4x4 squared — one of only three hundred units produced in America.

As we pull into the garage I had built into the mountain below my house, I get a nervous flutter in my chest. I'm not sure why, but I find myself worrying what Claire will think of my place.

“Where are we?” Claire asks nervously, stiffening as the automatic door blots out the star-flecked sky, throwing us into darkness.

“Home sweet home.”

CHAPTER FIVE

CLAIRE

For the first time tonight, I realize how stupid I've been.

I got in the car with a total stranger without telling anyone where I was going. A very good-looking stranger, but still. This guy could be a serial killer for all I know. We're parked in some kind of underground garage that looks as though it was built into the mountain itself.

Sebastian gets out, and I hastily unbuckle. Shadow emits a low growl as the wolf shifter takes his carrier out, looking none too pleased.

"I don't think your cat likes me," my rescuer observes as he carries Shadow toward a steel-plated door equipped with a keypad. My eyes dart around the garage, which is sparsely furnished with a few shelves and surveillance cameras in every corner.

Sebastian punches in a code, and I hear the heavy clunk of the deadbolt being drawn back into the lock .

"It's not you," I say, rubbing my arms nervously. "Shadow has some . . . trauma. His previous owner kept pit bulls for dog fights, and he trained them to be really aggressive. Half of Shadow's left ear had been ripped off when he was dumped at the animal shelter. His wounds were so bad that the vet there didn't think he'd make it. But Shadow is a fighter . . . He just doesn't like dogs."

“Or wolves, apparently,” says Sebastian dryly, turning over his shoulder and tossing me a crooked smile that makes my stomach flip-flop. “I won’t take it personally.”

Sebastian leads me out of the garage, and my shoes scuff on polished concrete floors. Lights wink on automatically, and it takes my eyes a moment to adjust.

I’m standing in a kitchen with an enormous island that looks as though it was carved from one gigantic block of marble. Chic dark cabinets frame the space, and the open floor plan leads into a gorgeous great room dominated by a stone hearth that stretches all the way to the vaulted ceiling. There’s a comfortable-looking leather couch, a sleek coffee table, and little else.

Other than the section of the room with the fireplace, the entire first floor is wall-to-wall glass. He must have incredible views.

“Wow,” I breathe. “Your place is amazing.”

Sebastian lifts one shoulder in a blasé shrug. “I have a very sought-after decorator. ”

I shake my head in disbelief. This is easily the nicest house I’ve ever set foot in.

“The toilet’s just through there . . . dining room’s around the corner. Study through there.” His tone is casual as he orients me, but there’s tension in his glorious body I didn’t notice before.

He seems . . . self-conscious. Nervous, even — as though it really matters to him what I think of his house.

“What should I do with Shadow?”

Sebastian’s mouth twitches in a grimace, which he quickly hides. “He can . . . make

himself at home. I'll bring in his shit box in a moment."

I press my lips together to hold back a laugh. It's obvious that my big, bad wolf is not a cat person, and yet he's opened his home to me and Shadow. There's a tiny, hopeful part of me that wants to read into that, but I know better than to think this gorgeous man wants anything to do with a sad, lost girl who's knocked up with Dane's baby.

"He'd probably do better in a smaller space like a bathroom. That'll give him a chance to get acclimated to the sounds and smells here."

A look of relief flashes across Sebastian's face, and he obligingly takes Shadow into the bathroom and sets his carrier on the tile. He steps out of the room to let me by, and Shadow hisses as I open the door to his crate.

"You're safe here," I say softly, more to myself than the cat .

Shadow stops hissing but remains curled in the back of his crate.

Coming out of the bathroom, I feel a prickle of awkwardness dance over my skin. Sebastian is a complete stranger, and yet he invited me into his home. If he's not a serial killer, it's incredibly generous of him. And if he is, well, I never thought my murderer would be so . . . beautiful .

His face is all sculpted angles, further accentuated by choppy black locks that are just long enough to fall into his eyes. His sharp jawline is shadowed by stubble, and he's got a pair of full, lush lips that look way too kissable.

Those deep-blue eyes flare when they see me, and Sebastian clears his throat. "That's all for the main floor. I'll show you upstairs to your room."

My room . For some reason, I get a little burst of disappointment that I won't be

sharing his bed. It's crazy considering I waited over a month to sleep with Dane, and even that felt like a big decision.

It's got to be the pregnancy hormones making me want to climb this man like a tree.

Following Sebastian up the metal staircase, I can't help gaping at the gorgeous artwork that adorns the walls. I don't know anything about fine art — only that these pieces look like originals.

My gaze snags on the portrait of a man whose face is scrunched in misery. Velvety shadows engulf his features in broad paint strokes, as if he's drowning in the darkness

.

Sebastian leads me to the room at the very end of the hallway, and my jaw drops when I walk inside. Like the main level, the far wall is floor-to-ceiling glass. A king bed with a minimalist canopy frame is situated opposite a huge stone fireplace that's a smaller version of the one in the great room.

Sebastian touches a button on the wall, and a fire crackles to life.

I shake my head in disbelief and wander into the en suite bathroom, where a cream-colored stone soaking tub is positioned in front of another giant window.

I groan aloud at the sight of the tub. Already this pregnancy is giving me weird aches and pains, and my crappy apartment only has a shower. A warm bath sounds like heaven.

“This is . . .” I grope for the right words but can't manage to find them. “Thank you .”

“Don't mention it,” he says, the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement. “Make

yourself at home.”

“Oh.” I slap a hand to my forehead as the realization hits me. “I forgot to pack a bag.”

I’d been so out of sorts from Dane showing up that it hadn’t even occurred to me. I did, however, remember Shadow’s litter box, bed, and food dish.

“Don’t worry, love. I can lend you some things. Why don’t you run a nice hot bath while I make us something to eat? I’ll leave a change of clothes for you on the bed.”

I nod mutely, my shoulders sagging with relief and gratitude. He must think I’m such a mess. I have no idea why he’s being so nice to me, but I decide not to question it.

Sebastian backs out of the room, and for a long moment, I just stand there, staring out the huge window at the shadowy trees beyond.

I should be horrified that my ex is a shifter. I should be terrified that I’m alone in the mountains with a man who can transform into a giant wolf. And yet, for the first time in months, I feel absolutely safe.

SEBASTIAN

My wolf whines at the prospect of leaving Claire all alone, but my angel has been through enough for one night. She needs some time to relax and unwind so that she can feel safe again.

I want her to feel safe with me, but she doesn’t know me. Not yet.

My blood boils at the thought of Murphy hurting her. I’m going to kill that motherfucker.

Pulling on my boots, I follow the lighted path out to my shed, which is just a small outbuilding that I've converted into an office. Pressing my thumb to the pad outside the door, I turn the handle and walk inside.

The low lights flip on behind my monitors, and I'm greeted by the cheerful blink of my servers. Even without the heater running, it's pleasantly warm inside my shed, thanks to the heat generated by my setup .

I wiggle my mouse, and all the monitors flicker to life. Along one wall, screens display security feeds for every room in my house. On the opposite side, lines of code wiggle across a black background.

Before I left Claire's place, I made sure her ancient laptop was open and oriented toward the main living space. She was running an outdated version of her operating system, and it was pitifully easy to gain access to her webcam.

It's dark inside her dreary flat. It doesn't look as though Murphy has been there since we left, but I'll continue to monitor the feed.

I'm furious with myself for letting him slip through my fingers — even more so after hearing Claire's story. There's no way I'm letting her go back to her place until I've caught the bastard.

My wolf doesn't ever want to let her go.

It's a strange feeling for someone like me, who's designed every facet of my life to minimize human contact. My pack brothers are the only people I can stand to be around for more than a few minutes. Until today.

The second I laid eyes on Claire, I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my days getting to know her. I want — no, need — to have her in my life. I want to learn everything

about this woman — what movies she likes, how she takes her tea, what she sounds like when she comes . . .

Having her in my home and not being able to touch her is pure fucking torture. All I wanted to do the second she walked through the door was take her up to my bed, peel off her clothes, and spend the next several days exploring every inch of her creamy skin.

My cock swells at the thought of Claire sprawled across my sheets, those soft blond curls fanned out behind her as I sink deep inside her warm, wet —

Just then, a flicker of movement on one of the feeds captures my attention. It's the camera in the guest bedroom — Claire's bedroom.

My beautiful girl is undressing for her bath. Her light-blond hair is still plaited down her bare back, and I groan as I imagine wrapping my hand around it and tugging her head back as she rides me. I'd suck one of those gorgeous nipples into my mouth and—

I shut off the monitor before she turns around and gives me another visual for that fantasy.

This isn't why I brought Claire here. I brought her here to protect her from predators like Murphy. I brought her here so that she would feel safe.

It doesn't seem right to start our relationship by spying on her through a computer screen. Besides, the first time my angel bares herself to me completely, I want to be able to do more than just watch.

You can't be serious , says a voice in my head. She'll never go for a monster like you .

She went for Murphy , I snap back. Clearly her taste in males isn't all that discerning.

And even though I shouldn't, I find myself hoping she'll make one more mistake by falling for someone like me.

CHAPTER SIX

CLAIRE

True to his word, Sebastian left a stack of clothes on the bed: a soft navy T-shirt and a pair of gray sweatpants. The shirt is so long it could be a dress, and the sweats are way too big. But once I knot the drawstring below my bump, they're actually really comfortable. Sebastian's rich leather-and-bergamot scent clings to the garments, and I can't stop myself from sighing as I hold the fabric up to my nose.

Padding down to the kitchen, I try not to imagine what it would be like to stay here with him — soaking in that luxurious tub every night, lounging around in Sebastian's clothes, and snuggling up in front of the fire with my handsome wolf.

I give myself a little shake. What the hell has gotten into me? Sebastian's not my anything. He's just being nice to me because he feels sorry for me — or because he's worried I'm going to tell the world that he can turn into a wolf.

The smell of cinnamon and maple syrup tugs me out of my pathetic train of thought. Sebastian is standing at the stove, flipping pieces of French toast in a skillet. The edges are deliciously fried, and my stomach grumbles.

He lifts his head as I approach, and something in his expression changes. His eyes rake down my body, roving over the swells of my breasts before stopping at my abdomen. A hungry look sweeps over his face, and for a moment, I see a flicker of the wolf in his eyes.

Belatedly, I realize my mistake. I've always had small breasts — small enough that I could get away with not wearing a bra. The pregnancy has made them grow nearly two cup sizes already, and while I thought the T-shirt was baggy enough, the thin material hides nothing. My peaked nipples are visible through the fabric, and the swell of my belly is obvious.

For several heartbeats, we just stare at one another, but then Sebastian averts his eyes. "I hope you don't mind breakfast for supper," he says, that scrumptious British accent doing funny things to my stomach. "I usually have groceries delivered, but with the snow . . ." He trails off. "Bread and eggs are all I have in the house."

"Breakfast for supper sounds amazing," I say, taking a seat at the counter where he's already plated some food for me.

I coat the French toast in warm maple syrup before taking a bite, making an appreciative sound in my throat. "It's delicious," I groan .

The corner of his mouth twitches, and he continues to watch me eat with a mixture of amusement and satisfaction.

"Sorry," I mumble, realizing I'm eating like an animal. "Being pregnant makes me hungry."

"Don't apologize. It's rather adorable, actually." And, bless him, he serves me another slice of French toast. "You're eating for two, remember."

"How could I forget? It's one of the few perks of being pregnant."

"Ah, yes. Must be bloody annoying, I suppose. You can't drink. You can't smoke. No deli meats or soft cheeses . . ."

I shake my head. “It isn’t that.”

The last fifteen weeks have been the loneliest of my life, which is ironic since I’m never alone. Not with the baby growing inside me.

I suck in a breath and let it out in a huff, trying to put it into words. “It’s just . . . I always thought I’d have someone to share this with.” I rub a hand over my belly, delighting in the tiny bump I feel there. “Getting that positive pregnancy test . . . doctor’s appointments . . . the first time I feel him kick.”

I cried for two days when I first found out. I spent most of the weekend huddled on the bathroom floor, leaving only to buy more pregnancy tests.

As soon as I saw those two little lines, I knew I had to end things with Dane. I just didn’t know how.

“I’m sorry you haven’t had that,” says Sebastian quietly. And I get the feeling he genuinely means it .

I shrug. “It is what it is.”

He opens his mouth as if he wants to say something but then closes it again.

“So,” I say, eager to change the subject. “You know a little about me, but I don’t know anything about you.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “I’m not that interesting.”

“You don’t rescue elderly cats for a living, so what is it that you do?”

To have this incredible house, he must do something pretty damn special.

“I’m a freelance pen-tester.”

I frown. “Like you test out pens?” I mime writing in the air, and Sebastian snorts.

“No. It’s short for penetration testing — sort of like an ethical hacker. Tech companies pay me to hack into their systems to show them where the vulnerabilities are. Occasionally, the authorities will request my services to ID black-hat hackers and track cyberterrorists.”

My mouth falls open. His job is impressive.

“And were you tracking Dane?”

He gives a noncommittal tilt of his head. “Yes.”

“For work?”

“For my pack.”

“Why?”

Sebastian’s expression darkens. “Let’s just say he hurt someone I care about.”

“Oh,” I whisper, staring down at my empty plate.

Sebastian was hunting Dane for someone else — someone who sounds important to him. A woman? I’m dying to ask, but he seems cagey about it, so I cast around for another topic. “How did you get into that sort of thing? Hacking, I mean.”

“I dropped out of high school when I was fifteen. I had what you might call a limited skill set, and by that I mean it was limited to brute-force hacking into people’s bank

accounts. Eventually, I had to grow up. Get a real job, as they say.”

I nod, chewing on my bottom lip. I get a sense that there’s more to that story, but I don’t want to pry.

“What about you? How did you get into the whole do-gooder thing?”

I snort. “The whole ‘do-gooder thing’?”

He rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

I shrug. “My parents were hippies who taught me and my brother to always leave things better than we found them. I guess the lesson just stuck.”

My voice cracks on the last word, and something in his expression softens. “They were hippies?”

I smile sadly, mostly because if I don’t, I’ll start to cry. “They were killed in a car accident when I was thirteen — my parents and my brother. I was taken in and fostered by another family, though they never adopted me. I guess I didn’t quite measure up.”

I don’t mean for that last bit to come out so bitter, but being an orphan fucking sucked. I refuse to let my baby grow up without a mother. I never want him to feel unwanted.

Sebastian doesn’t give me a pitying look or some line about how he’s sorry for my loss. He just stares at me for a long moment before reaching out and wiping a drop of syrup from the corner of my mouth.

Every nerve ending in my body zings to life at the light contact, and all my focus

goes to where he's touching me. He traces my lower lip with the pad of his thumb, and I have to resist the urge to suck his finger into my mouth.

His blue eyes follow the path his thumb takes, and I feel my panties go damp. My nipples pebble up beneath the thin shirt, and I'm terrified he's going to look down and see the effect he has on me.

But then Sebastian's nostrils flare, and embarrassment heats my cheeks. What did he say about pregnancy changing my scent? Can he smell how turned on I am?

His gaze flicks up to meet mine, and I immediately know the answer.

Sebastian bites down on his own lip, his eyes burning with an intensity that steals the air from my lungs.

I know he can't possibly be interested in me — not really — and yet my treacherous body aches.

I ache to be touched by him — to feel those big hands roving over my body. I want to feel him skin to skin, to learn what those hard muscles would feel like pressed up against the softest parts of me.

As if he can read my thoughts, Sebastian reaches for me. Those long fingers ghost across my cheek before threading through my hair. I feel a slight tug as he pulls me closer, and then his lips crash down over mine .

His kiss isn't gentle or sweet. It's searing, hard, and possessive. My lips part with a soft gasp, and he takes the opportunity to plunder my mouth with his tongue.

He tastes like maple syrup and pure, unadulterated sin.

Instantly, my body responds — begging to be closer to him. My breasts tighten, and my stomach turns over as warmth gushes between my legs. Sebastian rakes his teeth over my bottom lip, and I let out a whimper of need.

His mouth moves lower, pressing wet kisses all down my neck. I shudder, and my head rolls back as he commands my body. The hand on my hip draws me in closer until I feel his hardness pressed against my belly.

And fuck , he's huge.

Feeling the physical evidence of his desire unleashes mine, and I roll my hips against him. My fingers tangle in his silky black hair as he kisses me again, and a low groan rumbles up his throat.

My nipples are two hard points raking down his chest. Sebastian digs his fingers into my hips, grinding me against him as he ravages my mouth.

I have never been kissed like this.

The friction of his body moving against mine is almost unbearable — that throbbing ache in my pussy threatening to drive me over the edge. My head spins as Sebastian's tongue strokes my own, and I can't help but wonder what it would feel like to have that tongue thrusting in and out of my channel .

But just as I reach down to palm his erection through his jeans, Sebastian pulls away.

His hair is mussed, and his lips are swollen, but it's the intensity in his gaze that makes my breath hitch.

He releases me and then retreats, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

SEBASTIAN

The cold air stings my face as I burst out the back door. Claire's scent is all over me, and it's driving my wolf wild. My skin feels much too tight, and my body is itching with the urge to shift.

I knew it was risky giving her my clothes, but seeing her in them . . . holy fuck.

The sight awakened something in my wolf — this aching need to claim her. I wanted to rip that shirt off her right then and worship her perfect tits. I wanted to lay her out on the kitchen counter, spread her thighs, and fucking devour her sweetness.

When I scented Claire's arousal, I knew I was a goner. And when she rubbed up against me like that, I nearly lost control.

Mine .

The word hums through my bones, rattling my insides .

I'm smart enough to know what it means, but I won't let myself accept it.

One by one, I've watched my pack brothers succumb to the mating urge. It infected my pack like the plague.

When each of my brothers found his mate, he became a slave to the bond. His wolf

would not stop — would not rest — until he marked her.

I can't do that to Claire. My angel just escaped an abusive bear shifter, and she's pregnant with his cub.

I'm the last thing she needs in her life, but my wolf isn't convinced. He keeps pushing to the fore, begging me to mark her, and I know that if I don't let him out soon, he's going to become impossible to manage.

As soon as I'm far enough from the house, I feverishly start shedding my clothes. My feet go numb as they sink into the snow, and I've barely disentangled myself from my pants when my wolf bursts out of me.

A strangled cry rips from my throat as I succumb to the Change. Bones break apart and reform. Muscles and tendons shred as my nose lengthens into a snout. My scream morphs into a howl as fur spreads all over my body.

I land on four paws and lift my nose into the air, delighting in the spicy aroma of pine sap, wood smoke, and crisp, clean snow.

I catch a whiff of a ground squirrel and burst into a run. My prey provides a welcome distraction from the burning need to sink my teeth into Claire and claim her as my mate .

She's far too good. Too pure. Too young. She managed to escape the clutches of one monster, only to take shelter in another's lair.

I'm a selfish bastard at heart, but I won't sentence her to a lifetime shackled to me.

I push myself harder, cold wind in my fur. But just as I lose myself to the thrill of the hunt, I'm distracted by a new scent. This one stops me in my tracks and makes me

flatten my ears to my head.

Bear. And not just any mundane bear. I'm picking up on the sour musk of a certain eight-hundred-pound shifter.

Murphy .

I can't believe he followed us here to my territory. Dane Murphy is a coward, and yet he came here . All because I took what he thinks is his.

A deadly snarl rips from my throat at the thought. Claire is mine , and so is the child she's carrying. I don't care if it has bear genes. I'll raise it as my own.

Murphy isn't getting anywhere near my mate.

Possessed by my thirst for blood, I follow the bear's ungodly stink. But then I catch another shifter's scent on the wind, and I realize he didn't come alone.

I may be hellbent on slaughtering Murphy, but I'm not stupid. I'm outmatched against two bear shifters, but they're on my land. My scent is all over these woods, which will make me difficult to track. They don't know that I'm aware of their presence, which gives me a momentary advantage.

Breaking into a dead sprint, I double back toward my shed. I shift mid-run when the building comes into view, darting inside and picking up one of my burners.

I call Adrian first, but it just rings and rings.

Shit.

There's only one reason my alpha wouldn't pick up the phone, and that's if his mate

has gone into labor. I didn't think Cassie was due for another three or four weeks, but if the pup decided to make an early appearance, it couldn't have picked a worse time.

I dial Maddox next, who picks up on the second ring.

"Bears," I croak. "My place."

"How many?"

"Dunno," I huff, raking a hand through my hair. "At least two."

I hear Maddox speaking to someone in the background — probably Paige, his mate. "I'll be there in fifteen."

He hangs up without another word, and relief floods my system. My hands shake as I dial Nick. Like Mad Dog Maddox, the delta wolf in our pack is a cold motherfucker, which is exactly what I need.

Once my pack brothers have been dispatched, I shift back into wolf form and slink out of my shed, leaving the door cracked for easy access. My black fur allows me to blend into the night, my eyes glowing like twin torches ready to burn the whole fucking world down to protect my mate.

I pick up Murphy's trail along the back of the house just as pain explodes in my side .

For a moment, I am airborne, and the world tilts on its axis.

Glass shatters as the giant bear drives me through a window. We hit the floor in a heap of fur and claws, bits of glass embedding in my coat as we tumble across the polished concrete.

My back hits the fireplace, but I roll to my feet, facing off against the black bear snarling in my living room. I bare my teeth, ropes of saliva dripping from my maw, and Murphy rises onto his hind legs with a roar.

If I were in human form, I'd be sneering. Everything is a dick-measuring contest with bears. They try to dominate with their size alone, but wolves are faster and meaner.

In this moment, I'd gladly take on ten bloody bears. This male hurt my mate, and now he has the fucking balls to come onto my land, into my house?

Cowards like Murphy who prey on those weaker than them don't deserve to live. Slaughter is the only option.

I lunge at Murphy, feigning left. He swipes out one huge paw, but I change directions and sink my teeth into his soft, fleshy side.

The bear roars and tries to shake me loose, but I cling on for dear life. Only when his blood pools in my mouth do I let go, rebounding off the hearth and aiming for his throat.

This time, Murphy catches me with one giant paw, and pain ricochets out from my ribs. I smack into the couch, but before I can get my legs under me, he swipes at me again.

I yelp as claws rip through the tender flesh along my belly, but the pain only sharpens my focus. I roll back up and circle out, ears flat against my head.

The bear must see the crazy in my eyes, because he starts backing away. Broken glass crunches under my paws as I drive him out the giant hole he made in my living-room window.

A strangled scream from the staircase draws my attention, and I turn my head to see Claire standing on the bottom step.

My distraction costs me. Murphy stops his retreat and barrels toward me on all fours. I jump out of the way, but not before his claws rake across my spine.

Claire whimpers in terror and darts back up the stairs.

Good girl .

Recovered, I continue herding Murphy out into the frigid night air. Then the crunch of snow catches my attention, and I see the outline of another bear stalking toward me.

Shit .

He probably smelled the blood and came running — my blood. I can feel the warmth seeping from my wounds, but I hold my ground. My angel's life depends on it.

A murderous growl rumbles through me as I charge the newcomer. I don't think. I just attack, losing myself to the pain as I rip at the bear with fang and claw. I'm aware of an engine humming in the distance, but I keep my focus on the two giant bears trying to take what's mine.

I don't see the second bear's paw fly out until it's too late. It catches me squarely in my injured side, and I slam into a tree trunk.

I whimper in pain, trying to stand, but I can't make my legs obey.

Get up, get up!

But it's no use. My strength is failing. I can feel it draining from my body, staining the snow around me crimson.

A pair of eyes flash in the dark as Murphy lopes toward me. He moves slowly, lazily, as if he has all the time in the world — as if he plans to savor the scent of my fear before he disembowels me in my own backyard.

But then a blur of dark fur barrels out of nowhere, latching onto Murphy. I hear a deadly snarl and know from his scent that Mad Dog Maddox is off his leash. Nick flies in next, and the two of them bring down the bear as I struggle once more to gain my feet.

I don't have to tell them that Murphy is mine — even if I have to drag myself over there on two legs. They know I've been hunting him for over a year.

The bear growls as I limp toward him. Every step is pain. And yet I won't rest until the bastard who hurt my mate is nothing but a pelt at my feet.

When my fangs sink through Murphy's flesh, I have no intention of letting go. The iron tang of blood overwhelms my senses as I rip and claw at the bear. The woods fill with the sounds of a dying animal, though I'm unsure if they're coming from me or the filthy beast between my jaws. I just keep moving, keep fighting, until the thing beneath me stills.

When I look up, there's an angel framed in the broken window, her legs bare to the cold. My bloodied mouth falls open in a happy pant, and then the world goes dark.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEBASTIAN

I awake to the feeling of soft hands stroking my fur. The room smells like blood and honeysuckle, but for the first time in my life, I feel true peace.

Slowly, I peel my eyes open and look around. I'm lying by the fire in my room under a thick woolen blanket. The hand petting me belongs to Claire, and my fur isn't fur at all. It's hair.

I must have shifted in my sleep, because I'm lying on the floor buck naked. I try to move and wince as I stretch the fresh scabs that have formed along my sides and belly.

Claire gives a little gasp, her hands stilling in my hair. Then she yanks them out, and my wolf whines at the loss of her warmth.

When I look up, her face is pale, and her sea-glass eyes are wide and glistening.

I start to ask a question, but the words come out as little more than a rasp .

Claire hands me a glass of water, which I drain in a few gulps.

I'm suddenly ravenous, and my gaze snaps to the plate of sandwiches resting beside my mate.

“Your pack brothers said you needed to eat,” she says in a tremulous voice. “They said it would help you heal.”

My stomach grumbles. They’re not wrong, but I’m way too keyed up to eat.

“Ah, yes. Where are those tossers?”

Claire swallows. “The scary one didn’t say anything. He just . . . left.”

Nick .

“And the one with all the tattoos said he’d be back tomorrow to check on you.”

“That’s Maddox.”

“I’m sorry,” she stammers, looking more distressed than I am at the news that my pack brothers left before I woke up.

“Sorry for what?”

Her throat works as she tries to find the words. “For distracting you. I-I heard a noise, so I came downstairs. That’s when I saw you and —” She breaks off with a haunted look in her eyes.

I shake my head. I can’t imagine how terrifying that must have been for her to witness, but I shudder to think what would have happened if she hadn’t had the good sense to stay out of the way.

“It’s not your fault. Those bloody bears caught me by surprise is all. If Maddox and Nick hadn’t gotten here when they did —”

Claire's eyes well up, and I immediately regret putting that thought in her head. "They said you almost died," she whispers, a few tears trailing down her cheeks. "All because of me."

My wolf whines at seeing her distress, and I open my mouth to tell her I'd gladly die a thousand deaths to protect her and that precious baby she's carrying. I want to tell her that she is mine and that I will always fight her battles.

But I'm rubbish with words, so instead I cup the back of her neck and pull her mouth down to mine.

My kiss is frantic, desperate, claiming, and Claire responds in kind. Rising up onto her knees, she thrusts her fingers through my hair and makes a contented sound in her throat.

I pull back long enough to glimpse her face — to make sure this is what she wants. And when I see the need shining in her eyes, my wolf snaps his leash. "Oh, fuck."

Our mouths crash together again, and I lose myself in her scent. Everything about this woman just feels right, and I'm gripped once again by the driving need to claim her.

My hands push up the T-shirt she's wearing, exposing the subtle swell of her belly. I plant a kiss just below her navel so she knows just how much I cherish her and the little life growing inside her.

Sliding the fabric up higher, I finally expose those beautiful breasts. They're swollen and heavy from the pregnancy, and the delicate pink buds are peaked from the cool air.

Blood rushes to my cock, and I bend forward to suck one into my mouth. Claire's eyes flutter closed, and the breathy little sound she makes drags a satisfied growl

from my throat. I work the other nipple with my thumb until she moans in delight.

Feeling impatient, I pull the T-shirt over her head so I can get a good look at my angel. Most of her hair has come out of its braid and hangs in loose golden tendrils.

My hungry gaze skims over her slender shoulders and her magnificent breasts before coming to rest on the pretty pink lace panties she's wearing. The front is completely soaked, and my cock swells at the evidence of her desire.

“Do I look almost dead to you?” I rumble, gripping the back of her neck.

Claire shakes her head, her full lips parted.

Without another word, I get to my feet and scoop her into my arms. I lay her gently on top of the covers, kissing her slowly and deliberately. Claire fists my hair and pulls me closer, and my animal roars with pride.

The beast in me loves seeing my mate like this — bare and needy and ready for my cock.

Slipping my hand into her panties, I moan against her lips when her slickness coats my fingers. I gently part her delicate folds and circle her entrance until she shudders .

She is so fucking wet for me. My soldier is already standing at attention. It would be so easy to shred this flimsy piece of fabric separating us and ram into her hot cunt, but I want to make this good for her.

Biting my lip, I insert a finger, and Claire makes a contented sound in her throat. I bury my face in the crease of her neck, inhaling her gorgeous scent.

It's a mistake.

I feel a sharp pinch as my fangs descend, and venom spills over my tongue. I squeeze my eyes shut and will them to retract, but my need is much too great. My whole body is aching to be joined with Claire — the blood in my veins heating for her.

“I need to claim you, love,” I moan against her skin, allowing my hard length to press against her dampness through the thin lace of her panties. “I need to mate you and give you my mark.”

“Your what?” Claire’s voice is slightly breathless. She doesn’t understand a thing about our world — much less the mating mark.”

“My mark,” I explain, voice shaking as I run my nose along her pulse point. “It’s a bite that will embed my scent in your flesh and solidify the mating bond. You are mine , Claire. Mine .” I practically growl the words. “And so is this little one. I want to be sure that everyone knows it.”

I place a gentle hand on her belly, and she covers my fingers with hers. That little gesture nearly undoes me .

I don’t care if it makes me a selfish prick. I need this woman like I need air.

I know I’m not good enough for my beautiful angel. God , do I know it. Claire deserves someone selfless and kind and just as idealistic as she is. But instead, she got me — the monster lurking in the shadows.

Holding my hand over that little swell in her belly, I swear to myself that if she accepts my mark, I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of her and the baby she’s carrying.

“I’m yours,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “ Please , Sebastian. Make me yours.”

“Are you sure?” My voice comes out choked and raspy, and I force myself to look her in the eye. “Because there’s no going back.”

Claire gives a solemn nod, still holding my hair in a death grip. “Yes.”

And that’s all I need to hear.

With a ravenous moan, I smash my mouth down over hers, kneading her breast with my hand. Claire inhales sharply and arches into my touch, rubbing her mound against my hardness.

My angel is desperate to find a release, and I plan to give her what she needs.

Hooking my fingers in the waistband of her panties, I pull them down over her hips to expose her perfect pussy. A line of curly blond hair glistens along her seam, and my cock grows painfully hard.

Pushing her legs apart, I position myself between her thighs and lick a trail up her center. Claire lets out a shaky moan and rolls her hips, seeking friction.

I thrust my fingers inside her and pump in and out, circling her clit with my tongue. Claire moans my name, writhing on the bed, and my balls ache at the sound.

I set a punishing pace for my mate. Claire’s nectar drips down my fingers and into my stubble as I drive her closer to the edge. Her hands fist the bedsheets as I work her swollen nub, and when she comes apart in my hand, my wolf roars in triumph.

Claire’s body goes boneless, her essence soaking my sheets, but I’m not through with her yet.

Rolling onto my side, I pull her flush against me so that her bottom is nestled against

my hips. I fucking love the way our bodies fit together. It's as if this woman was made for me.

From this position, I can feel every inch of her velvety skin, and I have easy access to her breasts and pussy.

Gliding my hand over her hip, I find that sensitive bundle of nerves and begin working it in tight circles. Claire's soft moans make my cock twitch with anticipation, and when she grinds her ass into my erection, I nearly come all over her.

My angel's orgasm comes quickly this time, and I hold her in my arms through wave after wave.

I press my lips to her temple and can't resist kissing a trail from her cheek down to her shoulder. As my mouth grazes the tender valley of skin below her neck, I feel my self-control start to slip.

I need to be inside her — to claim her in every possible way.

Lifting her leg, I tug it up and over my hip so she's wide open for me. I position myself at her slippery entrance, delighting in the way her cream drips all over my manhood.

She's so wet and ready for me that I enter her in one hard thrust. Claire's sharp breath mixes with my own shudder of pleasure as her pussy clenches around me.

"Fuck," I hiss, burying my face in her neck. "You feel so good."

"Mark me, Sebastian," Claire whispers, reaching up to drag a hand through my hair. "Make me yours."

Those words. I never knew that three little words could sound so fucking sweet.

My cock throbs as I start to move inside her, hugging my mate close as I slide in and out of her channel. With every thrust, I worry I might hurt her, but my angel takes every inch of me with low, throaty moans.

I reward her by reaching down to play with her clit, and her walls squeeze my cock so hard that I think I might pass out.

I can't hold on much longer. Venom is pooling in my mouth, and my beast is pushing to the fore.

My thrusts become frantic, wild, animalistic, and Claire's cries of pleasure grow louder.

Just as I sense she's about to tumble over the edge, I brush the soft curls away from her neck and pierce her tender flesh. There's a higher-pitched cry as I sink my fangs into her, but it's pain intertwined with pleasure.

The sharpness of Claire's blood mixes with the bitterness of my venom, and I thrust in so deep I hit the very end of her channel.

Her entire body goes taut as her orgasm takes her, and the feeling of her body milking my cock shatters me into a million pieces.

Slowly, carefully, I withdraw my fangs and lick away the blood. Hot, sticky cum seeps between my mate's thighs as our scents merge into one heady fragrance. Wolf and angel, leather and honeysuckle. My female. My mate.

Sliding out of Claire, I roll onto my back and pull her over top of me.

Just like that, my wolf curls up, and that tightness in my chest eases. For the first time I can ever remember, I feel whole.

CHAPTER NINE

CLAIRE

After Sebastian gives me his mark, I fall into a deep sleep. I'm not sure if it's the adrenaline or the sex or something in his venom, but my body is completely spent.

And yet, I can't seem to get enough of this male. When I'm roused in the night by the feeling of his hard, silky cock against me, I'm instantly engulfed by need.

I lose count of my orgasms, and by the time the sun rises the next morning, there's a pleasant soreness between my legs and my mind is calm.

Dane will never threaten me again. Sebastian made sure of it. Sebastian, my mate and protector. The thought makes a smile tug at my lips.

Just yesterday, I was all alone in the world, facing the prospect of raising this baby all on my own while trying to keep it a secret from his biological father. Today, I have a mate.

Carefully disentangling myself from Sebastian, I slide out of bed and stare down at the male who saved me not once, but twice. The shades in the house must be on some kind of timer, because they're drawn over the wall of glass. Only a few slivers of morning light shine through the gaps along the edges, illuminating thin white scars along Sebastian's sides.

I shudder.

The terror I felt when I came downstairs to find him facing off against Dane was eclipsed only by the horror of watching him collapse in the blood-soaked snow and shift back into a man.

I saw the lacerations all over his body when his pack brothers carried him inside. No human could have survived wounds like that, and yet the deep gashes from the bear shifters' claws look as though they've had months to heal.

It seems I have a lot to be grateful for.

Slipping into Sebastian's extravagant en suite bathroom, I pause in front of the mirror to examine the little half-moon scar that's formed in the dip between my neck and shoulder. Like Sebastian's wounds, the mark has already healed to the point that it's just a glistening white crescent. Running my fingers over the raised skin, I feel a surge of pride.

Of all the women in the world, Sebastian chose me .

"Us," I whisper to the little being growing inside of me.

Warmth blooms in my chest as I tiptoe back into the room and pull on the clothes I borrowed last night. I go downstairs to check on Shadow, and my jaw drops at the views from Sebastian's windows.

The snowy mountains are laid out in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree panoramic view. The first rays of sunshine shining through the trees make the snow coating the branches glisten, and a few quiet deer stand in the blood-flecked snow, their necks bent as they forage for food.

Even though Nick and Maddox boarded up the broken window before they left, the entire first floor is freezing. I slip into the downstairs bathroom to freshen Shadow's

water before donning Sebastian's giant puffer jacket and boots and letting myself out the back door.

Trying to ignore the evidence of last night's carnage, I pick my way down the hill toward the little outbuilding on the edge of the woods. It's quieter on Sebastian's mountaintop than any place I've ever been. The only sound apart from the wind in the trees is the quiet pecking of a bird against the side of the house.

The door to the outbuilding is cracked, so I push it open. Motion-sensor lights flick on when I walk inside, illuminating screens mounted on every inch of available wall space and what appears to be a state-of-the-art computer setup.

I let out a low whistle. Even though Sebastian told me what he does for a living, seeing his workspace all laid out is still impressive.

I'm startled by the sound of a door sliding shut in the distance and jump about a foot in the air. My hip bangs into the side of the desk, jiggling the ergonomic mouse.

All the screens instantly flash to life, illuminating dozens of security feeds. I recognize a few of them from rooms in Sebastian's house. There's even a view of his guest bathroom where I took a bath the night before. But that's not all that's familiar.

A sick feeling unfurls in my stomach as I stare into my own living room. There's no mistaking the ratty couch, sad recliner, and outdated popcorn ceiling. I don't recognize the vantage point of the camera, but it's definitely my apartment.

My heart starts to beat wildly as I rip my gaze away. My eyes drift down to the open laptop, where my own frozen face beams up at me from the screen.

Just then, the door behind me opens wider, and I whip around to face Sebastian. He looks so happy. So . . . normal. His hair is still mussed from our lovemaking, and he's

shirtless despite the cold.

One quick glance around the room, however, and the easy grin slips.

I take a deep breath, but my chest feels as though it's full of broken glass. I can't believe I was so stupid.

"How long?" I ask.

"How long what?" Something about his tone tells me he knows exactly what I'm asking.

"How long have you been spying on me?" The words come out in a furious hiss, and the screens go blurry as my eyes fill with tears.

"I haven't been spying on you." He has the nerve to sound offended. "I had to look into you when I caught Murphy using your credit card. But I had no idea who you were."

A little zing of panic goes through me at that revelation. I thought I'd misplaced my emergency credit card, but I figured I'd just left it in an old purse. I didn't realize Dane had stolen it.

"I haven't been spying on you, love. I just hacked into your laptop last night so I'd know if he returned to your flat."

My jaw pops as I stare at the feeds. Why should I believe him when the evidence of his intrusion is staring me in the face?

"And last night when I undressed in that room?" My voice shakes with the force of my rage and devastation. It seems ridiculous, given what we were doing all night, but

it still feels like a violation.

“I didn’t watch you, I swear.” Sebastian’s eyes are wide. “Please believe me.”

I shake my head. I can feel myself spiraling. “You knew all about me before we even met!”

“No.” His eyes dart to the paused video I created to try to get Kevin adopted. “Not everything.” He flashes that crooked smile — the one that would have made me weak in the knees if he’d used it just a few minutes before. “If it makes you feel any better, I thought you were a stripper.”

My throat burns with unshed tears as I try to calm my raging storm of emotions. “And what did you learn about me? ”

“You’re twenty-two years old. Your parents and your older brother were killed in a head-on collision driving back from a hockey tournament. You were fostered by Debra and Len Montgomery, though they never adopted you. Your foster parents sent you to a shrink to treat an eating disorder when you were fifteen. You didn’t go to college despite having a three point eight GPA. You also excelled in volleyball. You watch a lot of K-dramas. You have a credit score of six eighty-two — a few points lower than it was before you missed some payments on the stolen credit card. You had an irregular Pap smear two years ago, which turned out to be HPV. You went for a battery of tests at your obstetrician at the end of November — I’m guessing after you and Murphy broke up. You tested negative for any sexually transmitted infections, but you found out you were pregnant.”

I stare at Sebastian, a cold, gaping hole in my chest where there was warmth and love only moments before.

I can’t explain why it bothers me so much that he dug into my private life — stole

these little personal details gleaned from my digital history.

I would have told him anything he wanted to know if he'd only asked. But instead of asking, he took these pieces of my life without my permission.

"You're thorough, I'll give you that," I croak.

"I can't help what I am, Claire," he says in a tired voice. "We can't all be fucking Mother Teresa."

I wince, my bottom lip quivering as I stare up at him. When Sebastian burst into my apartment to defend me from Dane, I'd thought it was fate that had brought us together. That he saw me for me — a woman about to become a mother who was just doing her best, not the sad orphaned girl who let the darkness swallow her whole. Not the Claire who was so desperate for love that she allowed herself to be taken in by a monster like Dane.

I'd thought I could have a fresh start with Sebastian — that maybe I didn't have to be defined by my past.

Turns out, he'd already seen everything I wanted to keep hidden. He'd already pulled apart my past, laying bare every painful and humiliating detail.

"I should go," I say, swallowing the sob that's threatening to burst out of me.

"No. Claire, don't —"

He moves to follow me out of the shed, but I hold up a hand to maintain the distance between us.

"Please, don't try to stop me," I whisper, dragging in a breath that burns my lungs. "I

just escaped one monster. I don't want another fight.”

CHAPTER TEN

SEBASTIAN

Claire insists on getting a car service to come pick her up from my place, and it physically pains me to watch her go.

The mere thought of being separated from our mate makes my wolf frantic, but deep down I know it was always too good to be true.

I never should have given in to the urge to claim Claire. It would have been hard to let her go before. Now it's fucking excruciating. My heart feels as though it's been ripped from my body, the wound left to fester.

I know Maddox will be by later to check on me, but I can't bear to see him. I don't want to explain to my pack brother how I ruined the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't want to be the object of his pity.

There's only one thing to do.

By ten o'clock, I'm slumped over the sticky bar top at Two-Mile Tavern. I couldn't bring myself to face anyone I know at The Lucky Buck, so I drove an hour to my favorite dive bar in Bristlecone.

The tavern got its name for its elevation — nearly two miles above sea level. My shifter metabolism makes it difficult to get properly sloshed, but it's easier at high altitude.

There's only one other patron here this early — an old-timer with a gray beard who's already hammered. A couple of thirtysomething humans blunder in for a hot toddy on their way to Breckenridge, but they leave in a hurry when they sense my mood.

The bartender brings me another round, and I hiss as the cheap bourbon hits the back of my throat. I'm about to ask if I can go across the street to the liquor store to buy something better when the door bangs open and I catch a whiff of wolf.

A tingle of apprehension shoots down my spine, cutting through my alcohol-induced haze. I shouldn't be here in another pack's territory, but I'd rather have to fight my way out of Bristlecone than face my own pack.

I can't tell Maddox I was stupid enough to give Claire my mark, let alone Adrian. They know there isn't a female in her right mind who could stand to be mated to me, and I don't want to deal with my alpha's wrath.

"If you're gonna tell me to piss off, you're gonna have to get in line, mate," I slur when I hear footsteps behind me .

"Well, you just get to be more of an asshole every time I see you," grumbles a familiar voice.

I lift an eyebrow as Axel plops down next to me, and the cold fist around my heart unclenches just a little.

Axel is a recluse and a grump, but he doesn't bullshit, and I like that about him.

"Likewise," I say over a burp before knocking back the rest of the horse piss that passes for bourbon in this place.

Axel cracks a grin and signals the bartender. He orders black coffee and a double

platter of steak and eggs. He isn't here to get drunk, and I resent him for it.

"I fucking hate this place," I grump when the bartender shuffles off to put in Axel's order.

"And yet you keep showing up," the wolf replies without so much as looking at me.

"Well, it's not for the other patrons, I can tell you."

He follows my gaze to the old man at the end who smells like piss. Axel's a man of few words, which is kind of annoying, but it's better than someone who doesn't know when to shut up.

I sense that he's waiting for me to elaborate, so I say, "I found my fated mate."

It isn't something I'd normally confess, but Axel is barely more than a stranger, so it's easy to talk to him.

He lifts his bushy brown eyebrows and lets out a low whistle. "You serious?"

I nod, fighting the acidic burn of self-loathing that is my constant companion .

"I fucked it up," I rasp. "Found her by accident hunting the last of McGregor's bears. I . . . looked into her, and she found out." I shake my head and crack a smirk that feels all wrong. "Didn't take long for her to realize what a fuckwit I am."

"Yeah. That sounds bad."

Axel nods at the bartender as he sets down a steaming cup of coffee in front of him and another bourbon for me.

“That’s all you have to say?” I snap, irrationally angry at Axel for being what he is — a quiet, growly mountain wolf.

His huge shoulders lift in a shrug. “What do you want me to say?”

“Aren’t you supposed to tell me how rare it is to find one’s true mate and that I should go after her and beg her forgiveness?”

“Why would I tell you that?” Axel asks. “You know better than anyone if you fucked this up.” He pauses and then adds, “Do you love her?”

“Of course I love her, you prat. Why do you think I’m here?”

Axel drags in a breath and lets it out slowly, looking as though he’d rather be anywhere but here having this conversation. “Well . . . then I guess you should go after her.”

“I can’t go after her, moron. She left .”

“Right,” Axel chuckles. “And I suppose you’re the first couple in the history of the world to have a little spat. ”

Irritation flares through me, and I open my mouth to rip him a new asshole. “I marked her,” I say instead.

Axel’s eyes go wide. “You what ?”

I nod, feeling drunk and a little desperate. What was I thinking, coming here? Talking to this Neanderthal isn’t helping.

“My wolf, he . . . needed to claim her. I wasn’t thinking. It was just . . .”

The greatest moment of my entire existence.

I swallow to get past the lump in my throat, but it's no use. I'm starting to think that even an IV drip of the world's shittiest bourbon wouldn't be enough to dull the pain I'm feeling.

It isn't heartbreak. It's a complete death of the soul.

I've heard of wolves who ignore the urge to mate going feral. What I haven't heard of is a wolf who's been rejected by his bonded mate and lived to tell the tale.

I realize I don't want to live without my angel. I may not be good enough for Claire, but she belongs to me.

"I need her," I mumble, and that painful knot in my chest eases just a little. "I need her like I need fucking air to breathe. I don't care if she thinks I'm a horrible bastard. I have to make her accept me."

Now Axel really looks as though he'd rather be anywhere else but here. He lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Well, I don't have a lot of experience in this area, but have you tried talking to her?"

I scoff. "Course I talked to her. I'm not an idiot."

"Did you tell her you love her?" Axel asks patiently. "Did you tell her she's your woman and that you can't live without her?"

The realization hits me at his words, and a leaden weight settles in my gut.

I've never thought Axel had much going on in that thick head of his, but maybe he's onto something.

I didn't tell Claire any of those things. I've never been good at the romantic crap. All I did was confirm her worst fears — that I'm a monster like Murphy who was going to use all that stuff I learned against her.

I may be a bit of a creep, but I'm not like him. I didn't dig into Claire's past to hurt her. Hell, I didn't even know her.

While I can't change knowing things she didn't want me to find out, knowing what I do doesn't make me think any less of my mate. It only makes me want to hold her. Love her. I just have to get her to let me.

"Thanks for the talk, mate," I say, pulling out my wallet and staring at the blurry bills inside. "I've gotta go."

"I'll drive you," Axel grunts just as the bartender brings out his food. "You shouldn't be behind the wheel."

The wolf lets out a resigned sigh, annoyed that I'm keeping him from his breakfast. "Can you box this up for me, Lorne? I'm gonna need it to go."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLAIRE

It's freezing cold and snowy when I pull up in front of Nine Lives on Tuesday. Bad weather means it's going to be a slow day for visitors at the shelter, and for once, I'm okay with that.

My eyes are puffy from crying, and I feel as though I've been hit by a truck. Despite knowing that Dane can't hurt me anymore, I haven't been able to sleep.

I kept telling myself it was PTSD from seeing him burst into my apartment, but that's not the truth. I can't sleep because of the gaping hole in my chest that opened up when I left Sebastian's.

Walking up to the entrance of the shelter, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the glass. There are dark circles under my eyes, and the mating mark is just barely visible beneath the neck of my wool sweater.

I tug the material up to cover it better and open the door. Susie is the first one here as usual, but the instant I walk in, I can tell that something is off .

The cages along the wall are empty, apart from the ratty cat beds and kitty condos. Our on-call vet, Dr. Thomas, sometimes stops by during the week to administer vaccines, but he wouldn't have taken all the cats into the back room at once.

My heart thumps in alarm as I stride into the office, where Susie is chatting

animatedly into the phone. Her round face lights up when she sees me, and she holds up one plump finger to say she'll be a minute as she finishes the call.

Based on her bubbly tone, I can tell she's speaking to a potential donor. "Uh-huh. Well, we are delighted . Yes. Thank you . Buh-bye."

I raise my eyebrows as she hangs up. The woman is beaming and practically levitating off her chair.

"Where are they?" I ask.

"Where are what?"

"The cats."

"Oh!" Susie's penciled brows shoot up as though she just remembered. "They've all been placed with foster families to make room for more kitties in need." She presses her lips together and emits a squeak of excitement.

"All of them?"

"All of them."

"Wow. I —" I shake my head, utterly speechless. Being in a calm home environment is infinitely better for the cats than being cooped up in a cage, but it's rare to find families who are willing to foster older animals with special needs .

I should be ecstatic, but instead I'm suspicious. I've only been off for two days, and Susie found fosters for all of them?

"But that's not even the best news," my co-worker gushes, wiggling her hands in

excitement. “We got our funding!”

I raise my eyebrows. “Another grant?”

She shakes her head. “I just got off the phone with a brand-new donor. He wired enough money to float us for a year , and he’s pledged to make a recurring donation to ensure we can stay open.”

“But who —” I can’t finish the thought — not with the unsettling mix of emotions swirling in my stomach.

“Don’t know,” says Susie with a shrug. “He asked to remain anonymous. Can you believe it?”

I shake my head. While the timing is certainly bizarre, Sebastian can’t be the anonymous donor.

“Did you scan in the foster applications and attach them to the animals’ files?” I ask.

Susie’s worked at Nine Lives longer than I have, but she sometimes struggles with the computer system and often misses steps in our record-keeping process.

“Not yet. I was just getting ready to do that when our mysterious donor called.”

Reaching for the stack of files on her desk, I open the top one and flip through it. The first foster application is for Hamish, the Scottish Fold who can’t tolerate other cats.

Fallon Brewer-Flemming is the name of the new foster parent. I let out a little sigh of relief, fighting the disappointment squeezing my insides.

I slide the file to the bottom of the stack and flip open another, and my blood runs

cold.

Sebastian Doyle.

I open the next.

Sebastian Doyle.

A low hiss bursts from between my clenched teeth. Sebastian signed up to foster all four remaining cats.

“You let one guy foster four cats?” I demand. Two fully grown cats is usually our maximum, and only if the animals in question are a bonded pair.

“Yep. He said he has plenty of room. His references all checked out, and he has no other pets in the home.”

Yeah, if you don’t count his giant wolf.

“I’m gonna need you to do his twenty-four-hour check-in,” Susie adds brightly. “Just to make sure the kitties are settling in.”

My hands shake as I set down the stack of files, seething with indignation. Not only did Sebastian come to the shelter and interfere with my work; now I have to go see him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLAIRE

My blood is boiling by the time I pull up at Sebastian's house. The gate we took to reach his garage is locked, so I park my car at the base of the hill and start hoofing it up the long flight of stairs leading to his front door.

I'm sweaty and out of breath when I reach the top, which only stokes my ire. My hands curl into fists, and I pound on the door — not caring that I might piss off our “anonymous donor.”

Then the door flies open, and my angry diatribe dies on my lips.

Sebastian is standing in the doorway wearing only a pair of sweatpants. My gaze travels up his six-pack abs and chiseled pecs before coming to rest on his face. Something like pain flashes through his cobalt eyes, and that gaping hole in my chest opens even wider.

I thought I'd be able to keep it together if I just stayed angry, but seeing my mate standing before me makes my throat itch with tears.

I want to throw my arms around him and bury my face in his neck. I want to cry and scream at him for what he did, and I also want him to scoop me up in his arms and carry me to his bed.

The distance between us makes my chest ache, and my body craves him with a level

of need that verges on painful. I hate this hold he has over me.

Then my eyes snap back to his sweatpants, noting the cat hair clinging to the fabric. For some reason, I find the sight hopelessly endearing — even if he did decide to foster the cats just to get close to me.

“Hey, love,” he says, his voice slightly ragged.

“Good morning,” I manage, trying my best to remain professional despite the confusing mix of feelings swirling in my stomach. “I’ve just come to check on the cats.”

“They’re well-cared for, I can assure you. Kevin hasn’t moved from his sunning spot by the window.”

I narrow my eyes in a glare. How can he stand there and act so normal when my entire being aches for his touch?

“I’ll need to see for myself,” I say. “The twenty-four-hour check is required for all of our fosters to make sure the cats are adjusting to their new environment.”

Sadness flickers through his eyes, but he quickly masks it. “Very well.”

He steps aside to let me pass, and I try to ignore the delicious scent that lingers in his home. It’s leather and bergamot and Sebastian, and my treacherous body thrums with need.

“This isn’t right,” I growl, my temper getting the best of me. “These cats have been through enough. You can’t just use them to get to me. They deserve better than that.”

Sebastian lifts those perfect dark eyebrows, and my gaze inadvertently flicks to his

lips. "I agree."

"Did you think that by donating a ridiculous amount of money to the shelter that you'd somehow win me back?"

"That donation was meant to be anonymous," he says coolly.

I open my mouth and close it again, glaring at him suspiciously. After everything he did, he has the nerve to stand there and act as though this is totally normal. What's worse, I'm going to have to uproot Kevin, Tator Tot, Nugget, and Yo-Yo all over again.

Seething, I stomp into the great room and stop dead in my tracks.

Sebastian's carefully curated living space has been transformed. Kitty condos are strategically positioned by the windows. Fluffy cat beds lie in puddles of sunshine. There's a tall scratching post next to the fireplace, and toy mice litter the floor. Kevin is sprawled on the warm concrete, looking more relaxed than I've ever seen him.

I round on Sebastian. "You went out and bought all this stuff? "

"Er, well, no," he admits, scratching the back of his head. "I . . . had it delivered."

"But you hate cats."

"Hate is a strong word," he says slowly. "I hate cat hair , but I've hired a maid service to come in and tidy twice a week. I think that should suffice."

I blink at him. "Why?"

"Four cats generate quite a lot of hair."

“No, I mean —” I gesture around. “Why go to all this trouble? You had to know I would come here and . . .” I trail off.

What is it that I’m planning to do? I can’t exactly confiscate the cats — not when they’re so well-cared for.

Sebastian shoves his hands in his pockets, staring at the floor. “I thought I’d give the whole do-gooder thing a try. I wanted to . . . I dunno. Be worthy of you.” He scoffs. “Stupid, really.”

I blink. Something about seeing my handsome, cocky mate like this thaws the ice around my heart.

“I’m sorry for digging into your past,” he continues. “I know it’s not . . . Well, it’s not how normal people start a relationship. But, in my defense, I didn’t plan on starting a relationship with you at the time.”

I nod.

He drags in a shaky breath, still not looking at me. “I don’t know how to do this,” he admits. “I’ve never met someone like you. Someone who was genuinely . . . good.” He shrugs. “I have a hard time trusting people. I guess I find it easier to learn all I can so that I’m . . . prepared.”

“I suppose with what you do, you’ve been trained to expect the worst,” I say slowly.

“Yes, but it’s not . . . Well, it’s not just my line of work.”

He pauses for so long that I’m not sure he’s going to say anything else, but then he adds, “My mother wasn’t the maternal sort, and I never knew my father. After my first Change, I was a bit lost, I suppose. Withdrawn. Quiet. Had a hard time making

friends.” He sighs. “My rugby coach was the only one who took much of an interest in me. I thought I’d finally found someone I could trust . . .” His throat works, and he doesn’t look at me as he says, “One evening, he asked me to stay back after practice. I thought he wanted to talk about my defense. As it turned out . . .”

Sebastian trails off, and my gut tightens. “How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

“I’m sorry,” I croak, feeling the inadequacy of the words even as they leave my mouth.

“I know now that he was just a shit stain of a human being preying on young boys — that I wasn’t the only one he did this to. But at the time, I felt . . . alone. Ashamed. Like it was some dark secret I had to carry.”

Horror and fury unfurl inside me, and my heart breaks for him.

“To cope, I would shift and stay wolf for weeks at a time. My animal didn’t feel emotions as acutely as I did in human form, which made the pain . . . bearable. When I was human, I didn’t speak to anyone. I think I was worried that people would find out what had happened if I so much as opened my mouth.”

“You didn’t tell anyone?” I whisper.

“Who would I have told? My own mother didn’t give two shits about me, and the man who . . .” Sebastian’s jaw twitches. “He was beloved . I didn’t think anyone would believe me, even if I had wanted to come forward. Eventually, I flunked out of school. I had a lot of time on my hands, so I learned how to hunt.”

Sebastian’s expression darkens. “I started stalking sexual predators online and

hacking into their bank accounts . . . draining the funds. It was easy to find out who they were — and even easier to gain access to their accounts. Nobody had a strong password back then. There was no two-factor authentication. Then I started going into their email accounts and forwarding the pictures and videos to the authorities. It felt like justice, but it wasn't enough." He takes a deep breath. "It took seven years, but I finally got up the courage to face my old coach."

Sebastian's expression shutters. "I wasn't merciful. There are still bits of him scattered all over the practice field, I imagine."

I swallow, cringing inwardly while trying to keep my expression neutral. I want to show my mate that he was right to trust me with his past.

"Slaughtering that bastard made me realize I had to stop. Turning perverts over to the authorities was no longer satisfying my wolf, and I didn't want to be that monster I turned into when I ripped the flesh from his bones. So I moved to the states. Got a proper job. It wasn't until this business with the McGregors that I started hunting again. Only this time, I was hunting for the bears that had hurt my pack."

I let out a shaky breath.

"Hunting Murphy . . . well, let's just say that it brought out a part of me I thought I'd gotten rid of."

"The part of you that has to know everything to feel in control."

He gives a jerky nod, and understanding hits me.

Sebastian has never had anyone in his life he could trust. Ever since he was a boy, he's moved through life discovering the worst of the worst in humanity. It's no wonder he feels the need to question everything — to know everything.

“So now you know all of my secrets,” he says quietly. “I know it doesn’t excuse what I did, but —”

“Thank you for telling me.”

Sebastian studies me for a long moment. “For what it’s worth, you’re not the woman I was expecting to find.”

“You mean a stripper ?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “I’ve never met someone who was quite so good. So . . . idealistic.”

“So naïve ?” I supply.

A tiny grimace creases his face.

“So desperate to have someone love me that I’d accept whatever scraps Dane tossed me? ”

“Wanting to be loved doesn’t make you desperate,” Sebastian murmurs, reaching up and ghosting his fingertips across my cheek. “It just makes you human. And you, my sweet human, are infinitely deserving of love.”

My breath catches at those words, and I feel a lump rise in my throat.

“You can’t even begin to comprehend the dark shit that goes on in my head,” he whispers. “When I first saw your videos online, I told myself that woman was too good to be true. That there couldn’t be someone like you left in this shit basket of a world, because if there was, then I was even more of a monster than I realized.”

My mouth falls open. Is that really how he sees himself?

“You are not a monster,” I say, holding his cerulean gaze so he can see that I mean every word. “You are good and kind. You hunt to protect others. You . . . You’re my avenging angel.”

A smile twitches at the corner of his mouth. “I rather like that.”

Sebastian leans in and presses a kiss to my forehead. “For what it’s worth, I feel honored that my mate is the kind of person who takes in strays. Who loves so deeply and trusts so fully. And, if you let me, I promise I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of that love and trust. To be worthy of you . . . and him.”

He reaches down to place a hand on my belly, and tears well up in my eyes .

Suddenly, I no longer care that Sebastian has seen into my past. He is my present and my future, and I want him to have all of me — even the sad, rejected orphan who I’ve tried to disown.

I know now that my mate won’t reject any part of me, just as I’d never reject the abused shifter boy who grew into the man I love. We both have our scars, and somehow I know that he’ll love mine just as tenderly as I love his.

Slowly, I rise up and plant a soft kiss on his lips. I taste the salt of my own tears on my tongue, and when Sebastian’s mouth moves against mine, I feel that sad, festering hole in my heart start to heal.

Soon our gentle kisses deepen, and a warm ache grows between my thighs. Maybe it’s the mating bond — maybe it’s just Sebastian — but the need to be with him is so strong it almost hurts.

My body won't be satisfied until he's inside me.

A low groan rumbles up Sebastian's chest, and I wonder if he feels it too. Before I can pull away to ask, my mate sweeps me off my feet and deposits me on the edge of the counter.

Cool air pricks my skin as he helps me out of my shirt, and my nipples pebble up beneath my bra. His gaze turns feral as he looks me over — his eyes golden like his wolf's. My skin heats under his assessment, and my panties grow damp.

Sebastian deftly unbuttons my pants, and I lift my hips off the counter. My jeans and panties come down in one rough tug, and my mate's nostrils flare as he takes in the sight of my bare lower half.

I can tell his wolf is close to the surface as he guides me back onto the counter and pries my legs apart. I shudder as my bare skin makes contact with the cold stone, but my shiver quickly gives way to pleasure as he parts my wet folds and licks a trail up my seam.

"Mmm," he groans. "You are delicious , angel."

My cheeks flame at his words. I've never felt so exposed. So . . . on display. But the moment he slips his fingers into my channel and begins to circle my clit with his tongue, all my insecurities dissolve into pleasure.

I am a goddess splayed out on his counter, completely at his mercy. Sebastian's movements are slow and languid — as if he's savoring every taste. And when he plants his tongue beneath the hood of my clit, my whole body goes rigid with need.

The prick of his stubble intensifies everything, making me grind my hips into his face as my body chases the friction. Sebastian growls against my pussy as my essence

coats his lips, thrusting his fingers in harder, deeper.

“So wet for me, angel,” he mumbles, dipping his head lower to lap up my cream.

I moan my assent and grind into him harder. The ache in my core is nearly unbearable.

As if he senses my level of need, Sebastian gently withdraws his fingers and shucks off his pants.

He stands before me in all his magnificence — a smattering of dark hair leading down to the long, proud length of him. A drop of cum is already beading up on the head of his cock, and my whole body shivers in anticipation.

Sitting up, I move to the very edge of the counter, and Sebastian enters me with one hard thrust. I cry out as he hits the very end of my channel, my pussy fluttering around his impossible girth.

I can feel him everywhere — in my very skin — and I close my eyes to commit this moment to memory. Now, tomorrow, and every day for forever, I want this male between my thighs.

Cupping my ass, my mate hefts me off the counter. I dig my fingers into his shoulders as he pulls out and drives back in, slamming me down onto his length over and over and over again.

With every thrust, that pressure builds until tears gather at the corners of my eyes. My body can't take this exquisite torture much longer. I need him to let me break.

“Come for me, angel,” Sebastian growls, pausing to rest his forehead against my own.

This time, when he rams back in, he hits that magical spot, and stars explode behind my eyelids.

I scream his name as my walls clench all around him, my pussy throbbing with each wave of pleasure. Sebastian grunts as he finds his own release, his warm cum spilling out of me and trickling down my thighs.

Completely sated, I rest my head against his shoulder and let him carry me upstairs. Sebastian lays me down on the bed as if I'm something precious and breakable, disappearing into the bathroom to retrieve a warm washcloth.

Once he's cleaned me up, he sprawls out beside me and covers us with a heavy blanket, tucking a stray curl behind my ear.

"Oh my god," I whisper, rubbing my eyes. "I'm supposed to be at work. I was only here to do the twenty-four-hour check."

"Then I'll call that overeager woman you work with and tell her I have a lot of questions."

I snort.

"Truly, I don't know a bloody thing about cats. I may have to keep you here all day and night . . . forever, if you'll let me."

"I think that can be arranged," I whisper. Truly, it's all I want in this world.

Turning over my shoulder to look at him, I'm startled to see that his face is a heartbreaking mix of elated and hopeful, and his eyes have returned to that deep blue I love so much.

He pulls me closer, pressing a tender kiss to my temple. And for the first time since my parents died, I feel as though I've finally come home.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Claire doesn't return to work that afternoon. I hold my angel captive in bed, feeding her French toast and giving her orgasms.

The next morning, however, she insists, so I make the thirty-minute drive to the hospital in Lakewood.

Shifters aren't susceptible to most human ailments, so it feels odd walking through the revolving glass door, past an entire fleet of wheelchairs, and into the gleaming lobby.

The curmudgeonly older woman at the help desk eyes me suspiciously when I ask for directions, and she sends me on what feels like a wild goose chase up to the labor and delivery ward.

When I finally reach the correct room, I hesitate. My wolf doesn't like the strange smells and sounds, and every fiber of my being tells me not to intrude.

And yet I know Adrian will want to hear this. If it were me, I'd want to know .

Clearing my throat, I knock softly, and a tired female voice beckons me inside.

I open the door and lock eyes with my alpha. Adrian is seated in a chair by the window, holding a tiny pink bundle in his arms. The baby's face is scrunched and

wrinkly, and there's a shock of black hair poking out from a white woolen cap.

It floors me to see my formidable alpha cradling his daughter so tenderly.

"Sorry to intrude," I mumble, glancing at his mate.

Cassie is reclined in the hospital bed, looking exhausted but happy.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks," she murmurs, offering me a wry smile.

It's more than I expected from Cassie, considering I once kidnapped her to use as leverage against her brutal bear shifter of a father.

"This better be important," Adrian rumbles. He keeps his voice low to avoid disturbing the baby, but it still sounds like a growl.

"It is. At least . . ." I trail off. "I just thought you'd like to know that Murphy's been taken care of." I glance over at Cassie, whose cheeks have lost all their color. "He won't bother you or your family ever again."

Cassie nods, and I turn back to Adrian. There's a new intensity to the protectiveness that seeps from his pores, which I'm guessing has everything to do with his new baby girl.

"Thank you," he growls, though his eyes soften. "I can't tell you what it means to have him gone. What it means to both of us."

I give a curt nod and turn to leave, but Adrian's voice halts me in my tracks. "Cass and I were just saying that Sibby needs a godfather."

“Sibby?” I repeat. It’s an odd name for a baby — even a half human, half shifter one.

“It’s short for Sybil,” Cassie explains. “It’s the closest we could get to ‘Sebastian’ for a girl.”

“What?” I turn to look at her, and Cassie nods, a slow grin spreading across her face. “I never thought you liked me much.”

“You’re the reason we found each other,” says Cassie. “And you never stopped looking for Dane.” She presses her lips together and swallows, a well of emotion in those deep brown eyes. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

A lump rises in my throat as I chance a glance at my alpha. And here I thought I was his greatest disappointment.

“Would you like to hold her?” Cassie asks softly.

My throat goes dry. I don’t know the first thing about babies. What if I drop it or squeeze it too tight?

Adrian emits a low growl that says he doesn’t feel like being separated from his pup, but Cassie shoots him a glare that any she-wolf would admire, and he nods. “Wash your hands first. She’s half human. Don’t want her getting RSV or —”

Cassie clears her throat loudly, cutting him off. “We are not putting our baby in a bubble. ”

Wordlessly, I do as I’m told and sit down on the edge of the bed. Adrian hands me his daughter, his movements slow and deliberate, and I stare down at Sybil.

She’s so tiny — tiny and perfect, with a puckered little rosebud mouth and big brown

eyes.

“Bloody hell,” I choke, my hands shaking as I try to find a comfortable position.

“How am I supposed to —”

“Hold her like a football,” Adrian suggests.

“A what ?”

“An American football,” he amends, showing me how to support Sybil’s body with my arm.

My eyes itch as I stare down at her, and I hurriedly scrub them with the edge of my sleeve.

“Everything all right?” Adrian asks.

I sniff loudly and nod. “I’m going to have one of these soon.”

“What?” My alpha and his mate say in unison.

And just like that, the whole story spills out of me — how I tracked Murphy, how I found Claire, and what happened when I realized she was my fated mate.

By the time I finish, Adrian and Cassie look shellshocked, and little Sybil has fallen asleep in my arms.

“You’re happy,” says Adrian, his voice half amazed, half accusatory. “And you’re scared.”

“Fucking petrified,” I grind out, unable to tear my eyes away from Sibby’s nose,

which is a perfect replica of Cassie's, only smaller.

If Adrian's pup has this sort of hold over me, what the fuck am I going to do when Claire gives birth ?

"So was I," says Adrian quietly.

His admission takes me by surprise, and I jerk my head up to look at him. "Does it ever go away?"

"It hasn't yet," he says, rubbing his hands together as he stares down at his daughter. "But I'd rather be terrified of fucking up the best thing that's ever happened to me than be back where I was with nothing to lose. You get used to it."

But for once, I'm pretty sure my alpha is wrong. I don't think I'll ever get used to this feeling.

I've never had a family of my own. The pack is all I've ever had, and I'm pretty sure they all just tolerate me. Now I have a beautiful mate, and soon I'll have a pup to love.

I am, without question, the luckiest bastard who ever lived.

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SEBASTIAN

Eight years later . . .

The bear careens into my side, locking his jaws around my scruff. We go down in a pile of limbs and fur, and I roll until I have him pinned. Seven years old, and he's already a good size, but his movements are still uncoordinated.

I chuff.

Again .

Miles snuffles and charges me, and I yip playfully as he tackles me. We roll down the hill through the wet spring snow, and this time, I let him pin me, my chest swelling with pride.

Claire cried for hours after our son's first Change. I know she'd hoped he wouldn't get the shifter gene — that she wouldn't have to tell him I'm not his biological father — but I nipped that in the bud.

Miles doesn't need to know the details of what his mom went through with Murphy, but it's important to me that he knows his story. He's my son, genes be damned, and I never want him to feel ashamed of what he is or where he came from.

These past six months, I've made it my mission to help him acclimate to his animal. Anytime Adrian calls the pack together for a run, I take Miles along.

It might be unorthodox for a bear shifter cub to run with wolves, but I'm determined for my son to grow up surrounded by pack. Eventually he'll need the guidance of grown bear shifters, but for now, he's content to be one of us.

Getting to my feet, I shake off the snow and jerk my head toward the house. We might not be able to communicate animal to animal the way two wolves can, but in the six months since his first Change, we've developed our own language.

Miles barrels past me up the hill, and I wag my tail. He wants to race.

The first one through the back door gets to watch whatever they want on TV. Little does he know I've rigged this game so I nearly always lose.

Our cub barrels toward the sliding glass door, shifting mid-stride. He whizzes into the kitchen with a victorious shout, and Shadow scampers out of the way.

"I win!" Miles hollers, balancing on one foot as he tugs on his sweatpants he left by the door.

I chuff, still in wolf form, and pad upstairs as my cub flops onto the couch.

Being a bit of a sore loser is part of the charade.

The scent of sunshine and honeysuckle envelops me as I reach our bedroom door. Nudging it open, I go straight for the bed and nuzzle my wet nose into my mate's limp palm.

Claire wakes with a start but relaxes when she sees me. My bones crack as I shift back into a man, and by the time I'm standing on two legs, I'm already hard for her.

"That was fast," Claire murmurs as I snap the door shut, rubbing the sleep from her

eyes. Her curly blond hair is adorably disheveled, and there's a pink imprint from the pillow across her cheek. She lifts an eyebrow and rubs her bump, which is straining at the thin material of my T-shirt. "Or should I say slow?"

Claire knows all about the little game I play with Miles. These last few weeks, she's taken to dozing off while our three-year-old naps. She's been running herself ragged setting up another location for Nine Lives, and even though she has people who could pick up the slack, I know the work brings her joy. So I keep Miles entertained during nap time to give her some much-needed rest.

I wouldn't normally wake her, but judging by the roundness of her belly, we're going to have a newborn any day now. Having been down that road twice before, I know that once the baby gets here, it'll be a couple of months before I get to worship her beautiful body again.

"I love seeing you in my clothes," I growl, climbing over top of her. "Almost as much as I love seeing you out of them."

Pushing up the hem of my T-shirt, I plant a soft kiss on the crest of her bump before working my way down between her legs. Her panties are already soaked, and I let out a very wolfish growl as I spread her creamy thighs and press another kiss along her center.

Fuck, I love every version of my mate. I love it when she sinks to her knees and looks up at me with those big blue eyes. I love it when she puts on her old cut-off shorts to clean the windows in the spring. I love seeing her in new-mom mode, sweaty and beautiful and utterly exhausted. But I especially love seeing her big with my pup.

Her tits are deliciously swollen, and her scent is even more enticing than usual. I circle one nipple with the pad of my thumb, delighting in the way she arches off the bed.

“Were you dreaming about me, angel?” I murmur, reaching down with my other hand to caress her through her panties.

“Mm, maybe,” Claire whispers, her cheeks flushing an adorable shade of pink as she rolls her hips into my touch.

“It better have been me,” I chastise, delivering a light swat to her swollen clit that has her stifling a cry in the pillow.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the eight years we’ve been together, it’s that Claire fucking loves it when I get all feral and possessive.

I wish I could say this was a performance I put on to please my mate, but it’s just in my nature .

“You are mine ,” I remind her, cupping her mound in the palm of my hand and rising up to meet her gaze. “This pussy belongs to me. It is mine to pleasure.”

“It’s yours,” she agrees in a breathy whisper, reaching up to run her fingers through my hair. Her gaze turns serious as she pushes an errant strand of hair off my forehead. “I am yours.”

“Good girl,” I rumble, yanking the thin fabric of her panties aside to reveal her perfect pink pussy. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of this ache between your thighs.”

Pausing to admire my beautiful mate’s glistening wet folds, I plunge my tongue into her channel and groan at the taste of her. Her essence is somehow even sweeter when she’s pregnant, and I can’t fucking get enough.

Licking a trail up her center, I slip my fingers inside her to replace my tongue, stroking that magical spot along her walls. With my other hand, I massage her poor

aching clit, dragging the lace of her panties over the tender flesh until Claire is whimpering into the pillow.

Her walls squeeze my fingers as she comes, and I can't take it anymore.

Fisting the soaked lace, I rip off her panties and plunge into her wet heat. Claire gasps as I catch her still in the throes of her orgasm, and I shudder as she milks my cock.

"I can't wait for this baby to come so I can get you pregnant again," I growl, tweaking her hard little nipple and watching in wonder as it becomes a sharp point .

Claire moans, thrusting herself down over my cock in a way that rips a snarl from my throat.

She is so wet for me, and I am so fucking close. I drive into my mate until she's whimpering my name into the pillow, barely able to hold back her cries.

When I feel her topple over the edge again, I let go — filling her with my cum.

I collapse on the bed and pull her against me, listening to our slowly synchronizing breaths and smiling as our three-year-old starts to babble in the next room.

It's strange. With the shitty parents I had, I never thought I'd have pups of my own. Meeting Claire changed all that.

From the very first moment I locked eyes with my angel, I knew that anything of hers was also mine. Mine to protect. Mine to love.

She's made me the happiest male alive three times over: first when she asked me to give her my mark, then when she made me a father to Miles, and again when she gave us Lucas.

These days, I have to take my alone time with Claire whenever I can get it. Between the kids and the cats, it's a full house, and it's about to get even fuller — full of love and play and afternoon trysts, and it's all thanks to my mate.

You've reached the end of *Stalked by the Wolf* , but there's more of Sebastian and Claire!

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:23 am

Get Stranded With the Wolf before you read.

The morning after Jared and Emma's night at the cabin . . .

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:23 am

Get Claimed by the Wolf before you read.

One year after Brewerfest...

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:23 am

Get Pursued by the Wolf before you read.

“Close your eyes,” says Damon as he leads me up the front porch of our new house.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:23 am

Get Wrangled by the Wolf before you read.

The smell of fresh lumber and sawdust hits me full force as I walk into our new barn. It wasn't built for housing animals, so it has a wood-plank floor and lots of light fixtures hanging from the rafters. The doors at either end are open, a warm fall breeze playing in the air.